

2023 General Elections: Dashed Hopes, Lessons and Pathways for Rethinking Election-Democracy Nexus in Nigeria

Victor E. Ita

Department of Political Science, Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus, Oruk Anam LGA – Nigeria
victorita@aksu.edu.ng

Sunday E. Ibanga

Department of Public Administration, Akwa Ibom State University
Obio Akpa Campus, Oruk Anam LGA – Nigeria

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjplr.2013/vol13n21171>

Published April 20, 2025

Citation: Ita V.E. and Ibanga S.E. (2025) 2023 General Elections: Dashed Hopes, Lessons and Pathways for Rethinking Election-Democracy Nexus in Nigeria, *Global Journal of Politics and Law Research*, Vol.13, No.2, pp.1-17

Abstract: *Undoubtedly, election is the cardinal defining characteristic of a democracy since the legitimacy of democratic governments anchors heavily on the contest of elections, which must be free, fair, and regular. Notably, the conduct of elections in Nigeria often suffers from a number of organizational and administrative shortcomings which in turn affects the nature, degree of transparency of the electoral process and its eventual outcomes. This paper focused on Nigeria's 2023 elections using a historical and descriptive investigative approach, with pertinent data drawn from documentary sources and analysed within the context of democratic theory. Obviously, though there was intensive preparation by INEC and a significant improvement in the conduct of the elections, especially with implementation of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Result Viewing (IREV) portal, the outcome of the polls was a dashed hope for Nigerians. The election was marred by electoral violence, voters' suppression, ethnic politics, low voter turnout and insufficient technology. Lessons from the election indicate that guaranteeing electoral credibility requires concerted and determined effort, since technology alone cannot ensure it. Accordingly, the paper recommended, among other things, a thorough evaluation of the 2023 elections by INEC to identify operational flaws and remedy them effectively to restore citizens' dashed hopes; unbundling of the commission and some of its responsibilities delegated to other institutions; undertaking continuous reforms towards conducting credible and acceptable elections founded on democratic principles and aimed at achieving electoral integrity and satisfying the expectations of electorates in future elections.*

Keywords: Citizens' participation, democratic governance, electoral norms, periodic elections, political decisions.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary system of democratic governance, elections and democracy are inseparable partners. Periodic elections are unique in democratic countries primarily because they are the prime means of selecting representatives of the people. Accordingly, the authenticity of the electoral outcome is greatly influenced by the nature, structure, management, and degree of transparency of the process (Obi, 2017; Ita & Atai, 2018). Notably, in a democracy, elections serve not only to elect representatives, but also to guarantee that the government in power carries out its authorities with the people's consent. This provides the basis for inferring democracy as majority rule.

In Nigeria's context, election is one of the five most controversial subjects, along with population census, creation of States and Local Governments, religion, and revenue allocation (fiscal federalism). Since the first election in 1923 in Lagos and Calabar, occasioned by the introduction of elective principles by the 1922 Clifford's Constitution, which provided for four (4) elected members of the Legislative Council - three (3) for Lagos and one (1) for Calabar - which gave rise to the formation of Herbert Macaulay's Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and the Calabar Improvement League (CIL), periodic elections and representative democracy have not only become institutionalised in Nigeria but have also flourished to great heights (Eminue, 2008; Umo-Udo and Ita, 2021). Noticeably, elections in Nigeria, prior to and after political independence, including those in 1959, 1964 (Western Region), 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019, failed to meet the fundamental requirements for a free and fair election; they served solely ceremonial and symbolic purposes. Each succeeding election witnessed increased incidence, tempo and skilful techniques of election fraud and manipulations.

As postulated by Chikendu (2003, p.99) "No election conducted in Nigeria since independence has received a clean bill of health". Undesirable acts of bare-faced election rigging, use of bloodthirsty thugs who blatantly and heartlessly maim and murder political opponents, and other illegal behaviour frequently fault Nigerian elections, transforming them into ugly and uncivilised caricature of the widely recognised electoral norms and principles (Ita, 2018; Kofi & Ibanga, 2018). Instructive too, are the corroborative verdicts of Adejumobi (2000, p.59) and Durotoye (2014, p.7), after assessing Nigeria's democracy between 1999 and 2007, that:

Democracy in Nigeria could not be described as 'real democracy' ... in view of the different kinds of anti-democratic practices by the political class. Election rigging and brigandage, violence and election annulment were common practices. The trend is towards a reversal to the old order of despotic political rulership under the guise of civil governance. One cannot but agree that elections in Nigeria in the period under study were a fading shadow of democracy, endangering the fragile democratic project itself.

Given this scenario, Nigerian democracy loses its meaning and turns into a government of some people, for all people, and connected to the people through elections, but with less influence from the people, thus undermining the notions of majority rule, popular sovereignty, and popular consultation.

In 2023, Nigerians went to the polls to elect their new leaders with great optimism that the electoral cycle would be a major improvement over the previous ones, especially as INEC introduced technological innovations that were thought would promote the transparency of the electoral process and boost citizens' trust, namely: the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) for the accreditation and electronic transmission of results and INEC Result Viewing (IreV) portal to serve as a repository of results from polling units (Ojukwu, Umeifekwem & Okeke, 2023; Abumbe & Atai, 2024).

In light of the foregoing context, this paper examined the conduct of the 2023 elections to ascertain whether or not the people's hopes, expectations, and desires were met; identify the challenges and lessons learnt; and establish potential pathways for rethinking elections and democracy nexus in Nigeria. In order to accomplish these goals, the paper is organised into a number of interrelated sections, starting with the introduction followed by the conceptual and theoretical foundations; the background, conduct, challenges and lessons; pathways for reconsidering the relationship between elections and democracy in Nigeria; conclusion and recommendations for organisational, operational and electoral reforms towards the conduct of elections that satisfy the expectations of Nigerians.

Conceptual Discourse

Election: Election is one of the most important civic activities that defines every liberal and competitive political system. According to Okolie (2005), election is the process by which eligible members of an organisation or group choose its officials or representatives. As a political phenomenon, election is an institutionalised method for selecting political office holders by the citizens of a country. Stated differently, it serves as a mechanism for the voters to select representatives for various positions in government institutions. Similarly, Yamma (2008) argued that election is the process of elite selection by the majority of the population in any given political system. According to the author, election offers the opportunities for the citizens to change a government which have failed to deliver or live to their expectations or have betrayed their trust.

For Alapiki (2010), an election is the process by which a group of people decides to choose one or a small number of individuals from among many to hold one or more positions of power. This method of selection typically entails laws and guidelines intended to guarantee a certain level of justice and fairness for all parties. It is the most up-to-date method of hiring people for public positions. For the author, an election is a process wherein individuals who are legally eligible to vote choose officers or make legally binding judgements about policy. In other words, the primary purpose of elections is to allow the people to choose their leaders and the policies and programmes they want to implement. As a democratic process, election involves a wide range of actions, the most notable of which are campaign and voting. A campaign is a complicated set of

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development –UK
actions conducted by politicians and parties to rally public support. The actual procedure of expressing one’s views on the ballot is voting, and it is the culmination of an election.

Democracy: As asserted by Crick (1964), democracy is the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs; thus, any significant effort to comprehend democracy must start with its traditional definition as the ‘rule of the people’. The phrase, which originally meant “rule by the people” with popular sovereignty as its distinguishing characteristic, first arose in Greek city-states in the fifth century BC as *demos* (the people) and *kratos* (rule), particularly in Classical Athens (Wilson, 2006; Przeworski, 2024). Therefore, democracy literally means “government of the people” or “government of the majority”. This impression is consistent with Abraham Lincoln’s conception of democracy, in his Gettysburg Address on November 19, 1863, as “Government of the people by the people and for the people”. In other words, democracy may be seen as a kind of governance that is formed by, for, and with the interests of the people in mind.

According to Appadorai (2004), democracy is a form of governance in which the people themselves, or representatives they elect on a regular basis, exercise their ruling authority. Therefore, a state like Nigeria may be referred to as a democracy provided it has the capacity to express the will of the people on fundamental issues of policy and social orientation. Therefore, democracy may be viewed as a form of governance where a regular election of representatives is decided by the people themselves, either directly or indirectly. In a similar vein, Sodaro (2007) and Ita (2024) saw democracy as a type of governance that allows the people to hold the rulers accountable and remove them from office, allowing the governed to achieve changes (democratisation) without resorting to violence, even if the rulers do not agree. The fundamental tenet of democracy, according to the authors, is that the people have the freedom to choose their own leaders and hold them responsible for their actions.

Generally speaking, democracy may be thought of as a form of governance that allows for the greatest amount of participation, whether through elections or the implementation of established rules. It is a government based on the rule of law, which is opposed to authoritarianism, high-handedness, and arbitrary decisions.

Theoretical Foundation

This paper is anchored on the strand of democratic theory as popularised by Robert Dahl. According to Dahl (1982; 2006), the only way for the people to exert mass influence over their leaders in a democratic system is through the election process, wherein leaders vie for the votes of the electorate. He outlined seven cardinal characteristics or attributes of democracy, namely:

- (i) Control over government decisions on policy is vested in elected officials.
- (ii) These elected officials are chosen in free, fair and frequent election.
- (iii) All adults have the right to vote in the election of officials.
- (iv) All adults have the right to contest for elective offices in the government.
- (v) All citizens have the right to express themselves without the danger of being punished by government.

- (vi) Legitimate existence of alternative sources of information and the right of citizens to use them.
- (vii) Citizens have the right to form independent associations including political parties and interest groups.

In their analysis of Dahl's seven characteristics of the democracy, O'Donnell (1996) and Sandbrook (1996) pointed out that characteristics 1-4 deal with the nature of elections in liberal democracies and can be manipulated and "technically fixed" to trick casual observers into thinking that the system is a liberal democracy. However, according to O'Donnell, characteristics 5-7 correspond to socio-political freedoms that provide the circumstances for free, fair, and competitive elections, making them the true test for the consolidation of democracies. These are the characteristics that reveal pseudo-democracies and reject "technical fixes". Competitive elections, where voters choose the leaders, may not be a complete form of participation, but they encompass all aspects of democracy since they create and maintain its essential elements, including representation, accountability, responsiveness, and participation. Hence, people's participation, which is mostly achieved through voting, is essential to democracy (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995; Theiss-Morse & Wagner, 2023).

In essence, democratic governance affords the citizens the privilege of choosing who governs them, and when necessary, vote them out of office. Indeed, it is through elections that citizens have a voice in choosing who will represent them and the opportunity to hold elected representatives accountable for what they have done, or not done, while in office. Since direct democracy, as it existed in classical Athenian democratic practice, is unattainable in modern societies due to their size and complexity, representative democracy, in which citizens elect representatives to represent them in the appropriate governmental institutions, becomes the most common practice in contemporary democracies. For Dahl (1971, p.2), to qualify as democratic, elections must offer an effective choice of political leaders among a community of free and equal citizens. This democratic ideal, he said, "requires that all citizens enjoy 'unimpaired opportunities' to 'formulate' their political preferences, to 'signify' them to one another, and to have them 'weighed equally' in public decision making". The democratic freedom of the people to choose who will govern them in a free and fair election distinguishes democracy from other types of political systems.

In Nigeria, politicians negate these democratic ideals by ensuring that elections produce nothing but favourable results by manipulating the electoral process, intimidating opponents and voters, and rigging elections massively. In the process, the value of the citizens (voters) is excessively depreciated, thus making accountability and responsiveness inconsequential and superficial. Frankly speaking, elections are conducted in Nigeria merely to constitute governments, they do not engender mass participation, effective representation, accountability and responsiveness as envisaged in democratic theory. The political elite, or godfathers, rely on electoral fraud and manipulation to win elections (Ita, Udoaka, & Ekpo, 2024); as a result, they place a low value on voters. Indeed, the observations made in the First Republic (Post and Vickers, 1973) and the Second Republic (Falola and Ihonvbere, 1985) about the Nigerian electorate are still true in the Fourth Republic: 'the masses are not objects of participation but objects of manipulation by the elite'. These issues constitute the thrusts of this paper and provides the springboard for

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development –UK
ascertaining whether or not the hopes and expectations of Nigerian masses were fulfilled vis-à-vis the 2023 elections.

INEC and the Conduct of 2023 Elections in Nigeria: Dashed Hopes and Emerging Issues

Since the return to civilian rule in Nigeria in 1999, the 2023 general election was the seventh consecutive election in 25 years of uninterrupted democratic practice in the country. The election provided Nigerians the chance to elect candidates for a number of positions, including the President, 469 National Assembly lawmakers, 28 governors, and 993 State Assembly lawmakers. The Presidential and National Assembly elections were held on February 25, 2023, while the Governorship and State Assembly elections, originally scheduled for March 11, 2023, were rescheduled for March 18, 2023, following a one-week postponement by the Independent National Electoral Commission (Dode & Ita, 2023).

The 2023 general election was the most meticulously planned, technologically-driven, and inclusive. In preparation for the election, INEC developed a four-year strategic plan as well as a thorough Election Project plan. More so, a new Electoral Act was put in place one year ahead of the election which provided for the early transfer funds to INEC and empowered the electoral commission to use election technologies like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Election Results Viewing Portal (IREV) (Gana, 2023). Again, INEC's introduction of improved technology for voter registration, particularly online pre-registration to vote, increased voters' interest in the election. The Commission also established new polling units to reduce overcrowding and to locate polling units closer to voters for easier access. Additionally, based on its past election experiences, INEC produced the ballot paper and results sheets locally to prevent logistical issues that could cause postponement of the election. Noteworthy, this was the first time since 1999 for sensitive materials to be produced locally for general elections.

According to Obisesan-Aina (2023), these landmark developments increased public confidence and anticipation that the 2023 general election will provide free choice, fair competition, and trustworthy results. The pre-election period witnessed a rebirth of engaged citizenship, with young people demonstrating their resilience and strength in full force as they used technology and social media to impact political discussions, voter attitudes, and electoral transparency. Furthermore, the emergence of a 'third force' candidate like (Peter Obi) provided voters with a variety of voting alternatives, making elections more interesting and competitive. Interestingly, despite growing insecurity, untimely currency redesign policy, and gasoline scarcity in the country, voters demonstrated exceptional resilience by casting their votes and demanding accountable political leadership.

As intensive as INEC was in its preparation and efforts to establish trust and mobilise voters before to the elections, the commission and other electoral governance actors failed to live up to public expectations for the 2023 elections (Berebon, 2023). Due to the failure of gradual electoral reforms to improve electoral integrity and deliver desired outcomes, the elections epitomized a squandered opportunity and dashed-hope. Particularly, the election on February 25 was beset by several logistical issues that caused polling officials to arrive late and voting stations to open late nationwide, especially in the South East and South-South geo-political zones.

Nonetheless, during the March 18 gubernatorial election, there was a noticeable improvement in the handling of election logistics as polling stations opened early, allowing accreditation and voting to start on schedule. The BVAS operated at peak efficiency during voter accreditation in both elections, reducing the need for manual accreditation and vote-padding. Yet, the public's confidence in INEC and the election's overall outcome was shattered by the delays in uploading the polling unit results for the presidential election on the IReV Portal. Though, the results portal performed at its best during the gubernatorial election, allowing voters to download results at the polling unit level (IRI/NDI, 2023).

The quality of the elections was also called into question by a number of procedural violations committed by various stakeholders, thus undermining Nigeria's democratic reform initiative. According to Nwaoku (2023), there were instances where returning and collation officials misapplied the rules and shown a lack of comprehension of election procedures. Furthermore, irregularities were noted in the application of the 2022 Electoral Act's provisions and INEC's rules regarding overvoting and vote cancellation while using the 'Margin of Lead' principle. The collation officers and returning officers in several collation centres neglected to compare and validate the results entered on hardcopy results sheets (Form EC 8A) with those posted on IReV. In some instances, accredited observers were refused entry to the results collation centres by security agencies, party members, and political thugs. Thugs also attacked collation centres, and unruly party agents interfered with the collation process in states like Rivers, Abia, Delta, Ebonyi, Gombe, and Enugu.

Challenges and Tensions: The Bane of Nigeria's Elections

The conduct of elections in Nigeria often suffers from a number of organizational and administrative shortcomings. The 2023 elections like its predecessors were subjected to social and political nuances of a corrupt electoral system. All known and new challenges were evidenced in the elections which need to be addressed if Nigeria is to hold a free, fair and credible elections in the future. These include:

(i) Electoral violence: According to Ita (2022), Nigeria has a lengthy history of election-related violence, which regrettably resurfaced in 2023. Aggressive political struggle, along with Nigeria's existential security concerns, augmented public anxiety before, during, and after the elections. Throughout the pre-election period, security challenges brought on by a rise in the activities of armed bandits, terrorists, herders, and separatist organisations, intensified in a number of locations. In addition to insurgency, banditry, and abduction, the security situation leading up to the 2023 presidential election was aggravated by vandalism and damage of property belonging to political parties or candidates. Moreover, there were recorded incidences of vandalism and destruction of party campaign billboards, as well as assaults on party adherents in virtually all of the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Yiaga Africa, 2023b; Atairet, Ibanga & Asuquo, 2024).

In the South-East geo-political zone for instance, the activities of separatist group (IPOB) escalated as the seat-at-home order was strictly enforced every Monday in the region. The election period was marked by repeated and organised assaults against INEC buildings,

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development –UK
materials, and staffs. These attacks jeopardised the commission’s preparations for the election and generated an environment of doubt and anxiety that the elections may hold in those locations. This spurred the House of Representatives to convene a public hearing on the attacks. Fifty-one incidences of arson and vandalism against INEC premises and electoral materials were reported in 15 states (Yiaga Africa, 2023c).

Added to the above, INEC staff were attacked during the Continuous Voter Registration (CVR) process in some States, resulting in casualties. For instance, in Abeokuta South LGA of Ogun State and Ede South LGA of Osun State, hoodlums set fire to the commission’s offices destroying over 65,699 uncollected Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs), 904 ballot boxes, 29 voting cubicles, 30 megaphones, 57 election bags, and eight electric power generators. Similar occurrences ensued at INEC offices in Izzi LGA (Ebonyi State), Orlu LGA (Imo State), Ikpoba Okha LGA (Edo State), and Onyagede Ehaje, Ohimini LGA (Benue State) to mention a few. In spite of the attacks, INEC displayed institutional resilience and proceeded with the elections. The commission ensured that damaged electoral materials were reproduced and destroyed offices were reconstructed or moved to safer zones, allowing the commission to hold elections in the affected areas (Yiaga Africa, 2023c).

According to Nwangwu (2023), voting was violently disrupted in several areas, including Lagos, Delta, Kogi and Kano States. In Enugu, the Labour Party senatorial candidate for Enugu East was murdered 72 hours before the presidential elections while between 21 and 39 deaths were recorded during the elections.

(ii) Voters’ suppression: This tactic, also referred to as “deliberate disenfranchisement of eligible voters” aims to affect election results by preventing or discouraging particular groups of people from casting ballots or by denying eligible voters the chance to register to vote or cast a ballot during an election in order to weaken their collective voting power. According to Dickson & Ita (2022), this approach is not new; it was used in every election held in Nigeria prior to the 2023 elections. During the 2023 pre-election period, several voters in the South-West and South-East were unable to register to vote while several others were unable to pick up their PVCs after production due to poor management, corrupt practices and lack of transparency of some INEC personnel.

Also, as reported by Yiaga Africa (2023a), registered voters were denied the right to cast ballots in several States, including Lagos and Kano States, during the presidential and gubernatorial elections in egregious violation of the 1999 Constitution and the 2022 Electoral Act. Voters were profiled based on their political or ethnic affiliations and refused entry to polling stations to vote. Likewise, instances of disruption and hijack of election materials by thugs also suppressed the votes cast in certain locations. For example, a bus conveying election materials and staff was hijacked in Ward 10, Unit 2 in Emohua LGA of Rivers State. Again, in Gokana Local Government Area of the State, security personnel prevented all observers from witnessing the collation process and only allowed party agents for the All Progressives Congress, Peoples Democratic Party and Social Democratic Party to have access to the collation centre.

Additionally, armed thugs fired intermittently and interfered with the voting process at two (2) Pooling Units at Okota Grammar School and five (5) Pooling Units in the Isolo community in Oshodi/Isolo LGA of Lagos State, according to a Yiaga Africa observer. At Kabuga Pooling Unit 022, Gwale LGA of Kano State and Wuryo Ward in Gassol LGA of Taraba State, thugs snatched ballot boxes for the Pooling Units, making it impossible for voters to cast their ballots. These actions had a detrimental effect on voter participation and the results of the election, which has made it even more imperative to develop administrative and legal frameworks for the abolition of all types of voter suppression in Nigerian elections.

(iii) Ethnic politics: Nigerian politics have traditionally been plagued by ethnic politics (Dickson & Ita, 2022). As in previous elections, the 2023 general elections revealed a voting pattern that reflected ethnic colouration and configuration, with the three major presidential aspirants securing significant victories in their respective geo-political zones. Manifestly, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) garnered almost 68% of the votes cast in the South-West, while Peter Obi, the Labour Party's candidate, got roughly 90% of the votes cast in the South-East. In the North-East, Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) secured almost 61% of the votes (INEC, 2024; Eze and Karibi-Botoye, 2024).

Remarkably too, the elections aggravated ethnic resentment and antagonism, particularly in Lagos State where the dominant APC lost to a comparatively unpopular Labour Party, which hitherto the 2023 elections had only one governor, who won through Appeal Court ruling in 2009. Despite the cosmopolitan status of Lagos State, supporters of the Labour Party and Igbo voters were intimidated by prominent APC members, including Musiliu Akinsanya, the chairman of the Lagos State Parks Management Committee and a close associate of President Bola Tinubu (Yiaga, 2023d).

(iv) Low voter turnout: Voter turnout is the percentage of individuals who actually vote in an election compared to the total number of registered voters. While over 93 million voters registered, just little more than 25 million voted in the presidential election. Although the March 18 state-level elections were predicted to increase voters' willingness to participate, the opposite proved true, as the elections were marked by a reduced voter participation (Ojukwu, Umeifekwem, & Okeke, 2023). It goes without saying that the one-week election postponement caused by the reconfiguration of the BVAS machines, which were utilised for the presidential elections, for the gubernatorial elections may have reduced the eagerness of potential voters, in addition to logistical difficulties and inadequate voter education.

(v) Insufficient technology: INEC decided to use both the BVAS and IReV after successfully implementing them in more than 105 elections before the 2023 general election. Notwithstanding the overwhelming popular support for the BVAS and IReV, their implementation was faced with significant opposition from some political players, who took legal action to stop INEC from implementing the technology. The insistence of INEC on 'No BVAS, no Voting' policy boosted public trust as it portrayed the Commission as rejecting external attempts to prevent the deployment of the BVAS and IReV (Yiaga, 2023d).

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development –UK

Plausibly, the use of BVAS during the election for voter accreditation in 99% of polling units guaranteed that the number of voters did not surpass or outnumber the accreditation figure at the polling units, thereby removing the possibility of multiple voting by only accepting one accreditation per person per permanent voter card. On the other hand, the device had its failure and weakness, the most significant being the inability of uploading results to the IReV portal during the presidential election, thus raising fundamental concerns about the integrity of the results and eroding public confidence in the elections.

Clearly, the results of the elections demonstrated that the use of technology alone was insufficient to guarantee electoral credibility. Although the Bimodal device was used for the majority of voter accreditation, there was potential for result tampering because the electoral commission did not transmit the results of the presidential election in real time. The latter was ignored even though the commission promised that its decision to use the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System for voter accreditation and real-time result transmission to its result viewing portal was irrevocable. This precipitated the series of petitions by opposition political parties challenging the election result at the presidential election tribunal.

Matters Arising: The Lessons, Renewed Hopes and the Role of INEC

The 2023 elections had come and gone, but it presented important lessons upon which hopes could be rekindled if the electoral umpire plays its part along the following course of actions:

(i) ***Necessity for continued electoral reforms:*** Prior to the election, a number of modifications were implemented to prevent electoral fraud and improve the integrity of the process. Innovations, such as the use of the BVAS for voter accreditation, increased the openness of the accreditation process. While it is unclear if the technological fault that caused the delay in uploading presidential results was inadvertent or deliberate, the IReV would have increased the election's legitimacy if the results had been published to the web in real-time, as required by INEC's directives. Again, full adherence to the results management criteria stipulated in electoral law would have boosted public trust in the election outcome. Unfortunately, the criteria were violated at some collation centres. It is hopeful that continuous electoral reforms can undoubtedly produce credible elections if all parties involved, particularly INEC and political parties, follow the rules and guidelines.

(ii) ***The 2022 Electoral Act, new political actors, and electoral technology all increased voter enthusiasm and desire to vote:*** The combination of the new electoral law, introduction of technologies like the BVAS and IReV, and the appearance of fresh faces on the ballot caused citizens to become more enthusiastic in the run-up to the elections. Voters' excitement, particularly among young voters, was indicative of their belief that the ballot could protect popular choice. The high turnout for the Continuous Voter Registration and Permanent Voter Card drives were evidence of public trust in the process prior to the election.

(iii) ***Concerted effort is required in ensuring electoral integrity as technology cannot perform magically:*** The competency, honesty, and impartiality of voting technology suppliers, operators, and managers must be ensured in order to fulfil the promise of transparent elections. Election integrity requires more than just electoral technology. All facets of the electoral value chain need more scrutiny from the people, media, civil society organisations, and political parties.

(iv) ***Inevitability of fundamental reforms in INEC:*** To rebuild public trust in the electoral body, the appointment procedure of INEC commissioners must be redesigned. After the contentious appointments of commissioners into INEC prior to the election, the commission exhibited indications of institutional failure. A few returning officers, collation officers, and Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs) ruined the elections by not following the election logistics plan, applying results management procedures incorrectly, and manipulating election results at the collation level. Furthermore, it is imperative to unbundle the commission and transfer some of its duties to other institutions. For example, the commission need to be relieved of its duties regarding the registration and control of political parties as well as the prosecution of electoral offences.

(v) ***Inconsistencies in the electoral legal framework:*** The first application of the 2022 Electoral Act in a general election exposed inherent inadequacies that serve as the substance for electoral disputes. Because of the vagueness of the rules pertaining to results collation, lead margin, and electronic results transmission, the procedure was vulnerable to manipulation and misconception. While the Act grants INEC the authority to examine election results that were announced under duress, neither the Act nor its guidelines specify the methods or procedures for exercising such power, leaving room for debate and uncertainty. Furthermore, the legal framework does not require INEC to test and verify its election technology. Standard practice requires institutions deploying electoral technologies to test and verify equipment, software and tools within a reasonable time before deployment for elections.

What is discernible from above lessons is that INEC should make earnest effort to sustain the deployment of BVAS and IReV technologies, though, with improved application in subsequent elections. Those entrusted with the application of these technologies and management of elections should be adequately trained well in advance to avoid deficiencies and irregularities in their implementation and misapplication of electoral procedures. All areas of uncertainties and barriers should be duly addressed to rebuild citizens' trust in the electoral process and its outcomes. It behoves INEC to prove itself as an impartial arbiter in all facets of future electoral contests in Nigeria's political landscape.

The Pathways for Rethinking Election-Democracy Nexus in Nigeria

It is clear from the above analysis that Nigeria's electoral democracy is at a turning point because of poor election governance, procedural flaws, the zero-sum nature of politics, and electoral impunity. To improve election integrity, rebuild public confidence, and prevent transitory excitement in the electoral process, Nigeria requires legislative, administrative, and policy actions. This is especially true since election is not a goal unto itself, but rather a component of the democratic process. It provides the chance to assess how well people in charge of citizens mandates are performing in relation to their assurances and governance deliverables.

Although election is essential to democracy, it does not ensure it unless it is deemed free and fair. A situation where election becomes 'the highest rigger takes all' renders democracy a complete farce. Thus, for Nigerian democracy to thrive, election integrity is critical. For this reason, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) implemented the Card Reader machine for voter registration. In the same line, several Resident Electoral Commissioners

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development –UK (RECs) in Nigeria are seeking the assistance of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to promote civic education and participatory election procedures.

The 2023 election cycle witnessed extraordinary levels of abuse of the electoral and collation process by political actors. In order to reverse this trend and ensure the survival of democracy, they must be held accountable for their financing of blatant election frauds. An atmosphere of impunity will persist and worsen if the sponsors and recipients of election crimes are not brought to justice, thus jeopardising our democratic function and reputation. In effect, INEC or any other institution, so vested, should fulfil its responsibilities to punish violators of the election Act 2022 and advance public awareness of its zero-tolerance policy towards election offences. Particularly so, because of its dysfunction, IReV's presence did not yield the anticipated accountability, resulting to loss of confidence to INEC. If sabotage occurred, those responsible must be held accountable. In order to prevent future elections from being undermined by IReV's dysfunction, a more thorough stress test is required (CDD, 2023).

Moreover, in order to preserve credibility and prevent any form of catastrophe that can result from post-election violence in the country, elections should be managed by impartial and professional national organisations. Besides, in order to replicate its efforts, INEC must make sure that the many stakeholders and organisations from whom it frequently recruits ad hoc staff, such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigerian Youth Service Corp, have thorough training programmes and are fairly remunerated. Furthermore, Nigerians should jettison the “winner-takes-all” politics by promoting the establishment of procedures and structures that are essential for multi-party competition and power sharing. Promoting Nigerian unity and encouraging voters to support candidates who are passionate about making a difference, advancing sustainable development, and combating corruption - the cankerworm that has resisted all remedies in Nigeria - are all necessary.

In addition, the involvement of women, minorities, and other disadvantaged groups in Nigeria's electoral process must be encouraged as well as eliminate the impediments to free and consent-based voting. There is a need to strive towards a time when those elected as leaders are elected based on their antecedents, track records of integrity, and a desire to be judged by history as men and women who have left their imprint on the sand of history, rather than the colour of their skin, religion, or ethnic sentiments.

Also, and importantly too, the electoral umpire must guarantee that the administrative and logistical flaws that impaired past elections are rectified ahead of the future elections. INEC should maintain adequate and continuous contact with the transport union and other logistics providing agencies to guarantee early election day deployment. This involves ensuring that only trained ad hoc officials are deployed on election day. Alternative arrangement should be put in place in the event that transport unions or companies withdraw or fail to meet their contractual responsibility to deliver election materials and staffs on duty.

In the light of the aforementioned perspectives, it is imperative that future elections in Nigeria be handled in a manner that significantly increases the likelihood that the primary goal of a free and

fair election will not only be accomplished but also widely recognised as having been accomplished.

CONCLUSION

This paper has established the contention that credible and reliable elections are the foundation of democracy. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that election is essential to democracy as the sole means by which the populace may renew and exercise their rights in national government and reap the greatest benefits of democracy. With a focus on the 2023 elections, the paper opines that the nationwide deployment and high operational frequency of BVAS's for voter accreditation and IReV in the February 25 and March 18 elections were positive developments that should be maintained and reinforced. Though the election was deemed the most well-planned, technologically advanced, and inclusive, the participation rate at the polls did not reflect the initial passion and interest of the populace to cast their ballots as turnout was the lowest in recent Nigeria's election history.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding the excitement that accompanied the preparations for the elections, the actual elections were severely defective. Millions of voters were disenfranchised as a consequence of widespread delays in opening of polling stations and commencement of voting, violent disturbances of the voting process, and allegations of outright results manipulation in several States. The lack of transparency by INEC during the election generated suspicion in the results, prompting opposition parties to contest the victories of Bola Ahmed Tinubu and others in various election tribunals and the courts.

A rigorous effort should be made to reverse the undesirable outcomes of the 2023 general elections. Perpetrators and funders of electoral malfeasance should be apprehended and prosecuted vigorously in order to dissuade those who illegality as a realistic means of electoral triumph. The electoral umpire, INEC, should adhere to the provisions of pertinent electoral laws regarding balloting, collation, transmission, and results announcement in order to renew and enhanced the dashed hopes and voters' confidence in Nigeria's electoral processes.

Recommendations

Deriving from the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are put forward hopefully to assist INEC to prepare and conduct elections that will satisfy the expectations of the electorates:

- ✓ The Independent National Electoral Commission should conduct a thorough audit of the 2023 general election to address identified operational flaws and implement the fundamental changes necessary to improve the quality of future elections.
- ✓ The commission should be unbundled to relieve it of some of its huge and arduous responsibilities. The National Assembly should make laws establishing a Political Party Registration and Regulatory Commission as well as an Electoral Offences Commission and have some of INES's duties delegated to them.
- ✓ Electoral offenders should be so branded and prosecuted, including collation and returning officers, who manipulated results and violated electoral guidelines. Updates on such

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development –UK

prosecutions and convictions should be published on INEC online and offline channels to deter budding violators.

- ✓ Voter education and sensitisation are crucial and should be continuous throughout the four-year electoral cycle. Simply registering to vote and showing up at polling stations on election day is insufficient; it is vital for voters to understand the voting procedure to avoid wasting their votes.
- ✓ Political parties and their candidates should refrain from offering material gratifications during campaigns and elections as it incites violence and thuggery. Equally, electorates should eschew any form of voter enticement as it compromises the democratic process.
- ✓ Voting is a constitutionally guaranteed right that allows individuals to take part in decisions that impact their lives, society, and future generations. As such, in order to exercise their sovereign right to choose leaders, citizens should foster the voting culture. Democracy only works when citizens participate.

REFERENCES

- Abumbe, G. T. & Atai, A. J. (2024). Ethnicity, Religion and Party Politics in Nigeria: An Evaluation of the 2023 General Elections. *Journal of Public Administration, Policy and Governance Research*, 2(4), 9-18.
- Adejumobi, S. (2000). Elections in Africa: A Fading Shadow of Democracy? *International Political Science Review*, 21(1), 59-73.
- Alapiki, H. E. (2010). *Politics and Governance in Nigeria*. Port Harcourt: S. P. Shapee Publishers.
- Appadorai, A. (2004). *The Substance of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Atairet, A. A., Ibanga, S. E. & Asuquo, E. E. (2024). Internal Security and State Policing in Contemporary Nigeria: The Nexus. *International Journal of Advances in Management and Economics*, 13(2), 80-90.
- Berebon, C. B. (2023). Addressing Electoral Hurdles in Nigeria: Analyzing the 2023 General Elections and INEC's Role. *Jurnal Ilmu Sosiologi Dialektika Kontemporer*, 11(2), 134-143
- Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) (2023). *Understanding the 2023 Nigerian Presidential and National Assembly Elections: Post-election Briefing Nigeria 2023/2*. Abuja: CDD Africa.
- Chikendu, P. N. (2003). *Nigerian Politics and Government*. Enugu: Academic Publishing Company.
- Crick, B. (1964). *In Defence of Politics*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dahl, R. A. (1982). *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy vs. Control*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dahl, R. A. (2006). *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Dickson, M. E. & Ita, V. E. (2022). Reassessing Ethnic-Based Party Formation, Proliferation and Political Instability in Nigeria: A Periscope into the Future. *Asian Research Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 18(2), 1-14.

- Dode, R. O. & Ita, V. E. (2024). Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and Election Postponements: Trends, Socio-Economic Effects and the Future of Nigeria's Electoral Process. *African Journal of Law, Political Research and Administration*, 7(4), 1-18.
- Durotoye, A. (2014). The Travails of Democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: 1991-2007. *Africa Update*, 21(1), 7-14.
- Eminue, O. (2008). Nigerian Elections Today: Matters Arising. *A Paper Presented at a Seminar on Moral Approach to National Elections in Nigeria, held in Uyo, May 15.*
- Eze, C. C. & Karibi-Botoye, Q. I. (2024). Ethnicity and Religion in Nigerian Politics: 2023 General Elections. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 10(4), 57-74.
- Falola, T., & J. Ihonvbere (1985). *The Rise and Fall of Nigeria's Second Republic, 1979-84.* London: Zed Books.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2022). *Electoral Act, 2022.* Lagos: The Federal Government Printer.
- Gana, G. (2023, July 4). 2023 General Election Outcome Fairly Reflects Nigeria's Complex Multi-Party Democracy. *INEC News*. Retrieved from: <https://inecnews.com/2023-general-election-outcome-fairly-reflects-nigerias-complex-multi-party-democracy-says-yakubu/>
- Independent National Electoral Commission (2024). *Report of the 2023 General Election.* Abuja: INEC.
- International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2023). *Final Report of the 2023 General Elections.* Washington, D.C.: IRI/NDI.
- Ita, V. E. & Atai, A. J. (2018). A Comparative Assessment of Electoral Management Bodies and Administration of Elections in Nigeria and Ghana. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 23(8), 24-35.
- Ita, V. E. (2018). Contending Issues in Party and Electoral Politics and Consequences for Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria: A Historical and Comparative Analysis. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 2(8), 110-121.
- Ita, V. E. (2022). Electoral Violence in Nigeria's Fourth Democratic Experience: A Survey of South-South Geo-Political Zone. *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration*, 10(2), 16-33.
- Ita, V. E. (2024). Strategies for Youth Mobilization, Empowerment and Political Participation: A Comparative Discourse and Lessons for Nigeria. *Wilberforce Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2), 82-108.
- Ita, V. E., Udoaka, S. P. & Ekpo, M. E. (2024). Godfather-Driven Crises and Internal Democracy in Nigeria's Political Parties: A Study of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressives Congress (APC). *Journal of Political Discourse*, 2(2) (1), 67-82.
- Kofi, U. A. & Ibanga, S. E. (2018). Youth Perception of Politics and Electoral Behaviour in Nigeria: A Survey of Uyo, Ikot Ekpene and Eket, Akwa Ibom State. *Journal of Political Science and Leadership Research*, 4(3), 56-68.
- Nwangwu, C. (2023, 3 May). Nigeria's Elections Faced Five Serious Challenges - How to Fix Them Before the Next Polls. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from:

- Nwaoku, O. (2023, March 27). Yiaga Africa Calls for Probe of Errant INEC Officials. *The Guardian News*. Retrieved from: <https://guardian.ng/news/nigeria/yiaga-africa-calls-for-pobe-of-errant-inec-fficials/>
- O'Donnell, G. (1996). Illusions About Consolidation. *Journal of Democracy*, 7(2), 35-51.
- Obi, E. A. (2017). Elections and Democracy in Nigeria: Counting the Votes and Making the Votes Count. In Amtaika, A. (Ed.). *The Democratization of Africa: Dynamics and Trends*. Texas: Pan African University Press.
- Obisesan-Aina, P. (2023, April 25). ANALYSIS: The Impact of a Third Force on Nigeria's Democracy. *Premium Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/595007-analysis-the-impact-of-athird-force-on-nigerias-democracy.html>
- Ojukwu, U. G., Umeifekwem, U. T. & Okeke, V. O. S. (2023). Democracy and 2023 General Elections in Nigeria: Retrospect and Prospects. *Direct Research Journal of Social Science and Educational Studies*, 11(4), 54-66.
- Okolie, A. M. (2005). Electoral Fraud and the Future of Elections in Nigeria: 1999-2003. In Onu, G. & Momoh, A. (Eds.), *Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*. Lagos: Nigeria Political Science Association.
- Post, K. W. J. & Vickers, M. (1973). *Structure and Conflict in Nigeria 1960-1965*. London: Heinemann.
- Przeworski, A. (2024). Who Decides What Is Democratic? *Journal of Democracy*, 35(3), 5-16.
- Sandbrook, R. (1996). Transitions without Consolidation: Democratization in Six African Case. *Third World Quarterly*, 17(1), 69-87.
- Sodaro, M. J. (2007). The State and Its Institutions. In Sodaro, M. J. (Ed.), *Comparative Politics: A Global Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Theiss-Morse, E. & Wagner, M. W. (2023). *Political Behaviour of the American Electorate*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc.
- Umo-Udo, N. S. & Ita, V. E. (2021). Colonial Administration and the Formation of the Nigerian State: The Socio-Economic and Political Transformations. In Umoette, G. T., Tom, E. J. & Ataide, O. H. (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Public Administration and Governance: The Nigerian Experience*. Calabar: University of Calabar Press.
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L. & Brady, H. B. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wilson, N. G. (2006). *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece*. New York: Routledge.
- Yamma, A. M. (2008). *Elections in Post Civilian Regimes in Nigeria*. In Omodia, S. M. (Ed.), *Managing Elections in Nigeria*. Keffi: Onaivi Publishing Company.
- Yiaga Africa (2023a, March 20). Yiaga Africa Condemns Violence, Voter Suppression, Vote-buying, Political Thuggery to Win Elections Across Nigeria. *Sahara Reporters*. Retrieved from: <https://saharareporters.com/2023/03/20/yiaga-africa-condemns-violence-voter-suppression-vote-buying-political-thuggery-win>
- Yiaga Africa (2023b). *Road to 2023: Tensions, Ungoverned Spaces and Limited Access for Elections*. Abuja: Yiaga Africa.
- Yiaga Africa (2023c). *Road to 2023: Disruptions, Distortions, and Discordance*. Abuja: Yiaga Africa.

Global Journal of Politics and Law Research

Vol.13, No.2, pp.1-17, 2025

ISSN: ISSN 2053-6321(Print),

ISSN: ISSN 2053-6593(Online)

Website: <https://www.eajournals.org/>

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development –UK

Yiaga Africa (2023d). *Dashed Hopes? Yiaga Africa Report on the 2023 General Election.*

Abuja: Yiaga Africa.