

Original paper

Democracy and 2023 General Elections in Nigeria: Retrospect and Prospects

Ojukwu, Uchechukwu Grace^{1*}, Umeifekwem, Uchenna Timothy² and Okeke, Vincent Onyekwelu Sunday³

¹Department of Political Science, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Nigeria.

²Department of Public Administration, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Nigeria.

³Department of International Relations, Gregory University, Uturu, Abia state, Nigeria.

*Corresponding Author Email: ojukwuuche04@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes democracy and Nigeria's general elections of 2023 while taking into account a broader range of variables that influenced both the process and the result. Over the past few decades, Nigeria has seen a wave of democratic advances. Democracy is a form of government in which citizens have the right to choose their leaders through free and fair elections. Free and fair election is the benchmark of democracy. In other words, democracy implies that the people have the opportunity to decide who governs them. Regular elections offer the people the opportunity to accept or refuse the men who are to govern them. It is the political right enjoyed by the people to decide who should govern them in a free and fair election that separates democracy from any other kind of political system. The 2023 general election is the seventh election in the series of general elections held since Nigeria returned to civil rule in 1999. Nevertheless, democracy in Nigeria has been complex due to the multiple ethnic and religious groups that make up the population, the prevalence of military coups, and the lack of economic development. Ultimately, the 2023 general elections in Nigeria became a major test of the nation's democratic progress due to the INEC's introduction of new technology, including the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV), to improve administration of the 2023 polls. Buttressing this optimism was the Electoral Act 2022, which introduced reforms aimed at more timely organization of pre-electoral processes and increasing transparency in results collation and reporting. Like most elections in Nigeria, the 2023 general election was conducted under a deeply contentious, and disputed, atmosphere, including widespread insecurity and uncertain government policies introduced ahead of the election. Relying on qualitative approach using data gathered from secondary sources as well as historical analysis. The study found out that the election fell short of Nigerian citizens' legitimate and reasonable expectations, as several accredited election observation groups reported that the credibility of the 2023 election was greatly marred by numerous pitfalls in election administration such as inefficient management of permanent voters cards (PVCs) distribution, failure of operational and logistical arrangements, malfunctioning of election technology, instances of vote manipulation, political violence, lack of transparent results collation and declaration process, and poor crisis communication. Considering also, the pressing issues that face Nigeria today, these include widespread poverty, corruption, and insecurity, as well as an inadequate electoral infrastructure that has hindered voter participation in past elections. The study therefore recommended among other things: strengthening the independence of the electoral body, putting in place measures to ensure the election is free from fraud and manipulation, and ensuring that the election reflects the will of the people. By implementing these strategies, the future general elections in Nigeria will be able to realize greater success in terms of improved democracy and a more stable post-election period.

Keywords: Democracy, 2023 General Elections, INEC, BVAS, IReV, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Elections in Nigeria have continued to elicit more than casual interest by Nigerian scholars due to the fact that, despite the appreciation that only credible elections can consolidate and sustain the country's democracy; over the years, Nigeria has continued to witness with growing

disappointment and apprehension its inability to conduct peaceful, free, fair, and open elections whose results are widely accepted and respected across the country (Igbuzor, 2010; Osumah and Aghemelo, 2010; Ekweremadu, 2011; Ojukwu, Mbah and Maduekwe,

2019; Gberie, 2011). Election is one of the key pillars of democracy. It is the means of translating the critical element of equality of citizens in democratic societies into relating through 'one person, one vote', in the constitution of the elective offices of the state. However, this is so only, if elections are free, fair and credible (Alemika, 2011). Democracy as a form of government thrives when elections are predictably regular, credible and the outcomes are acceptable to a wide spectrum of stakeholders, both local and international. An election is a process that is central to states' emerging from transitional democracy and attempting to consolidate democracy. The nexus between electoral process and democratic consolidation indicates the extent to which the election process is free and fair (Huntington, 1991). The measure of a free election is when the process is free of any form of inhibitions and contradictions. The role of the judiciary in the electoral process is generally acknowledged as being crucial, perhaps even more so when electoral petitions have to be considered.

Democratic governance is an electoral contract between the governors and the governed through free and fair elections because qualified citizens in democratic societies have the constitutional right to elect who leads them. The electorates can also negotiate the terms of governance with political candidates by the choice of who they vote for or against (Ifukor, 2010, p.404). Clapham (1993, p.32) posits that democracy is a process that requires consensus building among all stakeholders. It involves an agreement over the management of political competition, including competition to hold the major offices in a particular nation, by means short of escalated violence, save in very limited and containable circumstances.

It calls for accountability of rulers to the governed according to procedures which are broadly accepted by those rulers, and which can be enforced on them should they dissent.

Elections in post-independence Nigeria have been characterized by fraud and the subversion of the sovereign will of the people.

This, perhaps, has to do with the character of the state, or what most scholars describe as "the politics of primitive wealth accumulation" in Africa.

Corroborating this fact, Luqman (2009, p.59) observed that the history of elections in Nigeria's efforts at democratization has been a checkered one. Since independence, electoral conduct in the nation's democratization efforts has been an exercise in futility. This is due to the fact, that conduct of elections in the nation's political history has been marred by fraudulent practices, corruption, and violence. It is therefore, little surprise that past efforts at democratization have collapsed on the altar of perverted elections and electoral process. So bad was the situation, that election period has come to be associated with violence and politically motivated crises. That politics has turned to money

making venture has re-enforced the notion of election as a contest that is meant to be won at whatever cost possible. This has turned electoral conducts in Nigeria to a war-like process (Odoziobodo, 2015).

Be that as it may, Luqman (2005, p.59), further remarks that while a great deal of the problems confronting elections and electoral process in the nation's democratic history can be linked to behavioural and attitudinal dispositions of the political elite, a substantial portion of the blame must be placed on the door step of institutions that have been saddled with the responsibility of conducting elections in Nigeria. Experiences have shown that rather than being independent of the executive arm of government and maintaining a non-partisan stand, past electoral commissions in Nigeria's political history were indeed tied to the apron strings of the incumbent executive. Rather than being independent of the executive arm of government, transparent in its dealing, impartial in the discharge of its functions, accountable and responsive to the stakeholders involved in the process, electoral commissions in Nigeria have exhibited the opposite of all these virtues.

A cursory look at all the election management bodies Nigeria has had from 1959 to date reveals a disturbing degree of partiality and gross incompetence in the discharge of those sacred duties they were established to perform for Nigeria. Of course, in the opinion of Luqman (2009, p.60), their inability to effectively manage the conduct and administration of elections and electoral process has had deleterious effects on the nation's efforts at instituting credible and virile democratic system. The most glaring of such effects was the truncation of the democratic process through military intervention in the nation's politics (Odoziobodo, 2015).

It is important to note that as at the time of conducting the 2023 general election, ten general elections had already been conducted in Nigeria since political independence in 1960. These included 1964, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. Of this number, the military conducted the 1979, 1993, and 1999 transition elections as the country transited from military to civilian governments. On the other hand, the 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 as well as the 2019 general elections were organized by civilian governments as transition from one civilian administration to another. According to Oronsaye (2008, p.80), It is instructive to mention that the seven civilian government - organized elections, that is, 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections – suffered credibility problems resulting from the perception of the electorate that the elections were not free and fair and therefore, not credible. They accused the different electoral commissions - FEDECO, NEC, NECON and INEC, respectively of being partisan and pandering to the whims and machinations of the government in power. In particular, several election-monitoring groups, both domestic and international – the European Union Election

Observation Mission (EU EOM), the Yiaga Africa, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) West Africa, IFRA-Nigeria had adjudged the 2023 elections as the worst election ever conducted in the history of Nigeria since independence. This observation was occasioned by the poor preparation and execution of the election by INEC leading to disputed results in virtually all elections held for various political offices in 2023.

INEC introduced new technologies to improve administration of the 2023 polls, including Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV). The BVAS was used to biometrically verify voters as part of the accreditation process and to electronically transmit a photo of polling unit-level results at the end of the Election Day to the IReV online portal. Publishing polling unit-level results through IReV was widely anticipated to be a significant improvement to election transparency from the 2019 polls. It was a new innovation to ascertain a credible election, but the question is how neutral, objective, and innovative the operators are?

It is against this backdrop, that this paper examined democracy and 2023 general elections with a view to establishing the success or failure of BVAS and IReV in the conduct of the election and promotion of democracy in Nigeria.

Background to the 2023 Nigeria general elections

The 2023 general election is the seventh consecutive general election since Nigeria re-established its democracy in 1999. The elections mark 24 years of uninterrupted democracy—the longest span in Nigeria's history. The 2023 general election was the first nationwide elections conducted within the framework of the new Electoral Act, which President Buhari signed into law in February 2022. Continuing Nigeria's reputation for using advanced technology in elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) utilized two technological innovations to improve the integrity and transparency of the electoral process. The Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) verifies and authenticates voters, and the INEC Results Viewing Portal is a public-facing voter tabulation system that the INEC will deploy nationwide (Table 1).

The build-up to the 2023 general election in Nigeria was fraught with uncertainty. This was largely a result of the past experiences of the Nigerian electorate, many of whom have a long-held belief that their votes do not count. This belief stems from a feeling of powerlessness to determine their elected leaders at various levels.

Subjected to over three decades of military rule after its independence in 1960, Nigeria – which is Africa's largest

country by GDP and population size – has witnessed a series of general elections in recent times (Aina, 2023). Since the return of democracy which heralded the start of its Fourth Republic in 1999, the country has now held 10 general elections. While some of these elections have been characterized by irregularities, others have been outright abysmal. Such was the case with the 2007 general election that brought the late President Umar Musa Yar'Adua into office. Yar'Adua would eventually acknowledge that the election was nothing close to being free and fair. This led to his decision to priorities electoral reforms.

Nigeria's 2023 general election was one of the most keenly contested elections in the country's history. In 2015, the election of President Muhammadu Buhari was seen by many Nigerians as an opportunity to reset the country's affairs after a steep slide into backwardness, due to what was perceived as the gross incompetence of the previous administration. The Buhari administration promised to tackle security issues, particularly the persistent threat posed by Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), in the northeast (Aina, 2023). Other promises which won over the hearts and minds of Nigerians at the time included fighting corruption and prioritizing the economy.

Eight years on, while Nigeria has made some significant progress in degrading Boko Haram and ISWAP, President Buhari's claim that the insurgency has been 'technically defeated' has been disputed in several quarters, including among policy analysts and commentators (Aina, 2023). Similarly, the fight against corruption has mostly been perceived as 'selective' and politically motivated. In addition, the country has not made much progress on the economic front in the past eight years, with a high debt profile and a consistent rise in inflation. This has brought significant economic hardship on Nigerians. A recently published report from the National Bureau of Statistics contends that over half the population lives in multidimensional poverty.

Beyond its apparent failure to deliver on some of its promises, other challenges have emerged under the Buhari administration. In the North-West, for instance, the nefarious activities of armed bandits have claimed the lives of thousands and led to the forced displacement of many others. Recent years have seen increased secessionist agitations from the Indigenous People of Biafra and atrocities perpetrated by its paramilitary wing, the Easter Security Network, as well as Yoruba Nation agitators. Concerns over the administration's handling of the #EndSARS movement also drove a wedge in state-society relations, particularly between the government and young people, who were protesting police brutality that they claimed was mostly targeted at them. Another more recent example is the timing of the ill-informed cashless policy of the Central Bank of Nigeria, which has not only created a cash crunch across the country, but

Table 1: Electoral Statistical Information

| Election Date | Figures |
|--|--|
| Presidential and National Assembly elections | February 25, 2023 |
| Governorship and State Houses of Assembly elections | March 18, 2023 |
| States | 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory |
| Local Government Areas (LGAs) | 774 LGAs |
| Total no. of Registered voters | 93,469,008 |
| Males | 49,054,162 (52.5 percent) |
| Females | 44,414,846 (47.5 percent) |
| Persons with disabilities | 85,362 (data from the 2021–22 registration exercise) |
| Youth (aged 18–34) years | 37,060,399 (39.65 percent) |
| Registration areas/wards | 8,809 |
| Polling units | 176,846 |
| No of Electoral Constituencies for the Available seats | |
| Presidential constituency (36 States and the FCT) | 1 |
| Governorship seats | 28 States |
| Senatorial district seats | 109 |
| House of Representatives seats | 360 |
| State Houses of Assembly seats | 993 |
| Total | 1,491 |
| Political parties | 18 registered political parties |
| Total no. of Candidates | 15,309 |
| Men | 91.7 percent |
| Women | 8.3 percent |
| Youth | 28.6 percent |
| Campaign expenditure limit based on the type of position competed for | |
| Presidential candidates | 5 billion naira (\$10,848,800 USD equivalent) |
| Governorship candidates | 1 billion naira (\$2,169,760 USD equivalent) |
| Senate candidates | 100 million naira (\$216,976 USD equivalent) |
| House of Representatives candidates | 70 million naira (\$151,883 USD equivalent) |
| Houses of Assembly candidates | 30 million naira (\$65,092 USD equivalent) |

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into percentage was made by the Researchers).

has also partly damaged Nigeria's informal economy, impacting small businesses and subsistence households. The 2023 general election therefore offered Nigerians an opportunity to elect a fresh set of political leaders. Assurances given by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) prior to the elections through the introduction of technologically driven interventions such as the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal were intended to guarantee the credibility of the voting process. These initial assurances contributed to the enthusiasm of first-time voters, with over 9.5 million registering to vote. Another significant dynamic which characterized the build-up to the general election was the sudden emergence of a populist candidate in the person of Peter Obi of the Labour Party and his 'Obedient Movement', marking a paradigm shift in the traditional two-party electioneering process that has come to characterize Nigeria's general elections.

INEC's Insistence on the use of BVAS and IReV for the Elections

BVAS

Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) is an electronic device designed to read Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and authenticate voters – using the voters' fingerprints – in order to prove that they are eligible to vote at a particular polling unit. The BVAS is a technological device used to identify and accredit voters'

fingerprints and facial recognition before voting. BVAS usage entails either scanning the barcode/QR code on the PVC/Voter's register or entering the last six digits of the Voter Identity Number or typing in the last name of the voter by the Assistant Presiding Officer (APO 1) to verify and authenticate the voter. "Secondly, to replace the Z-pad for uploading the polling unit results to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) in real-time on election day". BVAS also acts as the INEC Voter Enrolment Device (IVED) during voter registration. Its usage has also eliminated the use of incident forms during accreditation on an election day.

INEC introduced new technologies to improve administration of the 2023 polls, including BVAS and IReV. The BVAS was used to biometrically verify voters as part of the accreditation process and to electronically transmit a photo of polling unit-level results at the end of the Election Day to the IReV online portal.

Publishing polling unit-level results through IReV was widely anticipated to be a significant improvement to election transparency from the 2019 polls. However, the success of these technologies is dependent on their administration, functionality on a national scale, and public confidence in the systems (IRI/NDI report, 2023). While INEC successfully piloted both systems during three off-cycle elections, it never conducted a full nationwide stress test in advance of the February elections.

In January 2023, after the procurement of BVAS machines for the 2023 elections was completed, the BVAS hardware and software was field tested at INEC

state offices. Citizen observers Yiaga-Africa were able to observe the field tests in some, but not all, locations, as the exercise was reportedly not intended to be open to the public (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Positively, INEC conducted a public mock accreditation exercise on February 4 during which time results and accreditation data were also transmitted to the IReV using the BVAS machines. However, the exercise involved only 436, or less than one-third of one percent, of the polling units in the country and public participation was low.

IReV

The INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) is a platform created by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria to provide real-time transmission of election results from polling units to the central collation centre.

IReV enables the people to view election results real time from various polling units across the country (Businessday, Wednesday, July 19, 2023). The IReV is an online portal where polling unit level results are uploaded directly from the polling unit, transmitted and published for the public.

At the front end of the online portal, members of the public can create personal accounts with which they can gain access to all uploaded results stored as PDF files.

The portal provides pictures of the election results from each polling unit, including the number of votes cast for each candidate and the percentage of total votes cast.

This accessibility of polling unit level results increases transparency and public trust in the process. Thus, IReV was designed to enhance the transparency of the electoral process and reduce the incidence of vote rigging and election manipulation. IReV was first introduced by INEC in 2020 when a by-election was conducted in Nasarawa state. The IReV was put to use in the recent off-season elections, including the Ekiti and Osun governorship polls with the electoral body and stakeholders in the electoral process gave credibility to the exercise.

The portal is also backed by the 2022 Electoral Act which gives INEC the power to deploy appropriate technologies for the conduct of elections in the country. Section 41(1) gives the commission the mandate to provide suitable boxes, electronic voting machines, or any other voting devices for the conduct of elections. Section 47(2) requires the presiding officer to use a smart card reader or any other technological device prescribed by the commission to verify, confirm, authenticate, and accredit voters.

Section 50(2) states that subject to Section 63, voting at an election and transmission of results shall be in accordance with the procedure defined by INEC. Mahmood Yakubu, INEC chairman had at a briefing penultimate to the general election said the commission

has vast experience in election results transmission via the iReV.

Result of the elections

On 1 March, INEC declared that Bola Tinubu (APC) obtained 8,794,726 votes (36.61 percent), Atiku Abubakar (PDP) came in second with 6,984,520 votes (29.07 percent), and Peter Obi (LP) came third with 6,101,533 votes (25.40 percent). Rabiun Kwankwaso (NNPP) was declared to have obtained 1,496,687 votes (6.23 percent). The results showed that among some 93.5 million registered PVC card holders, only some 25 million (27 percent) had cast their vote. Based on its parallel vote tabulation, YIAGA Africa (2023) averred that presidential results for Imo and Rivers states were not consistent with its findings.

The results process leading to the declaration of Bola Tinubu as winner was disputed by the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the Labour Party (LP) and the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP). PDP and LP headed to the Court of Appeal (CoA). Acting expeditiously, the Court of Appeal on 8 March granted the PDP and LP access to certified copies of INEC materials and technological data used in the 25 February elections. It also enabled INEC to prepare its election technology for the 18 March polls. Meanwhile, LP and PDP alleged that INEC did not comply with court orders made in their favour, raising concerns for further court interventions. PDP returned to the Court of Appeal but, on 15 March withdrew again, stating that INEC had started to provide the materials sought (Table 2). However, as late as 16 March the Labour Party was still alleging non-compliance by INEC, despite getting assurances that the requested information would be provided. Labour Party also stated that the lack of information impeded their ability to conclude the preparation of their petition. The 25 February post-election environment was largely peaceful, with parties appealing to supporters for calm. However, a few days before the 18 March elections, violence abruptly increased with more than a dozen attacks and abductions of candidates by thugs and unidentified gunmen, some of which resulted in fatalities. Violence shortly before and on Election Day appeared to strategically suppress voter participation.

On 7 March, the INEC published the lists with winners of 428 out of 469 National Assembly seats on its Twitter account. Results in seven Senatorial districts and 32 House of Representatives (HoR) constituencies were declared inconclusive and supplementary elections were held after the state-level polls. Following the killing of the LP senatorial candidate in Enugu-East on 22 February, INEC postponed the elections in this district to coincide with the state-level polls. The 2023 Nigerian House of Representatives elections were held on 25 February 2023 where voters elected members of the House of Representatives using first-past-the-post voting in all 360

Table 2: 2023 Presidential Election Results (as announced by INEC).

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

Source: BBC News Online, 30th March, 2023, "Nigeria election results 2023: Up-to-date results of presidential and parliamentary races.

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

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

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into percentage was made by the Researchers).

Table 3b: House of Representatives.

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

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into percentage was made by the Researchers).

federal constituencies (Tables 3a and b). The last regular House elections for all districts were in 2019. The winners of these House elections will serve beginning in the 10th Nigerian National Assembly. The APC have held a majority in the House of Representatives since the 2015 elections and solidified that majority in 2019. Announced results showed that APC were returned with a majority 59 Senate seats and 176 House of Representatives. PDP obtained 36 and 118, respectively, LP was returned with 8 Senate and 35 House of Representatives seats, while the NNPP won two senatorial and 19 House of Representatives seats (Table 3a). In total, eight parties are now represented in the National Assembly. Only three senatorial and 14 House of Representatives seats were won by women, the lowest female representation in the National Assembly since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 (Tables 3a and b).

The 2023 Nigerian gubernatorial elections were held for state governors in 28 out of 36 Nigerian states https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/States_of_Nigeria. Out

of the nation's 36 states, eight, namely Anambra, Bayelsa, Edo, Ekiti, Imo, Kogi, Ondo and Osun, hold off cycle governorship elections due to litigations and court judgments. Elections in Kogi, Bayelsa and Imo are scheduled for November 2023. All states have a two term limit for Governors which makes 18 incumbent governors ineligible for re-election. Eighteen political parties participated in the governorship election across the 28 states with 416 candidates showing interest in the position. Despite over 74 million voters registered and more than 69 million PVCs collected in the 28 states, 19.3 million voters voted during the gubernatorial polls in 23 states (Table 4). Overall, the March election results were noted for few changes as state's governing parties generally retained control of governorships. Like in the federal elections, Independent National Electoral Commission performance dominated post-election discussion as dozens of candidates claimed irregularities had impacted their elections. Additionally, the March gubernatorial elections had significantly more reports of

Table 4: Result of 2023 Governorship Election (as announced by INEC).

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

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into percentage was made by the Researchers).

violence and vote-buying than during the federal elections, especially in the states of Lagos and Kano.

Nigerians were relieved that the presidential election date was respected without a last-minute postponement as happened in the past; nevertheless, many complained that polling stations opened late across the country on account of the late deployment of staff and materials. These challenges were not experienced equally across the country, and disproportionately impacted voters in the South-East and South-South geo-political zones. While this pattern had been experienced in past elections, the regional difference in delays was more glaring during the 2023 elections, and INEC's lack of transparency and communication regarding the cause and extent of these problems undermined confidence in the process, especially in those zones and among parties that considered those areas their strongholds. Because of the delayed openings, many voters had to wait for long hours and in overcrowded conditions before casting their ballots. There was no consistent, coordinated effort to extend voting hours, and long wait times exacerbated tensions at many polling units.

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) generally facilitated the accreditation process of voters, although observers noted that devices sometimes malfunctioned with regards to thumbprint recognition. In a number of cases, the BVAS could not successfully transmit the results of all three electoral contests at the polling unit, and polling staff cited network issues. Citizen observers noted significant administrative improvements in BVAS functionality during the subsequent gubernatorial and state elections.

Targeted incidents of violence also impacted the polling process and likely disenfranchised voters. According to civil society violence monitors, news reports, and statements from INEC and security forces, Election Day violence and disruption of the electoral process occurred in at least 22 states and the FCT, including an attack on a collation center in Lagos. Election violence and insecurity significantly affected the 2023 elections, particularly in the pre-election period. The lead-up to the election was more violent than the equivalent period in 2019, and the overall 2023 election cycle saw significantly more fatalities and incidents of election violence, in significantly more LGAs, when compared to the 2019 election cycle. Reported incidents included: assassinations and attempted assassinations of political candidates and party officials, attacks on supporters and rallies of opposing parties, and

attacks on INEC facilities, processes (such as voter registration events), and personnel. Insecurity on election day was also significantly worse than during the 2019 elections, with violent disruptions of election processes reported in 22 states and the FCT on February 25 and 21 states during gubernatorial and state elections on March 18. Much of the violence was targeted political violence seemingly organized by, or at least conducted with the support of, politicians and/or party officials. Election violence was exacerbated by intra-party disputes during some of the primaries, shifting political alliances, the rise in armed groups, the emergence of new informal security elements, and a persistent failure to hold perpetrators of such acts to account. Peace accords and other peace-building initiatives appeared to have very limited impact, and the impunity of violent offenders continues to hamper a constructive path forward.

Without significant reforms and greater accountability, many Nigerians are fearful that political operatives may see political violence as a viable and low-cost electoral strategy in future elections.

Women's representation in Nigerian politics has been on a downward slide since 2011, and the 2023 elections in Africa's largest economy confirmed the expectations of poor outcomes for women. The number of women in Nigeria's National Assembly has fallen by 19 percent compared to the last assembly, with women now occupying 3 percent of seats in the Senate and 4 percent in the House of Representatives (Elor, 2023). To understand why Nigerian women performed so poorly in the recent elections, the 2022 primary elections provided insight into the challenges and barriers faced by women aspirants and candidates. The results of the various parties' primary elections highlight enduring limitations to women's representation in competitive politics in Nigeria. The country ranks in the bottom ten globally in women's representation in national parliaments, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023). This challenge of representation persists in spite of the near parity of voter registration between men and women in past election cycles.

Across all national and sub-national categories, women represented just over 10 percent of more than 15,000 candidates who ran in the 2023 elections for president, the National Assembly, governorships, and state assemblies (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Furthermore, 90 percent of women candidates ran on the platforms of small parties. Barring a rare upset by a relatively small

party—for example, the Labour Party—candidates from smaller parties have historically had limited chances of being elected into office.

Without a specific timeline, the law mandates INEC to publish the names of candidates elected and their scores. So far, INEC has not published the manner of calculation of the declared presidential and National Assembly winners, the turnout per state, number of accredited voters, total votes cast, rejected ballots, votes attributed to each party, as well as the list of polling units where elections were cancelled, postponed, or not held. The absence of this information undermines the possibility for independent verification of the outcome (IRI/NDI report, 2023).

Nigeria witnessed a surge in registration of young people in the lead up to the 2023 elections, and youth engaged actively in other aspects of the Nigerian electoral process. According to INEC, voters between the ages of 18 to 34 represented 76.6 percent of new registered voters for the 2023 general elections and 39.7 percent of all registered voters in 2023. Young people were engaged as community organizers and voter mobilisers and educators for their peers and communities (Yiaga Africa, 2023; IRI/NDI report, 2023). INEC Youth Ambassadors attended the National Youth Summit and shared messages for youth to not sell their votes or be involved in electoral violence in the lead-up to the elections. Youth also served as polling officials, including over 200,000 members of the National Youth Service Corps. Due to multiple logistical failures and polling delays beyond their control, polling staff, including the National Youth Service Corps, had to manage the vocal frustration and sometimes aggressive behaviour by voters.

Despite their engagement, young people faced significant barriers to register to vote. Failure of INEC to extend the timeline beyond June 31, 2022, likely disenfranchised many young people who were not able to register in their places of residence, as the ongoing ASUU strike displaced many students. Prior to the elections, university and polytechnic classes were paused, making it more accessible to allow students to travel to their areas of registration to vote. Students ended up comprising 27.8 percent of voters registered for the 2023 elections (IRI/NDI report, 2023).

Youth have been poorly represented as candidates for elected office, even when they contest in large numbers. Despite the legislative advances from the #NotTooYoungtoRun campaign that lowered the age requirement for standing for elected office, there were few youth candidates, especially when considered relative to the substantial percentage of young people on the voter register. Youth candidates declined in the national and state elections, comprising only 28.6 percent, a drop from 34 percent of candidates in 2019. Young women faced an especially high degree of under representation, with only 11 percent of youth candidates

(ages 25 to 35) for national and state elections being female (IRI/NDI report, 2023).

For the federal elections, youth candidates comprised a mere 3.7 percent of candidates under the age of 36. Comparatively, state elections saw more youth running as candidates, with 12.2 percent of candidates for governor and deputy governor, and 35.6 percent of the candidates for State Houses of Assembly. According to the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, 51 youths contested as candidates for governorship or deputy governorship seats in the state elections, in total. In Adamawa, Jigawa, and Ogun, youth had the least representation for the governorship election, as no youth candidates ran for office (Ugwu, 2022; Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023).

Youth faced societal and structural barriers to being nominated and running as candidates for elected offices that negatively impacted their abilities to participate as candidates. Adverse perceptions about their capacity to lead in politics and negative stereotypes about their involvement in election-related violence were at the forefront of these limitations. Since youth were less likely to be financially stable, they faced challenges with meeting campaigning costs, including the prohibitive costs of campaigning nomination forms. Even for those that were able to run, some nominated youth candidates were replaced to satisfy interests of their own political parties (Akhaine, et.al, 2023).

Despite facing obstacles to political participation, youth remain enthusiastic and galvanized to play an active role in shaping the future of Nigeria. Though the number of youth candidates as a whole (defined as 18 to 35) declined in 2023, there was an increase in Nigerians under 30 years of age who contested (Yiaga Africa, 2023). For example, Ibrahim Mohamed, who at the age of 27 years won the Bunza/Birnin Kebbi/ Kaigo seat in Kebbi state, is set to become Nigeria's youngest ever elected lawmaker.

Challenges of Electoral Credibility in Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

Nigeria is in an extremely fragile state. Available indices show characteristics of a failing state. There are conflicts and agitations everywhere, feelings of marginalization and exclusion, a rise in political and criminal violence, loss of control of borders, rising ethnic, religious, and cultural hostilities, weak institutions, food shortages, unemployment, inflation, crumbling infrastructure, deteriorating human development indicators such as infant and maternal mortality, and literacy rates. These troubling realities made the 2023 general elections a defining moment for the country.

1. Independence of the electoral umpire and the new Electoral Act: The independence of the Nigerian electoral institution- INEC has long been contested. Incidents like the burning or stealing of some of the commission's

materials, fake names on the electoral register and under-age registrations in some parts of the country raised questions about its possible connivance. The 2022 Electoral Act introduced innovations like the electronic transmission of results from the polling units and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System. These were intended to curb rigging. But some political forces were believed to be opposed to their use.

2. Emergence of 'viable' third force parties: Until 2015, Nigeria's political landscape was dominated by one party – the People's Democratic Party. It was the only party strong enough to win presidential elections. This changed in 2015 when the All Progressives Congress, a coalition of opposition parties, defeated the sitting president, Goodluck Jonathan. This heralded an era of a two-party dominant state. The emergence of the Labour Party and the New Nigeria People's Party seems to have changed the electoral dynamics. Obi framed his campaign on anti-establishment rhetoric and is therefore able to attract a horde of frustrated young voters. As the only Christian among the four leading candidates, Obi partially benefitted electorally from Christians opposed to Muslim-Muslim ticket of the ruling APC. At least three opinion polls showed him leading the race, though some have questioned the credibility of those polls. Kwankwaso, founder of the Kwankwasiya movement, is regarded as a grassroots organizer. He was believed to be popular with ordinary people in the North but was thought to lack a strong following in the South.

3. Insecurity: Insecurity is simply the very opposite of what we have as security. The level of insecurity in Nigeria is multifaceted as such one cannot accurately categorize the patterns of insecurity. The 2023 elections took place in an environment of widespread insecurity. With growing banditry in the North West, persistent violence driven by the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, the expansion of ISIS into Nigeria's North Central region, the expansion of farmer-herder violence into Southern Nigeria, and the emergence of the IPOB insurgency in the South East, insecurity had reached historic highs in 2022. While insecurity has consistently been a feature of elections in Nigeria, stakeholders agreed that for prior elections it had been more localized (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Nigeria's national security which has been compromised through incessant and runaway corruption, the activities of boko haram terrorists, the daily killings by the Fulani herdsmen and other criminal gangs, menacing poverty, dearth of infrastructure, institutions with weak performance capacities, a governance elite that is far away from the aspirations of the governed and too removed that it has become irresponsible and insensitive to the plight of its subjects, which was adequately exposed through the EndSARS protests in the country in early October 2020. Insecurity paranoia is continuing to haunt all inhabitants of Nigeria as it is already fast dawning on them that government cannot effectively guarantee the security of lives and

properties. The state security agents who are saddled with the responsibility for the security of life and property which include- the police, state security agencies, the military, immigration, and prison service have all performed abysmally in the discharge of their duties. The general insecurity in Nigeria made it difficult, if not impossible, to conduct credible elections in some parts of the country.

4. Corruption: According to John Campbell, USA Ambassador to Nigeria; corruption is a clog in the wheel of any nation struggling for the enthronement and consolidation of democracy and good governance (Punch Newspaper, July 7th, 2005). This shows that democracy cannot be predicted on a fragile and unstable political base. Corruption as a devastator has greatly eroded the fundamental values of democracy and its essential principles. Corruption in its popular conception is defined as the exploitation of public position, resources and power for private/selfish gain. For instance, Dobel (1978) defined corruption as "the betrayal of public trust for individual or group gain". In a similar vein, Obayelu (2007) identifies it as "efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means for private gain at public expense, or a misuse of public power for private benefits". According to Ogundiya (2010), events in Nigeria since 1999 have shown that the tidal waves of reversal have been contending with Nigeria's democratic project. Consequently, democracy remains grossly unstable and the future seems to be very bleak because of rampant bureaucratic and political corruption. Corruption has reached a high crescendo such that an average Nigerian now possibly associates democracy with it. The consequences of political corruption are potently manifest: cyclical crisis of legitimacy, fragile party structure, institutional decay, chronic economic problem and unemployment, and above all general democratic volatility. Corruption in this country is generally characterized by Looting of funds and wealth kept secretly, i.e. capital flight; misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds; money laundering (acquiring money through fraudulent ways); drug and child trafficking; illegal arms deal; gratification which involves monetary, material or physical favour as a condition or reward for performing official duty, official abuse of office in which an official suppresses and violates an oath of office and nepotism which is granting undeserved favors to one's relations. The recent corruption scandal in the oil sector totaling N1.7 trillion from 1999-2011, Police Pension Fund of ₦18 billion as well as the James Ibori N450 billion corrupt case of money laundering in London is just the tip of an iceberg as far as corruption is concern in Nigeria.

5. Money: Money is crucial in any election, especially in Nigeria, where the high level of poverty means that people need financial support before they can even attend campaign rallies. Vote-trading has also become a prominent feature of elections.

Election campaigns in Nigeria are characterized by lavish spending of money, denying participants a level playing field in favour of those who control governments and state resources. The influence of money in Nigerian political processes has also reduced the incentive for political parties to earn voters' confidence through issue-based campaigning and party platforms that respond to citizen priorities. Vote buying is frequently reported in the lead up to election day, despite an established regulatory framework (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Despite measures to improve the transparency of the electoral system, it was likely that money remained a big factor in the 2023 general elections.

6. Ethno-religious factor: This remains one of the forces that have contributed greatly to socio-political instability in the country. The latest sectarian turbulence in the country and the clamour for the presidency by the varied ethnic groups indicate that the society is still balkanized by tribal and religious sentiments (Victor, 2002). Each ethnic nationality in Nigeria has its own faith, interest, culture, language and level of aspiration and these forces seem to affect the economic fate of each group (Ojukwu, Mbah and Maduekwe, 2019). In addition, they make the creation of a common identity problematic, thereby exacerbating the difficulty in attaining a true democracy in the society. Four of the 18 presidential candidates in the election, regarded as the front runners, come from the three dominant ethnic groups in the country: Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. From the North are Atiku Abubakar, a former vice-president of the country (1999-2007) and the presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party and Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso, a former governor of Kano State and the presidential candidate of the New Nigeria People's Party. Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Yoruba from the South-west, was the presidential candidate of the ruling All Progressive Congress. Peter Obi, an Igbo from the South-East and former governor of Anambra State, was the presidential candidate of the Labour party. Since the 1999 election, there has been an unwritten convention that presidential power will rotate every eight years between the Northern and Southern parts of the country. That's why many individuals and groups from both the North and the South insist that President Muhammadu Buhari must be succeeded by someone from the South. Some individuals and groups from the South-East further argued that because the zone has not yet produced a president, it should get its turn in 2023. Some from the North-East, where Atiku comes from, equally argued that it should be their turn since the zone has not produced a national head since Tafawa Balewa, the country's first and only prime minister, in the 1960s.

Just like ethnicity and regionalism, religion has always been an important tool of mobilization and discord in Nigeria. Since 1999 there has also been a careful balancing act to ensure that the president and the vice-president do not share the same religion. While the North

is predominantly Muslim, the South is predominantly Christian. This balance was upset when Bola Tinubu, a Yoruba Muslim, chose Kashim Shettima, a Kanuri Muslim and former governor of Borno State, as his running mate. Many Nigerians and groups, including the Christian Association of Nigeria strongly condemned the ticket.

7. Burden of history: Obi's candidacy has been endorsed by Ohanaeze Ndigbo, the pan-Igbo socio-political organization, and some influential non-Igbo groups and individuals, including former president Olusegun Obasanjo. In the South-East region, there is a deeply ingrained belief that there is a conspiracy to exclude the Igbo from certain key political positions in the country because of their role in the Civil War (1967-1970). This belief has helped fuel secessionist agitations. Though the political elite of the region have remained aloof or lukewarm to Obi's candidacy, he is literally deified by ordinary people in the region who are excited by the "audacity" of his candidacy.

8. Presidential debates: In recent years, various groups have been organizing debates for key political contestants in the country. Tinubu, touted as a master tactician by his supporters, has managed to evade these debates. After a speech to an audience in the UK in December 2022, he left it to his aides to respond to most of the questions he was asked. It could be observed that presidential debates do not really affect the outcome of presidential elections. In fact leading candidates often refuse to take part in some or all of such debates. But Tinubu's non-appearance accentuates suspicion about his health and several controversies around him.

9. Technology Adaptation in an Infrastructure-Challenged Environment: Since 1999, each electoral cycle has become progressively worse than its preceding one with visible signs and wonders. Results were announced while people were still on the queues. Ballot box snatching and destruction and syndicated mayhem became the order and emergency professional god-fathers. Consequently, INEC decided to deploy technology to minimize deliberate undesirable human interference in the system and that was how BVAS was 'born'; a software that promised and still promises a seamless and sure process between accreditation, voting, result collation and announcement. Billions in hard currencies, including the Naira, were deployed to perfect and procure the software with the supporting hardware. INEC assured us that BVAS and IReV was a solution to all 'electoral banditry' and allied shortcomings, it will also shame the political buccaneers. With BVAS and IReV, snatching of ballot boxes, deliberate mis-recording and manipulation of results, missing result-sheets, and filling fake results would be of no use.

It was a disappointment of gargantuan proportions that the acclaimed game-changers could not change the game as they were short-changed by the unchangeable Nigerian system and political culture. The game-changers also chose whether, where and when to change the

game positively, negatively or leave it unaltered because the NASS results fared relatively well. That was why some heavyweights became paperweights overnight. Sadly, INEC supported by former President Muhammad Buhari overpromised and under delivered. They raised and dashed peoples' hopes, failed to comply with the electoral act, the Chatham House reported that Presidential election was not conducted in line with INEC's guidelines, especially the one bordering on real-time uploading of results while the NLC condemned the deliberate subversion of the peoples will by individuals, parties, INEC and security agencies. INEC could further enhance transparency and increase public confidence in the use of these technologies by providing opportunities for observation of all aspects of the process, as well as by providing the public with comprehensive information about problems identified during these exercises and efforts to address them before subsequent elections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The success of any electoral process is dependent on the credibility, transparency, and efficiency of stakeholders that manage, regulate, and secure the process. Saddled with the responsibility of establishing the rules of play and conducting the 2023 elections, INEC is a central election stakeholder (Idayat, 2023). While the introduction of the 2022 Electoral Act, which supports the use of technology such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) (a facial recognition system aiding voter accreditation), and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) have boosted confidence in the Commission, but overall trust in INEC has declined. Furthermore, the decision of the election petition tribunal quashing the win of the PDP governor in Osun state on grounds including over-voting and non-synchronization of the BVAS has somewhat dampened citizens' confidence in the ability of technology to solve Nigeria's election challenges. The management of the Permanent Voters Card (PVC) collection exercise has also led to citizen discontent, with many alleging that INEC staff in key strongholds of either ruling or opposition parties are denying citizens the ability to collect their voter cards.

Amidst widespread incidents of insecurity and severe currency and fuel shortages, the election management body, INEC, was still able to administer a nationwide election according to the electoral calendar for the first time in more than a decade. INEC also undertook improvements in planning and organization and made concerted efforts to confront issues such as overcrowding at polling units and results transparency (IRI/NDI report, 2023). However, INEC was not consistent and open in its communication about electoral updates and procedures; it also failed to provide important election data on voter registration and Permanent Voter Card (PVC) statistics in a timely manner. Such actions and/or omissions fueled

confusion and uncertainty. This was particularly pronounced during and immediately after the February 25 elections, when INEC failed to provide timely or accessible information regarding the nature and scope of late openings, cancelled elections, and challenges with the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV). Moreover, vote manipulation in some Southern states identified by Yiaga Africa's Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) revealed vulnerabilities in the integrity of INEC officials and oversight mechanisms, and disparities in the levels of election quality and access in Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Publishing polling station-level results through IREV is one of the major improvements to election transparency since the 2019 polls. However, the system was not tested at a national scale and floundered during crucial hours of the immediate post-election period, stoking confusion, and suspicion about the results.

While IREV provided voters the ability to look up the results of individual polling stations, the portal was not in compliance with open election data principles and did not provide the information in a complete, bulk, or machine analyzable format, limiting the ability of citizens to verify results at the LGA, state and national level or to fact-check contradictory narratives. A significant percentage of the results uploaded to the IREV were unreadable. Furthermore, at the time of publication, INEC had still not uploaded more than 9,000 presidential polling unit results to the IREV and did not clarify how many of these units were cancelled. The IREV system also required a login and password for several days following the election, creating barriers to access for what should be a fully public portal. Contrary to expectations and regulations, INEC used an alternate portal to house presidential results before posting them to the IREV (Section 38 (ii) of INEC's Regulations and Guidelines for the Conduct of Elections, 2022). INEC struggled to explain why it occurred, offering various explanations from technical glitches to cyber-attacks. Though these issues of transparency and missing results fueled speculation of deliberate malfeasance, the IREV system performed more in line with expectations for the gubernatorial and state elections on March 18.

As of the time of publishing of this work, INEC has yet to publish aggregate level results on its website for either the presidential, national assembly, gubernatorial or state assembly results, including vote shares, turnout, and invalid ballots data. Additionally other information critical to understanding the 2023 elections, such as the number of polling units where elections were canceled on election day or postponed, has also not been made public months after the election. The following recommendations are put forward from this study:

1. Generally, there is an important need for Nigeria to go back to the drawing board and address the problem of reform of the elections. Part of that reform will need to include accountability on the part of election officials

and stakeholders.

2. The presence of IReV has not brought the accountability expected due to its malfunction, thereby causing a credibility crisis for INEC. The Electoral Commission must be open and honest with Nigerians and provide a detailed explanation of what went wrong and why. If there was sabotage, the culprits must be brought to book. A more robust stress testing of IReV is needed to avoid its malfunction undermining future elections (CDD, 2023).

3. Importantly, there was presence of security personnel in most of the polling units observed. However, their impact was not felt in the places where there were violent incidents. It is the duty of security personnel deployed for election duties to protect voters, election officials and materials, which they failed to do in these instances, a reflection of what was witnessed during the 2023 Presidential and Governorship Elections in February and March. This phenomenon is appearing to be the new normal. INEC, the police, and the courts should identify and prosecute those responsible for electoral violence or manipulation during the 2023 election.

4. Social media companies need to expand their ability to respond promptly to falsehoods circulating on their platform, particularly on election day and immediately after. There should be improved collaboration with recognized fact-checking platforms to allow for quick response and action.

5. This election cycle has seen extraordinary levels of abuse of the electoral and collation process by political actors. Their sponsorship of obvious manipulations are electoral crimes that must be prosecuted if this trend is to be reversed. A failure to prosecute the sponsors and beneficiaries of electoral crimes will allow an environment of impunity to continue and escalate, putting both our democratic function and credibility at severe risk. INEC should fulfill its responsibility to prosecute violators of the Electoral Act 2022 and increase public communication about its intolerance of electoral offenses (CDD, 2023).

6. Ahead of future elections, interpretations of the constitution as they relate to the requirements for a presidential winner to be declared or prospective run-off candidates to be selected should be clarified to reduce the risk of post-election contestation.

7. INEC needs to ensure that the different stakeholders and groups that the commission often draws ad-hoc personnel from, such as the Nigerian Youth Service Corp and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), have robust training schemes to mirror its efforts as well as adequately paid.

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