

IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS ON SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implications of the 2023 General Elections on sustainable democracy and national development in Nigeria, considering the issues, challenges and solutions as the main objective. The study adopted the descriptive research design and collected data from journals, textbooks, newspaper reports and online materials bothering on the subject matter, while content analysis was used to analyse the data. The democratic elitism theory was used as theoretical framework to further analyse the implications of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The study amongst others found out that the elections brought some electoral advancement like the use of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the Electoral Act, 2020. However, the election recorded some challenges such as; voter intimidation, thuggery, electoral arson amongst others. The study, therefore, recommends that, there is need for electoral reorientation, electoral fairness and justice and that the electoral umpire should be allowed to operate on an independent basis as stipulated in the Constitution.

Keywords: Elections, electoral process, democracy, BVAS, PVC.

Introduction

Elections over the years have proven to be a strong foundation for democracy due to the critical role they play in the survival and growth of every democratic state. While elections are a procedure typical of democratic systems, their functional positioning varies, and they thus fulfill different functions in different societies. According to Jinadu (2005), elections encompass mediating institutional and psychological processes and provide anchors for citizens, as adults, to express their choices among those seeking public political office in an organized and routinized manner. In the political realm, elections are regarded as formal expressions of preference by the governed, which are then aggregated and transformed into collective decisions about who will govern them. The term "election" has become commonplace in discussions of democracy. While democracy is much broader and more inclusive than elections, it would be meaningless if elections were absent or abolished. According to Afolabi (2011), "elections serve certain purposes and help to guarantee democratic values of equality of individuals and liberty to decide a course of action or who to vote for." Furthermore, elections are said to have a social function, as they guarantee the peaceful transfer of political leadership and ensure political representation.

Nigeria, as a nation, has conducted several elections since its transition to democracy, with the 2023 general elections being the most recent, resulting in the emergence of a new administration at both the national and state levels. According to Olijì (2023), the 2023 general election saw Nigerians troop to the polls on February 25 and March 18, 2023, to elect a new President, National Assembly members, as well as 28 State Governors and members of 36 State Houses of Assembly. It was the seventh consecutive general election since the country returned to democracy in 1999, representing 23 years of unbroken democratic rule—the longest in Nigeria's history. Moreover, the presidential election was contested by eighteen political parties and conducted under a new electoral framework, the Electoral Act 2022, which allowed the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to deploy technology for the conduct of elections using the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) for fingerprint and facial biometric identification and authentication of voters.

However, the question that remains to be answered is: what impact did the 2023 general elections have on Nigeria's democratic and national development? Undoubtedly, the elections have come and gone, but the security challenges, voter intimidation, and electoral violence recorded during the process are issues that the nation must address ahead of future elections. In a *Premium Times* report, Okafor (2023) stated that the government of the United States of America would explore all available actions, including additional visa restrictions, on individuals believed to be responsible for or complicit in undermining the democratic process in Nigeria, as well as those seen to be intimidating voters. Furthermore, Aworinde (2023) reported that the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), a social advocacy organization, decried the violence, voter intimidation, suppression, and apathy that marred the governorship and state Houses of Assembly elections. The gubernatorial elections were further challenged by incidents of voter apathy in many states across the country, following diminished confidence in the electoral umpire due to the outcome of the presidential election—a major drawback to the nation's electoral process (Aworinde, 2023).

Godwin (2023) reported how angry youths in Rivers State protested the alleged manipulation of presidential election results in the state. The youths, who had come out to vote, refused to go home on election day, insisting that INEC officials must upload election results before exiting polling units. They accused INEC of attempting to manipulate the results. Additionally, reports emerged of sporadic shootings and vandalism of vehicles along the

Igwuruta-Elele-Airport Road in the Ikwerre Council area of Rivers State by protesting youths, who alleged that ballot boxes in the area were hijacked when it became apparent that Labour Party presidential candidate Peter Obi was winning (Godwin, 2023). In Kaduna, Bulus (2023) reported how elections conducted at the Khuta Polling Unit of Kwasam Ward in Kauri/Chawai Local Government Area for the Kaduna State House of Assembly were marred by vote buying and intimidation of voters and journalists by thugs. It is against this backdrop that this study attempts to further examine the implications of the 2023 general elections on sustainable democracy and national development in Nigeria, with the objective of identifying some critical challenges that hampered the success of the elections.

This study adopted a descriptive research design, as it allows the researcher to make a descriptive analysis of historical events while providing meaning to social phenomena. Data were collected from journals, textbooks, newspaper reports, and online materials relevant to the subject matter, while content analysis was employed to analyze the data.

Theoretical framework

Democratic Elitism

Democratic elitism accepts the main premise of elite theory. Key proponents of this theory include Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Michels, Joseph Schumpeter, and C. Wright Mills, among others. To Burnham (1943), no society is governed by the people or even the majority. This is because all societies, including societies called democratic, are ruled by the minority who are referred to as the elites. This theory states that the democratic principle is nothing but a formula that allows the ruling class to legitimise its power this is as the ruling class continue to decide what happens politically, economically and other wise. In political and sociological theory, the elite are seen as the selected few or a small group of powerful people who hold a disproportionate amount of wealth, privilege, political power, or skill in a group.

Theoretical Framework

Democracy gives room for all-inclusiveness and citizen participation; however, proponents of democratic elitism are of the view that even in the world best democracy, there are a few group of people who determine what happens in the society. The elites in most cases are indirectly seen in almost all institutions of the state (judiciary, political parties, legislature and the executive). When applied to this study, the 2023 general elections in Nigeria is seen as one which represented the wishes of the elites and not the masses both at the federal and state levels. The presidential election was contested by three main contenders Atiku Abubakar (PDP), Bola Tinubu (APC) and Mr. Peter Obi (Labour Party). Since after the elections, many scholars and analyst have stated clearly how the outcome of the elections did not reflect the peoples will. Ariemu (2023) in a Punch newspaper report, stated how Dr Sam Amadi, director of the Abuja School of Social and Political Thought decried the role of the elites in the conduct of the elections. He stated that “the outcome of the general elections showed Nigeria is yet to be democratic because the features of democracy, which include fair institutions that should provide equality for everybody, and guarantee basic freedoms have been denied the people by those who are at the corridors of power. During the elections, most elites were seen using their economic cum political power to influence the electioneering process and this to a large extent affected the outcome of the elections. It is therefore the position of this study that the will of the people should be respected in Nigeria during elections and any other national matter of discuss.

The Concept of Democracy

Democracy can be defined as a government that encourages popular participation of the citizens of a state in the affairs and operations of such state. Democracy entails citizens’

involvement and engagement in the electoral process of their state. Over the years, it has proven to be one of the most popular and best form of government all over the world. To Bryce (1921), democracy is a form of government in which the people rule by expressing their sovereign will through their votes during elections. Hence, it can be stated that elections and democracy are closely related and therefore democracy give room for peaceful and credible elections in the state. Seely (1995) describes democracy as a form of government in which everybody has a share. What this means is that democracy allows for equal representation of the people in the affairs of the state thereby giving room for equality and justice in every sector of the society. Agu (2015) identified good governance, public accountability, fairness, majority rule as salient principles of every democracy. While Democracy can be seen as a system of government in which the citizens directly or indirectly take part in deciding who should hold one office or the other at a regular interval, sustainable democracy within the context of this study can be seen as the setting up of democratic institutions and frameworks all of which further entrenches good and acceptable democratic practices over time.

Development/ National Development.

The concept of development is one with multiple definitions and interpretations, all of which in most cases constitute growth, progress and improvement within a physical setting. According to the United Nations (1986), development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process aimed at the continuous improvement of the wellbeing of the population. It encompasses the active engagement of all people in the development of their nation and the fair distribution of the benefits thereof. Development may also be seen as the useful application of state resources in the building and improvement of members of the society. To Peet & Hartwick (1999), development involves the betterment of the totality of the individual in his/her economic, political, psychological, social and cultural relations, among others.

Development in any sense of explanation, should be sustainable and people driven; thereby employing the available resource to solve present problems while having plans for tomorrow. There is therefore a relationship between development and national development. National development may be seen as the culmination of the entire state development and the increase in per capital income and indices of the state to a large extent. National development covers the development witnessed in all sectors of the society comprising of the economy, the electoral process, security, agriculture amongst others.

The 2023 General Elections in Nigeria: An assessment of some challenges

The hallmark of democracy is generally acknowledged to be elections in all regions of the world. Free, fair, and credible elections are associated with democratic governance, peace, and development. To Danjibo & Oladeji (2007), free, fair and credible elections provide the basis for the emergence of democratic governance, accountable and legitimate governments in every society with the capacity to initiate and implement well-articulated programs for the citizens. More so, elections empower the electorate to hold the government accountable and to demand service and feasible development agenda from prospective government officials. No doubt the 2023 general elections has come and gone however; the elections had some reported inadequacies all of which challenged the fairness of the elections. These challenges came in different dimensions and forms such as electoral violence prior and in the aftermath of the elections, the suppression of people's right to vote; ethnic and political tensions; low voter turnout; and technological hitches all of which affected the electoral process.

Asiegbu (2023) averred that electoral violence is a part of political violence and it has the capacity to influence the behaviour of voters, candidates and in most cases distort electoral

process; as the fear of violence leads to the late announcement of election results and further disruption of the electoral activities. During the 2023 general elections, Usman (2023) reported how the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) observed violence and threats on voters at Sabon Gari Local Government Area of Kaduna State, PU 008, Hanward Ward during the general elections with some party agents allegedly seen distributing the sum of N1000 naira to voters intending to vote for their party. Moreover, cases of disruption of polling processes by political thugs were reported as they were seen snatching ballot boxes and destroying electoral materials across the country and in extreme cases resulting in deaths of voters (Aworinde, 2023). In Rivers State, Onukwughu (2023) reported how an explosion and random gunfire disrupted All-Progressives Congress (APC) political rally in Ojukwu Field, part of which saw people scampered for safety. Electoral violence hampers the credibility of any election and hence must be avoided.

Another disturbing challenge noticed during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria was the godfatherism factor. Godfatherism affects the conduct of any election as the said godfathers handpick their anointed candidates and impose same on their people. Aworinde (2023) asserts that political godfathers influence and in most cases direct the affairs of the politics and the economic policies of a state just to satisfy their desperations and inert greed against the general good of the people. In Rivers State, the former governor was said to have anointed his chosen successor (Vanguard, 2023), while in Kogi State, the incumbent governor was said to have anointed a preferred candidate ahead of the forthcoming Kogi governorship elections (Usigbe, 2023). With the continuous practice of godfatherism appearing in Nigerian politics, there won't be room for meritocracy and fair play for all contestant and this in most cases affects Nigeria's democracy as the citizens are deprived of their choice of candidates.

Furthermore, there were report of abysmal level of low voter turnout in the state elections as election officials waited boringly for voters in several polling units. The reason for this is not farfetched, a resultant effect of INEC's under performance during the presidential election (Aworinde, 2023). In other cases, it was reported that the low turnout could also be attributed to the intimidation of voters by political thugs in the build-up, thereby prompting many people to stay away from polling centres. In a report by Naku (2023), in Rivers State, the governorship and State House of Assembly elections witnessed a low turnout of voters. This was different from the February 25 Presidential and National Assembly elections, which saw a high turnout of the electorate coming out with enthusiasm to cast their votes. The low voter turnout was attributed to the political tension in the state coupled with the show of force by the military and the police as well as the reported issues of electoral irregularities recorded in some parts of the State during the Presidential and National Assembly elections (Naku, 2023).

Another challenge noticed was the issue of technological failure in the transmission of election results during the presidential elections. Adebaye (2023) reported that the outcome of the electoral process proved that the adoption of technology in Nigeria's electoral process faced diverse challenges during the 2023 elections. This is because in some accreditation centres, registered voters were seen lamenting the inability of the Bimodal device to confirm them and the electoral commission's failure to carry out real time transmission of the presidential election results created room for alleged result manipulation.

Implications of the 2023 General Elections on sustainable Democracy and National Development in Nigeria.

Huntington (1991) sees democracy as a political system which is fair as it gives room for the most popular and accepted candidates to be elected or chosen through free, fair, credible and

periodic elections where every candidate is allowed to compete for votes. To a large extent, democracy promotes political participation and justice. The involvement of the people in the electioneering process gives legitimacy to the elected government. Nigeria practices democracy which gives room for the conduct of periodic elections since its transition from military to democratic system. However, the 2023 general election is one which many believed would have helped Nigeria as a nation to consolidate her democracy if gotten right. Hence, it becomes apt to take an assessment of some gains and challenges of the 2023 general elections with regards to Nigeria's democratic and national development.

No doubt, The 2023 general elections recorded some percentage of voter apathy part of which affects democratic development, however, there was an improvement of voter participation as citizens came out in their numbers to collect their Permanent Voters Card (PVCs). In a news report as captured by Suleiman (2023), the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) stated that the total number of eligible voters rose by 9,464,924 or 11.3 per cent from 84,004,084 (approximately 84.0 million) recorded in the 2019 general elections to 93,469,008 (approximately 93.5 million) eligible voters in 2023. The above figure prove that Nigerians were interested in deciding who their next leader should be. This is a plus for democratic and national development as democracy gives room for the people to get involved in electing the leaders of their choice. On the other hand, one bottleneck which Nigeria must defeat in order to consolidate her democracy is the issue of rigging, thuggery and snatching of ballot boxes. For any election to be judged free and fair, citizens' votes must be counted without any form of electoral violence, rigging and thuggery during elections, part of which was reported and recorded during the 2023 general elections.

According to a report by a Civil Society Organisation, Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) as captured by Biriowo (2023), the 2023 general elections recorded no fewer than 238 violent cases which resulted in 24 deaths. The report also showed that a total of 98 of the total violence occurred during the February 25 presidential election as 140 were reported during the March Governorship and State House of Assembly polls. More so, Willie (2023) reported how thugs hijacked and burnt election materials for four wards in Ogbia Constituency 2 in Bayelsa State during the state assembly poll in the state thereby forcing officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) deployed to the constituency to scamper for safety. These issues affect democratic and national development and therefore has the tendency to inflict fear and apathy on the citizens during the next elections.

Elections are conducted globally and there are laid down procedures and principles which are internationally accepted. This is because to a large extent, the way a nation conducts its elections represents or gives an image of such nation at the global stage. However, over time the elections conducted in Nigeria at different points in time have attracted condemnation from both local and international observers with the 2023 general election inclusive. According to European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) report as captured by Okafor (2023), although the elections showed the commitment of Nigerians to democracy, it also exposed enduring systemic weaknesses and therefore signalled a need for further legal and operational reforms to enhance transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability. To further confirm the above, a report by The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Nigeria election observation mission revealed a number of irregularities, including electoral violence, postponements of elections, inadequate protection of voter secrecy and the delivery of the wrong voting materials to some stations (Voice of Africa, 2023). The various reports from local and international observer groups and non-governmental organisations indicate that Nigeria is yet to

attain acceptable electoral standards. This situation significantly damages the country's image on the global stage, which is detrimental to democratic and national development.

In reaction to the reported pockets of violence, thuggery and electoral malpractices recorded during the 2023 general elections, the United States of America Department in Nigeria announced that it had taken steps to impose visa bans on persons who disrupted the recent general elections in Nigeria not minding their status or creed in the country (Okafor, 2023). This action and others alike when taken into consideration, paints the nation in a bad light and therefore is a call for Nigeria as a people to get it right in the nearest future as the world continues to watch the democratic development process in Nigeria.

Key Challenges

The key challenges may be considered from both internal and external perspectives. The internal challenges include the following:

1. Nigerian youths, who are the future leaders of the nation, are becoming increasingly disengaged from the electoral process. Many have either destroyed their Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) or set them aside, limiting their use solely to bank transactions.
2. Nigeria risks recycling ageing politicians who have become detached from current realities and lack fresh ideas for national governance.
3. There is a risk of entrenching mediocrity across all sectors of national life.

External challenges include the following;

1. The international community may continue to regard Nigeria as an unserious nation if electoral irregularities persist.
2. Nigeria's position as the self-styled giant of Africa is under threat, as the nation's influence appears to rest largely on population size rather than democratic and institutional strength.
3. Nigerians in the diaspora may continue to face discrimination and indignity abroad, partly as a consequence of the poor image projected by the nation's dysfunctional electoral process.

Conclusion

In this study, it is proven that election serves as a roadmap to the development and growth of any democracy and hence must be conducted in line with global best standards as seen the world over. No doubt. The elections have come and gone, however there is need for Nigeria as a nation to take cognizance of the successes and failures recorded during the last election as this would act as a building block to her evolving democracy and further preparation for the next elections.

Recommendations

- i. There is need for a national reorientation on elections to take place around the entire states of the nation as this will further change the already existing mind-set of the citizens with regards to the way elections should be conducted. This is because while some see elections as part of democratic practice, others see it as an avenue to plant and impose their selected candidates on the masses.
- ii. There is need for electoral fairness and justice to prevail right from the party primary level to the point of general election in the country as this will help promote the smooth and transparent electoral process in Nigeria.
- iii. The electoral umpire which is the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must be allowed to operate and conduct elections independently without any

interference from any quota. There is need to respect the independence of the electoral body so as to allow them conduct credible elections.

- iv. Finally, the electorates should be educated on the electoral process as this will help them understanding the politicking process surrounding the nation's political system. The electorate must be encouraged to come out and vote for candidates of their choice without fear or intimidation.

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