



Article

Is Nigeria an Ideal Democracy? An Assessment on the 2023 General Elections

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Abstract

There is no doubt that since the end of military rule in 1999, Nigeria has made significant strides toward democratization. Several international observers, such as the European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), National Democratic Institute (NDI), and International Republican Institute (IRI) just to mention a few, have declared some nations' past elections to be free and fair, with a thriving civil society that actively participates in influencing public dialogue. Also, Nigeria operates under a multi-party system that promotes a diversity of political viewpoints, and its written constitution outlines the rights and freedoms of its citizens. However, Nigeria still faces numerous challenges that prevent it from being considered an ideal democracy, such as voter intimidation and electoral violence. Moreover, instances of election rigging have raised questions about the integrity of Nigeria's electoral system. The study adopts a descriptive research method. The paper presents an analysis and description of Nigeria's democratic progress, challenges, and recommendations for improvement. To strengthen its democracy and create a safer and fairer future, the country should address issues like political corruption, inequality, and social unrest during and after elections. This can be achieved by adopting electronic methods in the electoral process, reducing human involvement. This implies that election results should be directly uploaded from the polling units, bypassing the complex steps of going through wards, local governments, and state centres before being uploaded. More so, the paper recommends that in high- and medium-risk states like Lagos, Kano, and Rivers States, INEC should endeavour to enhance oversight and surveillance of its officials with a reinforced security apparatus. This, among other measures, will create a system that enables citizens to voice their grievances and concerns regarding INEC officials.

Keywords

Ideal Democracy, Nigeria, Election, Threats, Intimidation

Introduction

The term "democracy" has been construed by many as encompassing not only institutions and governance processes, but also the nuanced concepts of citizens' expression, active participation, inclusive representation, and the cultivation of a democratic ethos. Indeed, "democracy" has permeated popular discourse, becoming a ubiquitous term in contemporary discussions. Etymologically, "democracy" finds its origins in Greek, deriving from two constituent components: "demos," signifying "people," and "kratein," denoting "to govern" or "to rule." Consequently, it can be linguistically deconstructed as "the governance of the people" or "the rule of the majority" (Becker & Raveloson, 2008).

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Abraham Lincoln, is widely acclaimed for his advocacy of democratic principles, particularly his pivotal role in preserving national unity during the American Civil War and his unwavering endorsement of the abolitionist cause. Within the taxonomy of governance systems, democracy stands as one of several paradigms, coexisting alongside others such as aristocracy and autocracy, each bearing distinctive characteristics and mechanisms (Becker & Raveloson, 2008).

Nigeria operates a federal system of government in which power is shared between the federal government and 36 states. The country gained independence from British colonial rule on October 1, 1960, and has since experienced various forms of government, including periods of military rule. Nigeria's present democratic system was reinstated in 1999 following the end of military governance. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, serves as the legal foundation for the country's democracy.

The Constitution bestows executive authority upon the President, who holds the roles of both Head of State and Government. Through a popular vote, the President is elected for a four-year term and can be reelected for a maximum of two terms (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). The legislative branch of government is known as the National Assembly, comprising the Senate and the House of Representatives. The Senate consists of 109 members, with three representing each state, while the House of Representatives comprises 360 members, allocated to states based on their respective populations. The core responsibilities of the National Assembly encompass legislation enactment and executive branch oversight (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

Heading the judiciary is the Chief Justice of Nigeria, responsible for interpreting the Constitution and resolving legal disputes arising from its interpretation. Operating independently from the executive and legislative branches, the judiciary's decisions hold binding authority across all arms of government (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

Nigeria has made some progress in strengthening its democratic institutions, such as the establishment of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 1998 to conduct free and fair elections, and the strengthening of the judiciary to promote the rule of law, National Orientation Agency (NOA) in 1993 for promoting patriotism, national unity, and social integration in Nigeria, National Assembly Service Commission (NASC) 1990 for managing the administrative affairs of the National Assembly, Public Complaints Commission (PCC) in 1975 for investigating and resolving complaints against government agencies and officials in Nigeria, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003 for investigating and prosecuting financial crimes in Nigeria, and Nigeria Police Force (NPF) 1930 for maintaining law and order, preventing crime, and protecting lives and property in Nigeria and among others.

Despite the presence of institutions, the realization of an ideal democratic state remains elusive. The political system of the country has been beset by a range of challenges, including corruption, electoral malpractices, and insecurity (Chibuzor & Polycap, 2021). Among the fundamental tenets of democracy are the Rule of Law, separation of powers, judicial independence, regular, free, and fair elections, protection of human rights, citizen participation, equality, political tolerance, consideration of public opinion, transparency, accountability, and acceptance of electoral outcomes, to mention just a few (Becker & Raveloson, 2008).

Contrary to these democratic principles, Nigeria's political landscape demonstrates inconsistencies. This study undertakes an analysis and comprehensive exposition of Nigeria's democratic progress, the challenges it faces, and offers recommendations for enhancement, with a particular focus on the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

One of the principles of a democratic nation is to have free, fair, and transparent elections, providing equal and fair opportunities for all citizens to participate in the electoral process. Thus, democratic election becomes an instrument of development. In democratic elections, there must be no way of knowing for which political party or for which particular candidate a citizen has voted. They are then secrete, when each citizen can put his ballot in an envelope, without having been either watched over or influenced, in the secrecy of the polling booth, and when he/she is also able, in the same way, to put his/her envelope inside the ballot box afterwards. More so, democratic elections are free when citizens have the right to choose from several candidates or parties that can run for the election without any restriction. They must also be free to decide whether they want to use their right to vote or to abstain from doing so, if they prefer (Becker & Raveloson, 2008). There are several examples of countries that have held successful democratic elections, such as Canada, Norway, and New Zealand just to mention a few. These countries have established robust democratic institutions, independent election commissions, and strong protections for civil liberties and human rights (UN, 2023). Nigeria is one of the developing countries in the world that has held several general elections since the return to democratic rule in 1999. It is not incorrect to state that democracy is built on law and due process, and when these ingredients are not present, democracy becomes deceitful.

However, observations during the just-concluded 2023 general elections suggest that some Nigerian political leaders violated the principle of secret balloting during the presidential and gubernatorial elections. Additionally, in some polling units, thugs took over, denying voters the opportunity to exercise their civic responsibilities. In some places, policemen were seen standing idly by, which not only instilled fear in many Nigerians about the expected democratic system but also called into question the sincerity of institutions responsible for ensuring true democratic elections by protecting citizens' right to vote.

Furthermore, according to Ibunge (2023), "the State Police Public Relations Officer, SP Grace Iringe-Koko, confirmed the arrest of one officer and three Inspectors of Police personnel for involvement in electoral malpractices in Rivers State." The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) reported that "the 2023 Nigerian presidential and legislative elections were characterized by violence, voter suppression, the influence of money, and online falsehoods" (CDD, 2023). "

The CDD added that some "technical issues with the use of the bimodal voter accreditation system (BVAS) were also noted, with 23.1% reporting BVAS malfunctions. This was particularly severe in the northeast, with 42.7% of observers recording malfunctions, but it was also high in the northwest at 28.7% (Yusuf, 2023). The observed challenges could have been overcome with sincerity of purpose, proper planning, and logistics before the election.

Moreover, between 1st January and 10th March 2023, a total of 109 election-related deaths were recorded across Nigeria during the buildup to the 2023 general election (CDD, 2023). In some places like Lagos, Rivers, Imo, Bayelsa, Katsina, and Kano, voters were spotted intimidated by thugs, while some were left with wounds (Adebayo et al., 2023). Given these identified challenges, the absence of government's credibility can result in a lack of trust and consequently lead to political disinterest. This focal point of concern has captured the interest of scholars in the field of social science who are concerned about the significance of achieving an optimal democracy by means of a functional electoral process within Nigeria. Therefore, this study attempts to shed light on the possible ways to eliminate, if not eradicate, the observed challenges in Nigeria's democratic elections.

Research Method

The study employs a descriptive research methodology and relies on secondary sources of data. These encompass academic journals, governmental publications, online resources, the amended 1999 Nigerian Constitution, and newspapers. Notably, internet sources, including those from the United Nations,

constitute a significant component of the study materials. The collated information is subjected to analysis through content analysis techniques for rigorous examination.

Conceptual Explications

Democracy

The concept of "democracy" requires an evaluation of the extent to which a political system embodies three key elements. A state may be classified as "democratic" when democratic features are prevalent, whereas "undemocratic" systems are characterized by a minimum of democratic elements and a predominance of anti-democratic values. However, this raises the fundamental question of what precisely is meant by the term "democracy." 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 House, 2021). Democracy is a political system in which citizens participate in the decision-making processes that shape their lives and the lives of their fellow citizens." (Diamond, 1999). Democracy is a political system in which power is held by the people, either directly or through elected representatives, who have the ability to exercise political power through the mechanisms of government" (Przeworski, 1991). Democracy is a system of government that empowers individuals to participate in the decisions that affect their lives and the collective well-being of their society, through the exercise of their rights to free and fair elections, freedom of expression, assembly and association, and the rule of law." (International IDEA, 2021).

Democracy is a form of government that embodies the principles of political equality, majority rule, and the protection of individual rights and freedoms, and that 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). Democracy is a political system that allows citizens to shape their government and participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives, and that is characterized by the rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts." (United Nations, 2021). Democracy is a form of government that is characterized by the participation of citizens in decision-making processes, the protection of individual rights and liberties, and the provision of public goods and services in a manner that is responsive to the needs and preferences of the population." (Held, 2006).

From the above definitions, it is crystal clear that democracy cannot be complete without emphasis on; citizen participation in decision-making processes, the existence of free and fair elections, the protection of individual rights and liberties, the rule of law, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and the ability of citizens to hold their government accountable. In other words, democracy is understood as a form of government that empowers individuals to shape their government and participate in decision-making, while ensuring that the rule of law and individual rights are respected, and that conflicts are resolved peacefully.

Democratic Elections

Elections are one of the fundamental pillars of democracy. The Electoral Law contains provisions that govern and clearly define both the organization of these elections and the process for counting and assigning the votes to the corresponding seats. There are two types of electoral rights: active and passive. Active electoral rights allow citizens to vote, while passive electoral rights enable individuals to run for office. In most cases, the electorate can exercise both types of rights (Becker & Raveloson, 2008). However, conducting elections alone does not automatically qualify a state as democratic. There are other forms of government that use elections. For an election to be considered democratic according to Becker and Raveloson (2008), it must meet certain requirements:

- Democratic elections are free when citizens have the right to choose from several candidates or parties that can run for the election without any restriction. They must also be free to decide whether they want to use their right to vote or to abstain from doing so, if they prefer.
- Democratic elections must be equitable in that it must ensure that every citizen who is eligible to vote has access to a vote, and that their vote is valued equally regardless of their origin, gender, language, income, wealth, occupation, social class, sexual identity, education, religion, or political affiliation."
- In democratic elections, there must be no way of knowing for which political party or for which particular candidate a citizen has voted. They are then secrete, when each citizen can put his ballot in an envelope, without having been either watched over or influenced, in the secrecy of the polling booth, and when he/she is also able, in the same way, to put his/her envelope inside the ballot box afterwards.
- Democratic elections are characterized by their transparency and openness to the public. This implies that every citizen has the right to observe the vote counting process when the ballot box is opened. Additionally, the entire process of vote counting, from the insertion of ballots into the box to the final calculation that determines the distribution of seats, can be closely monitored by interested parties.
- Apart from the aforementioned requirements, holding regular elections is crucial for ensuring a functioning democracy. This allows citizens to be informed about the date of upcoming elections in advance, providing them with enough time to prepare. Regular elections also enable the electorate to hold their government accountable and remove it from power if necessary. It's essential that the electorate represents the entire population, and no particular group should be excluded, except for those who are underage.
- And finally, the electorate's votes should be final, meaning that the election results should be enforced effectively, which implies that they must be accepted as legitimate.

The election process is characterized by two distinct systems: the absolute majority vote and the proportional vote. Both systems are crucial in shaping the political structure and forming the political will of the nation. The decision to adopt one system over the other should be made based on a consideration of political traditions, historical situations, and social conditions. The internal regulations of the party, relations between parties, and the relationship between the government and the parliament are all parameters that may vary based on the choice of electoral system (Becker & Raveloson, 2008). It is essential to ensure that the electoral system is not manipulated, as this undermines the primary function of an election and leads to a loss of legitimacy for the elected organs.

Institutional Theory

One influential scholar in the field of institutional theory is Paul DiMaggio, who has written extensively on the topic. In his seminal paper "Culture and Cognition," co-authored with Walter Powell, DiMaggio argues that institutionalized practices and beliefs become deeply ingrained in organizational behavior and are difficult to change, even in the face of new information or evidence (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). An institutional theory emphasizes the importance of legitimacy or the perception that an organization's actions are appropriate and desirable, in shaping organizational behavior. Organizations may adopt practices and structures that are not necessarily efficient or effective, but that are seen as legitimate within their institutional environment. One of the key ideas of institutional theory is that organizations are not just rational actors, but are also influenced by the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which they operate.

Another key figure in institutional theory is Scott Richard. Richard argues that this process is driven by a desire for legitimacy and a need to conform to prevailing institutional norms (Scott, 2014). Institutional theory is a sociological approach to understanding how organizations and institutions shape human

behavior. It is concerned with how norms, values, and beliefs become embedded in social structures and how these structures shape individual and organizational behavior. According to institutional theory, organizations and individuals conform to prevailing social norms and institutional rules, even if those norms and rules are not necessarily in their best interests.

Institutional theory can be applied to understanding the malfunctions of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political institutions in Nigeria's 2023 general elections, particularly in the context of political institutions. The Nigerian political system is characterized by a history of corruption, fraud, and irregularities in elections. The institutional framework, which includes political parties, the electoral commission, and the judiciary, has been criticized for being weak, ineffective, and prone to manipulation.

One of the central tenets of institutional theory is that organizations and individuals conform to prevailing social norms and institutional rules, even if those norms and rules are not necessarily in their best interest. In the case of Nigeria's general elections, the prevailing social norm appears to be that irregularities during election are acceptable and even expected, particularly among political elites. This norm is perpetuated by a variety of factors, including a history of corruption, weak institutional enforcement, and a lack of transparency in the electoral process.

Legitimacy is an aspect of institutional theory that refers to the perception that an organization's actions are appropriate and desirable. In the context of Nigerian politics, legitimacy is often tied to the perception of fairness and transparency in the electoral process. However, the Nigerian political system has been widely criticized for lacking legitimacy due to the widespread perception that elections are rigged, fraudulent, and manipulated. To correct this, the institutional framework, including the electoral commission, political parties, and the judiciary, must be strengthened. Additionally, efforts should be made to promote transparency, accountability, and democratic values within the political system.

A Review of Nigeria's General Elections from 1999 to 2023

In the retrospective analysis of Nigerian elections spanning from 1999 to 2023, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR), enacted in 1948, assumes a pivotal role as a benchmark. Article 21 (3) of the UNDHR delineates 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). Throughout this timeline, the Nigerian electoral landscape has been marred by complexities ranging from voter apathy to electoral violence and intimidation.

Sa'eed (2023) observes that the first three presidential elections in the Fourth Republic (1999, 2003, 2007) were tainted by varying forms of fraud, manipulation, violence, and ballot snatching. Notably, the 2007 general elections, yielding over 70 percent of votes for the ruling PDP, suffered widespread disrepute, with scholars emphasizing its divergence from democratic norms (Suberu, 2007; Omotola, 2009). This prompted acknowledgment from President Musa Yar'Adua, elected in the controversial 2007 contest, of the election's imperfections. However, the 2011 elections marked a turning point, earning acclaim for their credibility and management by Attahiru Jega, then-chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Sa'eed, 2023). The Commonwealth Observer Group acknowledged that these elections celebrated democracy in Nigeria (Commonwealth Observer Group, as cited in Sa'eed, 2023).

Nevertheless, challenges persisted. Pre-election violence, culminating in fatalities, remained a concern. Ibeh (2015) reported that within 50 days, 61 incidents of election violence occurred in 22 states, leading to 58 casualties. This violence spanned across all six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, indicating widespread repercussions (Ibeh, 2015).

The 2019 General Election, intended as an improvement upon its predecessor, echoed past issues. Security threats encompassed godfatherism, violent campaigns, insurgency, and more (CLEEN Foundation, 2019). The Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room identified concerns about transparent results collation, accountable election administration, violence mitigation, and fair campaign grounds (Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, 2019).

However, the 2023 general election marked a missed opportunity for democratic advancement. Hopes for consolidation of electoral reforms were dashed by myriad pitfalls. The credibility of the election suffered due to inefficiencies in voter card distribution, technological malfunctions, and lack of transparent results collation (Nigeria Civil Society Situation room, 2023). Election violence, insecurity, and vote-buying further eroded the election's credibility (Nigeria Civil Society Situation room, 2023). Notably, the deeply contentious and disputed nature of the election created an atmosphere incongruent with ideal democratic proceedings (Nigeria Civil Society Situation room, 2023). This was exemplified by incidents such as the altercation involving Funke Akindele, the deputy governorship candidate of the PDP, during campaign activities (Solution, 2023).

In summation, Nigerian general elections since 1999 have been marked by a complex interplay of challenges and progress, often diverging from the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While strides have been made, persistent issues continue to raise questions about the realization of an ideal democracy in Nigeria.

Discussion of findings

It is pertinent to acknowledge that no democratic nation has achieved a state of perfect democracy; however, the trajectory toward this destination should instill optimism within the populace. The discourse within this study will center on the attributes of an ideal democratic election, as outlined by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. An exemplary democratic election is characterized by its adherence to principles of freedom, fairness, and transparency, while affording every citizen equal and equitable opportunities to engage in the electoral process.

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria yielded unexpected outcomes despite the substantial financial allocation to support its execution. The tension and uncertainties that surrounded the conduct of the 2023 general election, including widespread insecurity and deaths across the Nigeria were special concern about the credibility of 2023 general election outcome. According to Abbas and Haruna (2023), the existing records show that 52 acts of political violence occurred in 22 states within one month (between 8 October and 9 November 2022). These incidents led to the death of 24 persons, while over 20 others were injured.

The Nigerian populace has harbored reservations about electoral processes since the reintroduction of democratic governance in 1999. The viability of an ideal democracy is compromised when the citizenry perceives the electoral process to be tainted. This sentiment is further underscored by the perception held by certain segments of the population that participating in the election is an exercise in futility, given the anticipated misconduct in the process. The experience of ballot snatching, ballot stuffing, multiple voting, underage voting and party agent collusion/bribery are just a few to mention about many reflections on electoral malpractice of the 2023 Nigeria general elections. Awopeju (2011) stated that Nigeria, since 1999 democratic government has suffered from years of elections characterised by electoral rigging, fraud and corruption. Isma'ila (2016), stated that "political corruption has crippled consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. The issues of electoral misconduct from 1999 up to the present in Nigeria's fourth republic democratic venture have undeniably raised worries, casting doubt on the process of strengthening democracy within the nation.

To counteract this disillusionment and to rekindle the hope kindled during Nigeria's attainment of independence in 1960, a new electoral act was enacted in 2022. This legislation serves to confer legal underpinning to the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) initiatives pertaining to electronic voter authentication and the electronic transmission of election results. To reinforce this commitment, Professor Mahmood Yakubu, the Chairman of INEC, affirmed that the vote counting process would transpire in the presence of voters, with the outcomes documented on a result sheet. Furthermore, he indicated that a photograph of the duly signed result sheet would be promptly uploaded onto a secure online platform. While this proposition appeared promising, its practical implementation yielded contradictory results.

According to Adichie (2023), "Election workers had arrived hours late, or without basic election materials". "There were reports of violence, of a shooting at a polling unit, and of political operatives stealing or destroying ballot boxes. Some law-enforcement officers seemed to have colluded in voter intimidation; in Lagos, a policeman stood idly by as an APC spokesperson threatened members of a particular ethnic group who he believed would vote for the opposition". These posed questions to many Nigerians about the hope for an ideal democracy in Nigeria. One of the principles of ideal democracy is that "every citizen of voting age should have the right to vote in a democratic election, regardless of their race, gender, religion, or any other distinguishing factor" (Becker & Raveloson, 2008). Any electoral practice that has continued to be characterized by thuggery, threats, intimidation, and disenfranchisement of citizens undermines the fundamental principles of democracy, freedom, and human rights. More so, such practice will ignite the violation of human rights, the marginalization of citizens, and the undermining of the legitimacy of the democratic process. Isma'ila (2016), highlights that insecurity, corruption, weak democratic institutions, lack of internal democracy within political parties, military mentality, weak electoral umpire, and electoral irregularities have seriously posed threats to democratic practices in Nigeria's Fourth Republic elections.

To belittle Nigerians' intelligence, the Senate and House results were easily uploaded, leaving another puzzle for Nigerians to solve on why the same medium that summited Senate and House results could not summit presidential results with an excuse of cyber-attack (Adichie, 2023). It is clear from this that there is a lot of insincerity in that regard. According to Adichie, "The process was imperiled not by technical shortcomings but by deliberate manipulation." This questions whether the integrity of the INEC is still preserved. An undemocratic election is capable of creating ethnic division in civil service and causing distrust, and bitterness among the workers and society at large.

Conclusion and Recommendations

When a system demonstrates sincerity of purpose, it is observable in the process and align with the stated goals and principles. The actions must be consistent with words, and there is a transparency in the intentions. This concept is not only important in business transactions, but also, in leadership roles and governance. It also, signifies that the system is driven by a true and authentic desire to achieve a particular goal, objective, or outcome, without any hidden agendas, ulterior motives, or deceitful intentions.

There has not been a formal election held in the nation that hasn't been marked by high political tension, volatile emotions, and a general feeling of unease. In Nigeria, electoral violence has posed a serious threat to the development of democracy. From the general elections in 1959, which helped Nigeria achieve independence on October 1, 1960, to the first elections after independence in 1964–1965, held during the First Republic of Nigeria, to the Second, Third, and Fourth Republics to the present. During electioneering seasons, the most popular pre-election stories in the media are frequently negative. Either some political contenders have been killed, or abducted, like was observed in Enugu, Ebonyi, and even in Kano states Nigeria, or campaign rallies, popular markets have been bombed like was seen in Lagos and Borno states, or political thugs have attacked political rivals Lagos and Kano were good examples of such incidents with guns and lethal weapons.

These and many more do not portray a true or ideal democratic election. Therefore, we put forward that first, the electoral process should involve less human intervention and more electronic means. This implies that results should be uploaded right from the polling units without having to pass through the rigorous process of wards, local governments, and state centers before uploading the result. Secondly, competency tests should be administered to candidates, and the identities of those who pass should be made public. A procedure for filing complaints against partisan and corrupt ad hoc officials should be established by INEC. In high- and medium-risk states like Lagos, Kano, and River states, INEC should endeavor to step up oversight and surveillance of its officials. This will no doubt give room for creating a system that enables citizens to voice their grievances and concerns regarding INEC officials. The commission should as a matter of sincerity have the Nigerians at the front than the few politicians with power tussle.

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