



JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONSHIP (JPSIR)

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1 (2023)



**PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA**

Ecowas Election Monitoring and Challenges of Election Security Management in Nigeria: A Post Analysis

Ekpo Tony Johnson¹, Akah Augustine Ugar^{2*}

Article Information

Received: September 27, 2023

Accepted: October 25, 2023

Published: October 30, 2023

Keywords

*Democracy; Elections; Politics,
Political Parties, Nigeria;
ECOWAS*

ABSTRACT

Elections in Nigeria are becoming a recurring democratic norm and need to be sustained by every stakeholder in the democratic enterprise. However, the political system is not without insurmountable challenges, as national and regional efforts through the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS seeks to deepen and consolidate Nigeria's fragile democracy through participatory observer missions at elections. There are pockets of electoral security challenges and calls for synergy between the Nigerian government and respective institutions to deploy more funding and logistics for smooth elections and respect for electoral guidelines by political parties. A post-analysis study of this research shows that Nigeria's elections are flawed with tampering, violence, vote buying, rigging, manipulation and abuse of voter register and registration process. The study further focused on the challenges of election monitoring by the sub-regional organization and election security management in light of Nigeria's elections. The study concludes by highlighting key issues that must be addressed to avert electoral security challenges.

INTRODUCTION

ECOWAS member states, in a bid to foster economic cooperation and development, signed the Treaty of Lagos in 1975, however, with the understanding that no better result can be achieved without cooperation. Hence, peace and security initiatives were undertaken by ECOWAS to facilitate the development process. ECOWAS, from 1993, began to deepen its focus on peace and security as a guarantor of economic integration. The peace and safety guide, notwithstanding, may be considered to have made remarkable progress amidst challenges, both on the integration side and also in its regional security pursuits. Regarding peace and security, the reoccurrence of crises and instability, which led to the armed conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the late 1980s and early 1990s, moved the Community's highest authority to adopt an instrument for preventing and managing conflict.

The Protocol on the Mechanism for the Prevention, Management and Resolution of Conflict, Peacekeeping and Security was signed in Lomé on 10th December 1999 for these objectives. In line with the mandate of the ECOWAS to enhance cooperation with relevant multilateral organizations on peace and stability in West Africa, ECOWAS participated at the U.N General Assembly and the African Union Summit and held meetings on the margins of the Assembly and the Summit with relevant institutions on how to resolve political crises in several Member States jointly.

One remarkable achievement made by ECOWAS towards ensuring regional peace and security was the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance – a Supplementary Protocol to the Mechanism for the Prevention, Management and Resolution of Conflict, Peacekeeping and Security,

which took effect in 2001 – precisely to monitor the conduct of elections in Member States. Article 12 of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance invites the ECOWAS Commission to implement measures to ensure the effective management of elections in the Member States and that they meet internationally recognized standards. In light of this, the Commission deployed observers to monitor elections in member countries. In addition, the Commission organizes an annual meeting of the ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions (ECONEC) and periodic workshops. Furthermore, a directory of election observers has been prepared in the three official languages of ECOWAS (English, French and Portuguese). Under this division of Article 12 of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, Article 53 (c) of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, and the decision of the Authority of Heads of State and Government to deploy timely pre-election missions to Member States organizing elections, the Commission provided Electoral Assistance Packages in the preparation of these elections. The series of elections planned for 2015 started on a very positive note, with elections held in Nigeria, Togo, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

In facilitating the provision of Electoral Assistance Packages to these Member States, the Commission deployed Pre-election Fact-finding Missions, long-term observation/Situation Room and Election Observation Missions to cover all aspects of the electoral process in these countries. ECOWAS, on the margin of the ECONEC Annual General Assembly meeting, reviewed electoral processes in the region and strengthened the Electoral Commission Networks to better prepare them for the challenging elections planned in countries like

¹ Department of History & International Studies, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria

² Institute of International Political Sociology, Kiel University, Germany

* Corresponding author's e-mail: firstclassakahaugustine@gmail.com

Niger, Benin, Cabo Verde, Gambia and Ghana.

The number of internationally monitored elections in West Africa remarkably increased over some time. National governments, multilateral organizations and many international non-governmental organizations have been progressively involved in the processes to strengthen the democratic process in West Africa. While the African Union (AU) led the continental initiative, regional organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have contributed to the stabilization efforts and advancing democratic governance. Despite its vital importance to democratic government and stability, elections in West Africa remained arduous.

In Nigeria, elections were often beset by political intimidation, fraud and generally, an un-level playing field, such that elections have not produced the desired democratic system of government. Also, while ECOWAS institutions have assumed greater responsibility for election monitoring and other democratization initiatives, they are yet to overcome several challenges in the practice of election monitoring, which impacts election quality and democratic governance. Despite the presence of ECOWAS observers in Nigeria, blatant and systematic electoral frauds and other electoral-related issues have manifested and have been orchestrated by political actors. These have led to criticisms of not just the role of election in democratic consolidation but also the relevance and credibility of election monitoring missions in Nigeria and Africa as a whole.

Notwithstanding the backlash against election monitoring in Nigeria, the practice remains fashionable but has not yielded its intended results in Nigeria. This issue remains why the country continues to experience setbacks amidst efforts from different international organizations to bring about democratic consolidation through election monitoring. Again, what does the involvement of the organizations in Nigeria's electoral process portend for the country? What then can be done to enhance its effectiveness and capacity to improve the integrity of elections to promote the culture of democratic consolidation and peacebuilding sustainability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Elections in Nigeria and ECOWAS Monitoring Role

The wave of democracy that swept Africa in the 1990s had given rise to one of the basic tenets of democratic culture: periodic elections. Since 1999, ECOWAS's role in election monitoring in Nigeria cannot be downplayed. First, as a sub-regional institution with a core mandate to entrench good governance and democracy in member countries, its role in providing monitoring as logistic support to realize its order was a welcomed initiative, though with many challenges. Secondly, arising from the concern ECOWAS has that elections should be conducted according to international best practices, ECOWAS needed to be on the ground to monitor these

elections and ascertain their credibility and fairness.

In the narrative of Nigeria, Olatunde (2016) focused on the role international observers played in the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the 2015 general elections. He first defined what election monitoring is. Citing Bard-Andreassan, he described election monitoring as action-oriented and participatory research. The primary purpose is to objectively collect evidence of the electoral process to assess whether the process was democratic. The study is action-oriented in that the results are not merely of academic interest but are intended to influence the situation by encouraging politicians to act democratically, encouraging public institutions to allow unfettered debates, and enabling voters to know their democratic rights. Central to election monitoring, according to Olatunde, is the critical role of confirming or contesting an election's result and determining its credibility when specific electoral criteria have been met. He concluded that the most crucial function of election monitoring is establishing confidence in the electoral process. However, what could be explained from the study is that international observer missions play a critical role in shaping the conduct of elections in Nigeria and, by extension, deepen democratic tenets. The similarity here is that ECOWAS, as a sub-regional institution, also performs the function of election monitoring. Still, with the seeming challenges of not being able to access larger polling units across the country, as workforce logistics is shallow, leading to election security challenges, these, in turn, completely change the election narratives. It is these lapses the present study intends to fill.

IRI/NDI (2019) observed that the electoral administration and process improved the conduct of previously held elections of 2015, 2011, 2007 and 1999. It also noted strongly that Nigeria's 2019 general elections, through its observer missions, demonstrate the international community's continued interest in and support for democratic progress. The mission also provided Nigerian citizens, election and government officials, civic organizations and other stakeholders with an objective assessment of the electoral process and practical recommendations for best addressing challenges to inclusive and credible elections in Nigeria's democratic future. Nigeria's 2019 elections were an opportunity to consolidate democratic gains since the end of military rule in 1999. In 2015, Nigeria experienced the first peaceful transfer of power since independence in 1960 from one ruling party, the PDP, to a former opposition party, the APC. The 2015 polls marked improvement in election administration and transparency over previous elections. Although there were shortcomings, the overall success of the elections underscored for Nigerians that credible elections matter. This sentiment was captured in an Afrobarometer survey in 2017 that showed that 72 per cent of Nigerians agreed that democratic elections are the best means of choosing the country's leaders. IRI/NDI observed the following recurring challenges in Nigeria's

electoral process: political parties' flawed candidate nomination processes, insecurity and election-related violence, money in politics, and a failed election security management process.

Aniekwe and Atuobi (2016) focused their study on two decades of African Union election observation while previewing how the African Union Election Observation Missions, AUEOMs, have evolved from diplomatic and political missions to independent and technical tasks. While examining these changes, they identified that the most significant change has been the shift away from short-term to long-term election observation missions based on an electoral cycle approach. While their analysis challenges the AU to take further steps to ensure that the AUEOM is thoroughly professional and that reports are based on evidence generated over time by trained observers and experts, they recognize that the AU election observation trajectory has been through different stages. These stages include the struggle for freedom, human rights and democracy within the context of apartheid and occupation – and in some cases, colonialism; norm-setting in a democracy; anti-coup and unconstitutional change; and the regime of election observation to confirm state compliance. They articulated that the current government should be focused on professionalizing the AUEOM and making it an independent technical mission. They recognize that while the AU faces challenges in reaching its desired technical competence regarding election observation, it also identifies areas of immediate short-term improvement. A critical linkage between the AU as the continental body and the Regional Electoral Commissions, RECs are drawn. Although there are still gaps in the deployment of AU election observation, the sustainable consolidation of democracy and electoral transparency in Africa entails an appreciation of the democratic trajectory, identifying the gaps and accepting the need for improvement.

Hartmann (2013), while writing on governance transfer by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in a working paper series, opined that most democracies in West Africa are reluctant to follow ECOWAS supplementary protocol on democracy and good governance on the conduct of elections due to legitimacy of the electoral process that is mostly fraud with irregularities and marred with violence at the conduct of elections in their country. More so, the reports by the ECOWAS observation mission did not convey, in most cases, the general assessments of the conduct, reliability, and election process. According to Hartmann, reports said elections were “fair, peaceful and transparent”. The most critical formulations include Nigeria’s 2007 elections as being “generally fair” or “sufficiently free and fair,” as in its reports on Senegal’s 2007 election. Such statements by a sub-regional institution are not taken lightly and mirror the challenges and transparency of the election observer mission conducted by ECOWAS. Hartmann’s position is primarily based on the unpreparedness of ECOWAS to establish itself as a suitable election monitor

and observer mission in elections across the sub-region. As highlighted in his work, a significant albatross to the ECOWAS observer mission is the specific mandate, size, composition, and components of the observer mission. At some points, the observer mission was composed of the design of both civilian and military members. In some cases, ECOWAS conducted joint missions with European Union in Togo (2010) or with the African Union and the United Nations in Niger (2011). A precise analysis shows that ECOWAS was still learning the methods and practice of election observation and monitoring.

Election Management Bodies in Nigeria Since Independence

The origin of electoral management bodies in Nigeria can be traced to the period before Independence when the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) was established to conduct 1959 elections. The Federal Electoral Commission (FEC), established in 1960, led the immediate post-independence federal and regional elections of 1964 and 1965 respectively. However, The electoral body was dissolved after the military coup in 1966. In 1978, a new Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) was constituted by the regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo. FEDECO organized the elections of 1979, which ushered in the Second Republic under the leadership of Alhaji Shehu Shagari. It also conducted the general elections of 1983.

By 1987, General Ibrahim B. Babangida had constituted a new body, the National Electoral Commission, NEC, headed by Professor Eme Awa, 1987-1989, and Professor Humphrey Nwosu, 1989-1993, Professor Okon Uya, 1993-1994, which attempted to return Nigeria to democratic rule. In December 1995, the military government of General Sani Abacha, which had earlier dissolved NEC in 1993, established the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), which also conducted another set of elections: Local Government councils to the National Assembly. However, These elected institutions were not inaugurated before General Abacha’s sudden death in June 1998 aborted the process. 1998 General Abdulsalam Abubakar’s Administration dissolved NECON and established the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The body organized all transitional elections that ushered in the 4th republic on May 29 1999. It has today repositioned itself to deliver credible elections that would sustain Nigeria’s nascent democracy. As a permanent body, INEC comprises the workforce recruited since 1987 under the defunct National Electoral Commission (NEC). Its presence has been established in all 36 states, the Federal Capital Territory, and the 774 Local Government Areas of Nigeria.

Analysis of Elections in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023

In 1999, Nigeria significantly returned to democratic rule, making its democratic government today the longest-running democracy in its history. Military rule ended in 1999 with the military government of General

Abdulsalam Abubakar, who took over at the death of General Sani Abacha in 1998 and handed over power to the then democratically elected government of President Olusegun Obasanjo on May 29, 1999. Between 1999 and 2023, Nigeria conducted seven successive presidential elections (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023). From Olusegun Obasanjo administration (1999-2007) to Umaru Musa Yádua (2007-2010), who was succeeded by Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015) to Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2023) and the recently elected Bola Tinubu's led government (May 2023 to date), Nigeria has made significant progress in conducting elections (though not wholly free from irregularities) that saw the peaceful transition of one democratic government to another, even from one Democratic Party to another.

Nigeria's first elections under the democratization process occurred in 1999. These elections exhibited certain features, including landslide victory, rejection of results by losers, and poor administration of elections. Nigeria had four elections over three months (December 1998–February 1999). These were the local government council elections of 5 December 1998, the State House of the Assembly and gubernatorial elections of 9 January 1999, the National Assembly elections of 20 February 1999, and the presidential election of 27 February 1999. The three registered political parties contested these elections: the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All People's Party (APP) – later All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP), and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). Although these parties claimed to be national in outlook, each maintained dominance in specific geographical-ethnic domains. At the end of the presidential election, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP was declared the winner and the duly elected President of Nigeria. He won 18,738,154 votes (62.78 per cent) over Olu Falae, who ran for the APP/AD alliance, with 11,110,287 (37.22 per cent). The PDP extended its dominance to all other national, state, and local elections, including executive and legislative elections. The election results were challenged. There were pockets of protest regarding the credibility of the polls, the most notable being the litigation filed by the defeated candidate, who challenged the election results. The elections were not credible, as attested by reports of local and international observers, including the ECOWAS, Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), the Carter Center, National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), and the EU. All reported widespread irregularities, including a 'miraculous' 100 per cent turnout of voters in Rivers State during the presidential election. However, political parties, candidates, and civil society decided to sheath their swords because the election was meant to disengage the military from politics, and little attention was paid to its credibility.

The second elections (2003) were considered a crucial step towards democratic consolidation. More attention was paid to a second election's preparation, conduct, and credibility at all levels. However, the road to the

2003 elections was full of potholes, either left unfilled or haphazardly before the elections were held. The registration of more political parties (increased from three to thirty) and a review of the voters' register were alarm signals amid palpable fears and tension across the country. Everyone knew that the stakes were higher than in 1999. A lot of manipulation and manoeuvring went into the build-up, and the hand of the state (in other words, the presidency) was evident. Most notably, President Obasanjo changed the order of the elections through the 2001 Electoral Bill. Whereas in 1999, elections proceeded from the lower to the higher levels – local, state, national assembly and presidential – the 2001 Bill specified that the presidential election would come first. The opposition interpreted this as a calculated step by the PDP to facilitate a bandwagon effect in subsequent polls should Obasanjo's PDP win the first elections. The governors, in particular, saw the reordering as an attempt to storm their state-based strongholds. The crisis generated considerable controversy, even among people in the highest echelons of power. Then President Obasanjo, Senate President Pius Anyim, and Speaker Ghali Umar Na'Abba all traded accusations and counter-accusations over the distortions. The ensuing struggle over the legal framework of the election thus gave the impression that the playing field might not be level. In sum, the politics behind this was that both the President and the National Assembly wanted to secure their re-election before the turn of the governors because the state governors have become very powerful and, if elected first, might use their local political machines to thwart the political ambitions of the National Assembly members and the President for re-election.' Therefore, it was unsurprising that the 2003 elections generated massive domestic and international interest. Several domestic and international observers also participated. The administration of the elections was generally poor. INEC's organizational weakness and lack of autonomy from political forces all hampered its effectiveness. For instance, the review of the voter's exercise was fraught with irregularities, particularly non-registration of eligible voters and withholding and sale of voters' cards. However, the electoral results showed that the PDP emerged as the winner at all levels with wide margins. For example, President Obasanjo won the presidency this time with 24,109,157 (61.80 per cent) of the total votes cast. At the same time, General Muhammadu Buhari, the ANPP candidate, emerged runner-up with 12,495,326 (32.3 per cent).

The 2007 general elections were the third in the series that maps Nigeria's democratization since 1999. Given the seeming widespread disenchantment with the ruling PDP, it was another opportunity for change and power turnover in the country. Before the elections, the political atmosphere was again agitated. Among other mind-boggling incidents, President Olusegun Obasanjo condescendingly declared that, for him and the PDP, the 2007 election was a do-or-die affair. Nigerians enthusiastically went to the polls for the Gubernatorial and

State Houses of Assembly elections on 14 April and the Presidential and National Assembly elections on 21 April. In the results of the elections, INEC awarded the PDP an unimaginable landslide victory at all levels, where Umaru Yar'Adua of the PDP scored 24,638,063 with 69.60%. His closest rival, General Muhammadu Buhari of the ANPP, scored 6,605,299 with an 18.66% – unimaginable because the last eight years of PDP leadership had not improved the living conditions of average Nigerians in any fundamental sense. How the PDP garnered the votes was puzzling. Across the country, there was unprecedented rigging, ballot stuffing, falsification of results, intimidation of voters, and direct assault on the people. In some extreme instances, voting did not take place. Following the death of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua on May 5, 2010, the 2011 general elections were a year close. They had promised Nigerians a better electoral process than that which brought him to power through the set-up of an electoral reform panel headed by former Chief Justice of Nigeria, Muhammadu Uwais. Professor Attahiru Jega, the new INEC chairman, had slated national elections for April 2011. The gubernatorial and State Houses of Assembly elections were held in Nigeria on 9 April 2011. The election was initially scheduled to be held on 2 April. The presidential election was held in Nigeria on 16 April 2011, postponed from 9 April 2011. The election had some unpopular political controversy as to whether a Muslim or Christian should be allowed to become president given the tradition of rotating the top office between the religions and following the death of Umaru Yar'Adua, who was a Muslim, and Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, who was to complete the tenure of late President Umaru Yar'Adua. Following the election, widespread violence occurred in the country's northern parts. Goodluck Jonathan was declared the winner on 19 April. The international media reported the polls as having run smoothly with relatively little violence or voter fraud in contrast to previous elections, particularly the widely disputed 2007 election. The US Department of State said the election was successful and substantially improved over 2007, although it added that vote rigging and fraud also occurred.

The 2015 general elections were initially scheduled for 14 February but were later postponed to 28 March (Presidential, Senatorial and House of Representatives) and 11 April 2015 (Governorship and State House of Assembly). General Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress, APC, emerged as the winner of the Presidential elections and was sworn in on 29 May 2015. The 2015 election was successful because tensions were everywhere concerning the country's complex politics and security environment. However, it was the first time in the history of Nigeria that an incumbent president lost an election. Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party, PDP, lost his seat to Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress, APC.

The 2019 election was keenly contested. The period leading to the polls was characterized by widespread

violence, a high inflation rate and economic challenges. Most Nigerians wanted a change from the Buhari-led APC leadership. However, Muhammadu Buhari was declared the winner at the end of the elections and returned elected.

Meanwhile, the 2023 elections had 93.4 million registered voters, according to INEC reports. Still, only a 27 per cent turnout was recorded, representing an abysmal decline from the last three elections (54 per cent in 2011, 44 per cent in 2015 and 35 per cent in 2019). On 1 March 2023, The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) announced the final results after a chaotic count lasting almost four days. Tinubu's victory was irrefutable, with 8.79 m votes, putting him ahead of the opposition PDP candidate, Atiku Abubakar with 6.98 m and the Labour Party candidate, Peter Obi, with 6.1m votes. Although Bola Tinubu was announced the winner of the elections by INEC, the inauguration occurred on 29 May. However, the Nigerian electoral act allows individuals and parties to challenge the conduct of an election through the election petition tribunal, and this petition must be filed within 21 days of the declaration of the election result. Hence, the two main opposition parties (PDP and LP) have approached the court to seek to nullify elections. The extant literature reveals that the ECOWAS election monitoring and observer mission has gained traction in Nigeria's democratic culture as essential stakeholders in the electoral process have affirmed its capacity to consolidate on democratic enterprise, irrespective of the seeming challenges the mission has passed through since inception. Most scholars have extensively discussed the role of election security management. However, much effort is still needed in interrogating the lapses of the ECOWAS elections monitoring system and the factors responsible for the challenges of election security management in Nigeria. These lapses are a function of the non-holistic nature of election security management. It is this void in the activities of election monitoring concerning election security management in Nigeria that this study tends to fill.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study focuses mainly on secondary data. It relied on papers published in scholarly journals, especially the Journal of African Elections, Global Journal of Political Science and Administration, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Democracy and Journal of Opinion. In addition, reports from the International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI), press release, newspapers, and other essential materials were reviewed. To arrive at the findings reported here, we critically studied the above materials, compared and contrasted the results reported therein and assigned the popular and common arguments accordingly. The study focuses only on the articles and research papers with logical, convincing and empirical findings. Therefore, the study adopted the content analysis method within the qualitative research design, using a desk review approach

in analyzing ECOWAS election monitoring and the challenges of election security management in Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Arising from reviewing secondary data from the relevant sources, this study made three main findings. First, it reveals the challenges inextricably tied to the difficulties of ECOWAS elections monitoring in Nigeria. Hence, we argue that, in assessing the role of ECOWAS in Nigeria elections, the most dominant criticism is Nigeria's entire election monitoring practice is unneeded and has become a liberal, neo-colonial agenda where the election report consistently affirms the position of the winning party. Despite recognizing the need to monitor the electoral process, it will be best if the ECOWAS monitoring team operates fairly and credibly. Second, the study reveals that election security management is critical in conducting free and transparent elections in Nigeria and creating a safe and enabling environment for elections. In this sense, security is indispensable to free, fair and credible elections. From providing basic safety to voters at political party rallies and campaigns to ensuring that result forms are protected, the whole electoral process is circumscribed by security considerations. Third, the study underscores the challenges bedeviling election security management in Nigeria on three levels: compromising security principles, election principles and electoral plans. In what follows, we explicitly discuss these findings under three sub-headings:

Challenges of ECOWAS Election Monitoring in Nigeria

The implementation of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance through election monitoring in Nigeria, however, could be considered satisfactory to an extent - at least in establishing the presence of election observers in these elections. Overall, it indicates that ECOWAS showed dedicated concerns and striven to defend the ideal of democracy through election monitoring in Nigeria. Thus, ECOWAS realized that election results were increasingly accepted by the parties involved in the Member States of the Organization elections if the observers were fully involved, even if reports from elections observations did not match the realities of the polls or reflect the dynamics of elections. Although there were pockets of violence across the states in the general elections, national and international observers regarded the election as relatively peaceful. For example, the 2013 election witnessed violence and malpractice on a larger scale than the 1999 general elections. The 2003 elections, according to reports, were characterized by "low-intensity armed struggle" by thugs hired by the political class, especially in the Niger Delta. The intra-party and inter-party conflicts also degenerated into violence, especially in the ruling PDP in the election cycle. But ECOWAS Observer Missions reported that it was free and fair. The violence in the following general election in 2007 was worse than the previous elections in the Fourth Republic. Indeed, the election cycle of

do-or-die politics was declared by the then President, Olusegun Obasanjo, and the period also witnessed more daring rigging tactics, ballot snatching, the use of security operatives to alter results and intimidation and harassment of opponents as well as Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials. Consequently, 2007 was declared a cycle of "civil strife, heightened social and political tension and sporadic use of violence, but armed conflict was not formally announced. The 2007 election, because of the violence, also led to a judicial review of some of the reported results in the polls. The 2011 election witnessed the worst violence in the Fourth Republic as over 800 persons were killed in the violence that trailed the presidential election. Yet ECOWAS Observer Missions declared it free and fair. However, ECOWAS observation missions, usually led by former heads of state or persons of high repute, helped to confirm the region's progress regarding respect for democratic rules.

The conclusions reached by observer teams have often focused on the polling day election procedure, with little effort to provide a decision about the entire electoral process. The repeated pattern has been to applaud the "freeness" of polling day with little attempt to probe into the "fairness" of the pre-election phase. Though ECOWAS Observer Missions in these elections identified flaws and provided technical recommendations for improving subsequent elections, it failed to give a final evaluation of the entire electoral process. For instance, the 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections were rated by ECOWAS observers to be credible, but the same polls were voided by Nigerians and criticized for being deeply problematic. In response, the observers admitted that they only endorsed the polling process, not the entire election. The competence of ECOWAS election monitoring teams to effectively and consistently evaluate electoral processes is subject to criticism for several other reasons. Despite the support of foreign partners, there is still a lack of professionalism by some observers. The challenge partly stems from the inability of the ECOWAS Observe Missions to translate the long-term observation methodology into practical action fully. In addition, the size of observers continues to be a subject of debate. With thousands of polling units to monitor and several kilometers of distance to cover added to a limited budget, deploying a credible monitoring mission with the competence to determine the character of the electoral process impartially remains a challenge. Though no consensus exists regarding the ideal number of observers deployed in an election, election missions often have relatively lean human resources. Lack of proper funding also affects the length of time the task stays in the country being observed. Of note is that no consensus exists for determining the credibility of an election process. The different organizations have mainly applied varying standards for measuring an election's "freeness" and "fairness". A conflict of interest and consideration of African solidarity particularly constrained the ECOWAS Observer Missions. The duality of roles (as mediators

and election observers) these regional institutions play has often limited their objective assessment of election quality.

Election Security Management in Nigeria

Given the scale of general elections, the number of people involved, election materials that need to be moved, the difficulty of traversing terrain, and the physical locations that need to be protected, such an operation is complex. It represents logistics and planning challenges that require a wide range of stakeholders, processes, places, and issues in time and space. Whether it is of electoral staff, voters, or other stakeholders such as candidates and their agents, parties, civil society organizations, domestic and international observer groups and security agencies themselves, security is critical in the protection of electoral personnel, locations and processes; in ensuring that voters exercise their civic duties without fear or hindrance; in creating a level playing field for all political parties and candidates to canvass for support; in protecting domestic and foreign observers in discharging their duties and obligations, and in maintaining the overall integrity of the democratic and electoral processes. The significance of electoral security cannot, therefore, be overemphasized. Electoral security is crucial for creating the proper environment; electoral staff is required to carry out their duties; for voters to freely and safely go to their polling units to vote; for candidates and political parties to organize rallies and campaigns; and for other numerous stakeholders to discharge their responsibilities under the Constitution and the Electoral Act.

In planning, coordination and deployment matters about electoral processes, well-coordinated security is a fundamental requirement for success. Adequate security ensures the free movement of electoral staff, voters, candidates, observers and other stakeholders on Election Day, which adds to the credibility of the electoral process. Similarly, adequate security is an essential pre-condition for deploying valuable electoral assets and sensitive materials to registration and polling sites. Good security increases the participation of political parties, candidates and voters in an election. It also enables a more objective coverage of events by the media and easier circulation of voters' education, message and materials. In most developing countries, where forces of democratization were unfolding, election security remained an issue. Access to power was highly-priced because the states' hold on the economy had not decreased much since independence. Indeed, the struggle to gain access to power and thus to state resources did not only remained protracted but fierce as well. Civil wars and communal clashes were commonplace, indeed a routine. This fueled arms proliferation and civil wars in North Africa, precipitated by the Arab Spring and its aftermath. The global community was experiencing unprecedented killings, terrorism, kidnappings and abductions. Travelling by road, air and sea was unsafe. In some exceptional cases, states induced acts of terrorism directed at citizens to settle political scores. Security was a global concern

as it was borderless. Anti-terrorism laws were being replicated across countries. The international system of inequality and rising poverty were implicated in this global security architecture as they fuel acts of terrorism. Simultaneously and regardless of the prevailing security siege, the yearning for human freedom was desirable to exit humanity's predicaments. People lived in a profound paradox where citizenship and security siege had to co-exist. Therefore, election management bodies cannot afford to concern themselves with planning for the electoral process alone. However, they were compelled by circumstances imposed by the interface between national and global security architecture to think and act security in an ever-changing world. Managing election security was, therefore, a cousin of election management. In Nigeria, apportioning blame to INEC on matters about election security, legal constraints in election security matters were often glossed over. Existing legal regimes were incapable of responsibly responding to security challenges in elections. Without security personnel, INEC had to fall back on the conventional police for election security. The existing legal regime was inadequate in the context of present-day realities. The current legal administration could not have contemplated the security challenges of kidnapping, abductions and other cowardly acts of terrorism. No doubt, the prosecution of electoral offenders, considering their share number, constituted a massive drain of INEC's meagre resources and a distraction from its primary mandate.

Election Security Management Challenges

Between 1999 and 2023, security services and the Commission made significant strides in dealing with security challenges to the electoral process. From 2011, success was recorded by the security services towards active participation in the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES). For the first time in the history of election security in Nigeria, a common platform responsible for coordinating security matters and polling scarce resources, particularly personnel, in dealing with shared security challenges. Through ICCES, security services promptly intervened and forestalled potential crises that could have gotten out of hand across the country. INEC's experience from the 2011 General Elections showed that some of the most severe challenges to election security were associated with deploying security personnel. While there were tremendous strides in deployments in 2011 compared to previous elections, there was still room for further improvements. Issues such as early and adequate deployments to polling units, the provision of escort/protection for election officials and sensitive election materials, preventing violence between supporters of one political party and another, the presence/influence of thugs and militia groups in certain parts of the country as well as attacks on electoral personnel are outstanding issues needed to be addressed to enhance the credibility and transparency of the electoral process. However,

election security was an issue that cannot be left to Security Agencies and Electoral Management Bodies alone; all other stakeholders, such as the media, the National Orientation Agency, Community Leaders, Civil Society Organizations, CSOs, etc., had a significant role to play in the task of securing the electoral environment. The following were identified by Fidelis and Paki, as some of the critical challenges in election security management in Nigeria:

Lack of Adherence to Security Principles

To effectively discharge their duties during elections, security personnel must be led by their own rules of engagement. Other necessary guidelines include

Equitable and Right-Based Election Security

This entails that contestants and the electorates must be treated equitably by both security forces and electoral officers. Political factors must not determine the actions of security forces. They must remember that an election allows the people to exercise their Civic and human rights. Any security that does not consider and acknowledge this fact is defective.

National Ownership

There Should be awareness that elections are a sovereign process. Similarly, security in a country is an aspect of the sovereign process of that nation. Thus, security and elections must be guided by the ownership and control of a national authority to reflect national sovereignty.

Strategic Planning

Elections are planned affairs. Ordinarily, elections are planned within about 18-24 months before the polling day and occur as a widely dispersed exercise requiring significant planning and preparatory activities. Often, the security forces (police and military) hardly possess sufficient standing personnel and resources to secure an election and simultaneously carry out their regular duties.

Flexible and Efficient

To be efficient, the electoral process should be amendable to changes. The amendments should accommodate legal, operational, or political conditions that arise.

Transparent and Accountable

This ensures that election security operations are carried out in the public interest. Disclosing operational security policies to parties involved transparently increases public confidence in security operations. Transparency requires that there must be broad consultation on the election project.

Lack of Adherence to Election Plan

Planning affects people and institutions in their polities. The authorities must implement plans to secure, transfer, and store sensitive election materials in every election. Therefore, planning an election is essential

for the successful conduct of polls, even when it might sometimes prove challenging. Many ongoing violent conflicts in Nigeria could also trigger violence during election periods. Competition comes from a given society's political, economic and social dimensions. The matter of election planning also involves identifying the institutions involved. Multiple institutions, like INEC, Ministries of Interior, Defence, Information, and others, may be interested in creating a secure election environment. These institutions work to develop, implement, and review security measures throughout the electoral process. Civil Society Organizations, the Media, Trade Unions, and religious, traditional and opinion leaders also play essential roles in creating a secure electoral environment by mediating, building intolerance for violence and enhancing public confidence in experiencing specific electoral participation.

Lack of Adherence to Election Principles

Ordinarily, an election is a contest for legitimate power; it is a non-violent competition, keenly contested among aspirants, to acquire or retain power. Nonetheless, in this process, confrontation is inevitable. There is, therefore, the need to realize that election security should focus on containment and management of the process based on electoral principles. Organizing and conducting credible elections demand adherence to principles and rights that define democratic elections. Thus, election entails that the following Principles, which are pretty challenging to election stakeholders, be observed: a.) Transparency. b.) Compliance with national laws. c.) Freedom of speech and association. d.) Impartiality. e.) Inclusiveness. f.) Competitive or Non-competitiveness.

From the discussion so far, it is trite to say that elections in Nigeria are continuously marred with insecurity and election-related violence, fueled by political actors who show gross irresponsibility not to accept the election result or seek redress in the court of law. Also, in most cases, internal party primaries flaw the candidate nomination process; this leads to intra-party disputes and conflicts of interest among party members seeking nomination into the same public office. As much as election-related violence and flawed nomination processes at the intra-party level exist, little progress can be recorded to stop money in politics. Money in politics systematically destroys the valid will and character of the electorates to choose who governs or represents them. This comes as vote buying and selling—a weapon used to change the psychology of the electorates. Political parties and candidates are found to bridge the peace by not following electoral management bodies' guidelines in the conduct and security management on or before election day. Citizens' engagements in the entire life circle of the electoral process do not seemingly get to an all-time appreciable statistic. The study also found out that election security management is completely lacking in the electoral process, from voter registration exercise to election day casting of votes, inadequate number of observer missions,

insufficient security personnel around polls, collation of data and final announcement of winner shows lapses in the handling of election security architecture and management of the general electoral process.

CONCLUSION

Elections are fundamental in democratic processes as they signal the end and beginning of a leadership cycle. They are the processes through which people of political desire can be put in public office to account and be made to introduce policies that reflect the people's general will. In other words, elections express the people's sovereign choice that helps confer legitimacy on political leadership. Elections do not just happen on Election Day (ED) but are subsumed in the process encompassing activities before, during and after elections. This process includes the legal and constitutional framework of elections; the registration of political parties; campaigns and manifesto debate; the authenticity of the voter register and financing; the activities of security agents and government in power; electoral agencies; the liberalization of the political process in the country; and the independence of adjudicating bodies on elections and the local, regional and international bodies playing the observatory role. In this sense, ECOWAS has protocol mandates the organization to observe elections in member states. The challenges to these protocols are that most of the ECOWAS elections reports, particularly in Nigeria, have been faulted and accused of lacking merit because, in most cases, the reports do not represent the truth and the views of the majority of electorates. As long as the reports of elections are not credible, electoral irregularities will remain pervasive, and an effective elections management system will be far from reach. Electoral tampering and violence appear to be a recurring decimal and have taken a different dimension with vote buying from the electorates by candidates standing in elections. This unwholesome practice negates the ethics of elections and creates electoral insecurity. This is problematic and makes cases for revisiting the ECOWAS protocol. Hence, this paper strongly recommends that the ECOWAS observation mission become transparent, accessible, and fair and treat all parties equitably.

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