

ASSESSING THE PERFORMANCE OF ELECTIONS OBSERVER'S MISSIONS IN THE CONDUCT OF THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

Ishiekwene, Anwuli Joy¹, Agah Benjamin E²

^{1,2}Ph.D. Lecturer, Department of Political Science, Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State.

Email Address- anwulijoydelsu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study assessed the performance of election observer's missions in the conduct of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. According to the study, the importance of election observers' roles in elections is highlighted by their propensity for impartial and non-interventionist observation. Their unbiased evaluation of the entire process is also included, as shown in their post-election reports. Reports from impartial foreign election observers, if anything, tend to provide elected government officials a certain level of political legitimacy. The general election cycle in Nigeria in 2023 was similar to previous ones in that a sizable number of domestic and international election observers actively engaged in it. Using the historical method of data collection, involving a critical but systematic analysis of secondary data, this study revealed amongst other things that since Nigeria's return to democracy, IEOs have been effectively involved in successive elections, issuing reports and verdicts to support the electoral process. The study however opined that against expectations, the proliferation and continuous involvement of IEOs in Nigeria's elections have not yielded the desired results. In the 2023 elections however, some of the key issues observed, along with assessments from various international organizations include the fact that the elections were marred by instances of challenges related to electoral violence, irregularities, transparency, polarization, and lack of trust arising from the failure to use the much celebrated technology during the election. The study further revealed that election observers during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria highlight significant challenges related to logistics, security, political cooperation, impartiality, transparency, and technology. These findings underscore the importance of addressing these challenges to enhance the effectiveness, credibility, and impact of future election observer's missions in Nigeria. The following recommendations were therefore outlined for the study: The government through the Independent National Electoral Commission should enhance logistical support, strengthen security measures, promote political cooperation, improve transparency and accountability and enhance observer's impartiality.

Keywords: Elections, presidential election, observer's mission, corruption, transparency, politics

1. INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

Election monitoring and observation is the process of closely examining and assessing an election "in order to ascertain its impartiality with regard to structure and management." Election observation and monitoring are intended to increase trust in the fairness of the electoral process, help prevent fraud in the voting and counting procedures, and report to the nation's citizens and the international community on the overall integrity of the elections (Central Election Commission, 2006). Additionally, observers can arbitrate conflicts between opposing political parties upon request and in the proper context in an effort to ease tensions prior to, during, and following elections. As a result, election monitoring basically plays the role of an unbiased third party to guarantee free and fair elections.

The development of the idea of election monitoring is very much tied to the recent resurgence of civil society and its continuing role in the engineering of democratic rule, to that extent, election observation could be seen as a reflection of a particular stage of the involvement of civil society in the democratization process. Its success in that regard is also suggestive of its claim to legitimacy (Department For International Development, 2010). The whole phenomenon of international or local observation does not only underline that legitimacy, it also indicates the extent civil society has become internationalized. In spearheading the struggle for democracy, election observers or monitoring groups also directly stakes a claim to its own autonomy and a specific role, a watchdog role in public affairs. Following the principled victory of democracy, civil society, represented by observer groups, was unwilling to cede control of the realisation of this concept to authoritarian regimes, who would then be able to dilute and potentially adulterate the democratic ideals. Election observer monitoring groups were, in a sense, institutionalizing their own role in the consolidation of democracy as well as laying a claim to autonomy. The actual election becomes just one more phase in the fight for democracy, and election observers or monitoring organizations have to establish their own place in the ongoing endeavors to prevent the prospect of arbitrary government. There is also a direct interest in civil society monitoring of elections. In transitional contexts where civil society had to become political organisations and face the ruling regime head-on in elections, it

was imperative to have some independent oversight of the electoral watchdog that the ruling regime had established to guarantee its own fair play (Ezekwe & Eme, 2010).

Election monitoring is not new in Africa. It will not be out of place to say that elections in Africa, from colonial days have always been the subject of some sort of monitoring and observations. Journalists have always observed elections in order to report on them. In addition to keeping the peace and order during elections, security agencies have also been used to make sure that voters and election officials are abiding by the rules and regulations. When a political party fields a candidate in a constituency, they almost always send operatives to oversee voting in every polling place. Lastly, researchers have observed elections in Africa in the field since the colonial era and have produced in-depth analysis and conclusions. In Africa, elections still include all of these (Ezekwe & Eme, 2010).

However, since the late 1980s, election observations and monitoring in the continent have taken on a qualitatively different dimension from these earlier processes (Griffith, 2013). The increasing institutionalisation of civil society organisations, international organisations, intergovernmental groupings, and foreign governments as third parties in the conduct of elections in Africa is this new dimension. Election observation and monitoring, typically conducted outside the state but with its approval, have developed into venues where national and international organisations declare their commitment to the viability of democracy in nations going through democratic transitions. The idea is that given the transition situation, both institutions and the culture supporting free and fair elections are weak (Hyde & Kelly, 2011). Newly emerging opposition parties are often suspicious vis a vis the government or the ruling party, monitoring such elections becomes a confidence building measure, a deterrent tool against electoral fraud, and in post-conflict situations, a mechanism of conflict resolution.

With reference to Nigeria, elections have frequently been conducted there without the full participation of the populace. The way the system functions shows that the democratic spirit is completely disregarded and applied incorrectly. Thus, the outcome has always been manipulated in favour of candidates of the powerful few (Ezekwe & Eme, 2010). This is unfair and shameful, given the democratic system we opted for. It is better to tell the people that the leaders would be 'selected' so that they would not bother to queue up in the scorching sun. But allowing them to vote and later turn things upside down is the height of betrayal that must be resisted. It is problematic when elections and politics are viewed as a "do or die" situation in a society. Nigeria's electoral process has long been tainted by growing anomalies and the governing party's repression of opposition. The electoral commission's impartiality and independence are frequently violated, casting doubt on the legitimacy of individuals who are elected on a national and worldwide level. The current state of affairs has brought attention to the necessity of securing lasting democracy through free, fair, and credible elections worldwide.

This unequivocally explains the justification for international election monitoring and observation, which has progressively evolved into a global standard as a way to guarantee that elections held anywhere in the world are free, fair, and credible and are found to have complied with international norms for such elections. In light of the aforementioned context, this paper assesses Nigeria's election process in order to pinpoint the contributions made by foreign election observation organisations to the establishment of a durable democracy. It primarily seek to find answer to the question: what are the underlying reasons and motivations for international entities to monitor elections in Nigeria?

Research Objective

The general objective of this study is to assess the performance of foreign observer's missions in the conduct of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria, while the specific objective of the study is to understand the underlying reasons and motivations that prompted international entities to observe elections in Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Elections and Elections Observations

Elections have been a vital part of democratic transitions, decolonization, and the implementation of peace agreements around the globe (The Carter Centre National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2019). Elections provide the means for the people's will to be freely expressed in choosing their government. For governing institutions to have democratic legitimacy they should have been granted the authority to govern in the name of the people, and be accountable to the people for the exercise of that authority, through genuine and periodic elections. A genuine and democratic election process can contribute to ensuring sustainable peace and stability. Elections provide groups with an opportunity to express their political voice in competition with their opponents without resort to violence and enable the peaceful transfer of political power (European Commission, 2018). It should be noted that election is not only a tool of democratic participation but also a fierce contest for positions of leadership, power and access to resources (Kuhne, 2010).

One of the strong appeals of democracy is the central position whereby it allocates and accommodates citizen's participation. Unlike other forms of government, democracy gives citizens wide elbowroom which ideally allows them to select their leaders, hold such leaders accountable, and determine the length of leaders' stay in power. The basic desire of both men and women to have control over their life is the basis of this provision (Kornberg and Clarke, 1994 referenced in UNDP, 2010). "Insofar as its most influential decision-makers are selected through regular, transparent elections where candidates openly vie for votes and nearly all individuals are eligible to cast ballots," is how one defines a democratic political system (Huntington, 1991:661 cite in Bamgbose, 2012). Therefore, Elections involve a set of activities leading to the selection of one or more persons out of many to serve in positions of authority in a society (Orji & Uzodi, 2012).

An accurate and complete assessment of any election must take into account all aspects of the process, and no election should be viewed in isolation from the political context in which it takes place. Factors to consider include: the legal framework for the elections as laid out in the constitution and electoral laws of the country; the ability of citizens to seek and receive accurate information upon which to make political choices; the ability of political competitors to organize freely and to reach out to citizens in order to win their support; the conduct of the mass media in covering parties, candidates and issues; the freedom that citizens and political competitors have to engage in the political and electoral process without fear of intimidation, violence or retribution for their choices; the conduct of the voters registration process and integrity of the voters register; the conduct of the voting, counting, results tabulation, transmission and announcement processes; the handling of election complaints; and the installation in office of those duly elected (NDI Report, 2019).

Election observation is the process by which an independent and unbiased body of observers watches elections in a specific nation or area in comparison to predetermined standards. The goal is to determine whether the elections adhere to recognised guarantees of democratic participation, to spot problems and shortcomings, and to offer suggestions on how the process can be improved going forward. Election observation, especially by domestic groups, further reinforces the rights of citizens and their organizations to participate and ensure greater transparency in the manner their leaders are chosen (INEC, 2014). International election observation is now so widespread that a regime's refusal to let outside observers is interpreted as an indication that it has anything to conceal. It is unanimously acknowledged in the media and in policy circles how important election monitoring is (Hyde & Kelly, 2011). As noted in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, international election observation is a widely accepted means of providing accurate and impartial assessments about the nature of electoral processes. Accurate and impartial international election observation calls for credible and reliable methodologies and cooperation with national authorities, the national political competitors (political parties, candidates and supporters of positions on referendum), domestic election monitoring organizations and other credible international election observers organizations (Griffith, 2013).

Observing the electoral process is an important integrity-safeguard mechanism. It is one of the checks-and-balances that protect the viability and honesty of election administration, as well as the participation of political parties, candidates and interest groups. In addition, observation promotes compliance with the legal framework and deters questionable activities and potential conflicts. Public reporting by observers increases transparency and helps ensure election officers' accountability (IFES, 2011). An observer has an obligation to know exactly what to observe. Election observation is not about seeking for fault but an objective assessment of the election process. At the minimum, it requires adequate appreciation of the electoral laws, rules, procedures and processes of the electoral system that is to be observed. It is important for a prospective Observer to study the field manuals for election officials and also have an idea of the enabling laws and a baseline understanding of the political system that is being observed (INEC, 2014). Observers can confirm that governments are following the law, which can be useful in putting an end to "sore loser" protests, boosting voter confidence, helping the international community to determine whether the elections are legitimate, and, in theory, advancing democratisation. Additionally, observers can lessen election fraud and denounce governments that flout the law. This can occasionally validate domestic opposition, as demonstrated in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 (Hyde & Kelly, 2011).

Election observation, to put it simply, is the observation of procedures and events that are planned ahead of, during, and following elections; gathering of information and observations; analysis of the information in light of election legislation; and a description of the results of this analysis and the conclusions drawn from the reports (INEC, 2014). In this regard, election is an election when the votes of the peoples count; the general acceptability of any election largely relies on the legal framework and mode of conducting it i.e. whether it is "free and fair". The functionality of international election observers therefore becomes necessary in determining electoral integrity of any country of the world. They provide general baseline to measure its credibility, fairness and transparency. Thus, acknowledging its indispensable role in ensuring sustainable democracy across the world is imperative.

The Nature and Characters of Elections in Nigeria

Since Nigeria gained independence in 1960, its political processes have been marked by instability, with election crises forming a significant part of this ongoing turmoil. These crises are not recent developments; they began soon after independence and have varied in frequency and intensity over the years. Scholars have long studied these election crises, often attributing them to factors like ethnicity, modernisation, or class dynamics. Some explanations view them through the lens of class struggle, though they often lack clarity on the specific nature and form of these class conflicts within Nigeria's unique socio-political context.

Analyses of election crises in Nigeria frequently overlook the factional struggles for hegemony within a peripheral state. With the introduction of regional government in 1954, a distinct societal structure emerged in Nigeria, marked by an unusual relationship between economic and political power. Instead of economic strength leading to political control, Nigeria's dominant class was granted political power without corresponding economic power. As a result, the state itself became a source and instrument of economic power, utilised to suppress opposition, with state power serving as both a tool and a measure of dominance for those in control (Ekekwe, 2016).

Thus, while the petty-bourgeoisie assumed governance roles, they did not truly become the ruling class, as they lacked the economic power to assert real control. In theory, the ruling class is one whose economic interests largely dictate the state's power and intervention (Ekekwe, 2016: 81). At that time, the ruling class was the metropolitan bourgeoisie, which controlled the economy. Following independence, the local petty-bourgeoisie focused on accumulating wealth and economic power, intensifying political competition as a form of class struggle. In this environment, accumulating political influence became an avenue for economic gain, leading the petty-bourgeoisie to view politics as a fiercely competitive endeavour.

The 1959 Federal elections highlighted that Nigeria's political and social structures, both at the federal and regional levels, lacked a unified and stable petty-bourgeoisie. Political parties formed by various factions within this class were not adequately equipped to promote stability (Dode, 2010). Up until 1964, Nigeria could only be described as having political administrations or governments, but not a cohesive state. The fragmented social framework revealed that a well-defined Nigerian state, as understood through conventional classifications, was absent. This lack of cohesion within the dominant class hindered the establishment of a common national agenda and disrupted political stability (Rawlence and Albin-Lackey, 2017).

The competition for resources and political control among the factions escalated after independence, with factions using political power to marginalise rivals and, at times, eliminate them. The need to control state apparatus for personal gain became essential, leading those in power to monopolise state resources to reinforce their economic positions (Ekekwe, 2016). This scenario left opposition parties with little chance of accessing resources or power constitutionally, reducing democracy to the mere act of elections. The high-stakes nature of elections, underscored by former President Olusegun Obasanjo's assertion in 2007 that the general elections would be a "do or die" affair, illustrates how entrenched these issues have become.

Thus, upon independence, Nigeria had a political elite who, lacking economic control, fragmented into factions vying for resources and state dominance. These elites sought to merge political and economic power but could not agree on key socio-political policies. Consequently, issues like election results, census data, and revenue allocation became contentious and often led to conflict. Election disputes, in particular, grew more severe as elections became crucial for legitimising dominance and wielding the state's coercive power.

The post-independence Nigerian state's structure and the character of its dominant class have proven incompatible with ideals of free and fair elections. The dominant class lacks the democratic ethos—such as tolerance and political consciousness—necessary for peaceful competition. Since independence, the postcolonial state has remained fragile, lacking a native capitalist class. Without a unifying ruling class, Nigeria's fragmented elite could not establish a cohesive ideological framework to guide the nation. This failure has obstructed the development of dominant socio-political values and durable institutions, including stable mechanisms for leadership succession.

The ongoing electoral crises in Nigeria reflect the broader challenges of state formation within emerging democracies. Nigeria's socio-economic landscape has yet to produce an autonomous state independent from dominant social classes, particularly the ruling elite. This limited autonomy hampers the state's role as an instrument of impartial governance, as it remains an arena for intra-class struggles. In Nigeria's postcolonial state, fragmented elite interests prevent the establishment of a common national identity, impeding its evolution into a cohesive and inclusive governing entity. Consequently, this lack of unity fuels political instability and election-related violence, as competing factions prioritise their hold on power over democratic integrity.

International Elections Observation in Nigeria, 1999-2023

According to the Transition Monitoring Group (2019), international election observers have mainly focused on ensuring credible and acceptable elections, with the aim of fostering democratic governance. The Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security has highlighted that elections with integrity play a crucial role in empowering women, fighting corruption, improving services for the poor, enhancing governance, and ending civil wars. For elections to uphold integrity, they must be run professionally, impartially, and transparently, and voters must perceive them as such. Various rules, treaties, and conventions guide electoral practices, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 1965; the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1966; the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe of 1990; the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observation (IEOCCIO) of 2005; the African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance of 2007; and the Declaration of Global Principles for Non-Partisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations (DoGP) of 2010.

The Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation outlines that international election observers must provide impartial, independent, and informed analysis of the election process without interference. Observers are expected to follow codes of conduct that include respecting the sovereignty of states and international human rights, adhering to national laws and electoral authority, maintaining political impartiality, avoiding obstruction of electoral processes, wearing identification, ensuring accuracy and professionalism in observations, avoiding media comments prior to official statements, cooperating with other observers, and upholding appropriate personal conduct (Essia & Yearoo, 2019).

Despite the enthusiasm both locally and globally to witness the democratic process, the 1999 general elections were marked by inadequate institutional preparedness. Widespread irregularities and electoral fraud marred the election in which Olusegun Obasanjo emerged as president. International election observers actively participated in monitoring this election, with their reports shaping future elections in Nigeria. The Association of Asian Election Authorities (AAEA), in collaboration with the International Foundation of Electoral System (IFES), observed that the elections were plagued by irregularities and fraud across many states, attributing these issues to a lack of institutional preparation and the absence of a civil political culture among Nigerians (Essia & Yearoo, 2019).

The Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) also criticised the 1999 general elections. In their joint report to the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Committee, they acknowledged the election as a major milestone in Nigerian political history, but one still tarnished by significant irregularities, electoral fraud, and violence. They urged Nigerians and the government to address these issues in future elections. Reactions to the 2003 general elections from international election observers were mixed, particularly concerning the process, citizen involvement, and outcomes. For instance, the International Republican Institute (IRI) noted that despite challenges, the 2003 election was a step forward in Nigeria's democratic evolution. They argued that how the election results were perceived was less important than the actions taken by the government and civil society towards democratic governance. In contrast, the Commonwealth observer group stated that the results were largely fabricated, suggesting that Nigeria still struggled to conduct credible elections. Similarly, the NDI highlighted issues of violent campaigns, voter intimidation, underage voting, and inaccuracies in voter counts, all of which undermined the electoral process.

Increasing condemnation from international election observers marked subsequent elections, particularly in the 2007 general elections. Reflecting on the period leading up to these elections, the NDI observed that approximately 280 people died due to election-related violence between 2006 and 2007. The institute cited various forms of electoral malpractice, such as underage voting, ballot box snatching, and electoral officer intimidation, and widespread violence that frustrated the efforts of international observers. The European Union (EU) expressed disappointment at the way the elections were conducted, noting institutional failures by the electoral management body, lack of transparency among political parties and officials, and disenfranchisement of a significant portion of the population.

Similarly, a deputy director at the International Republican Institute's Africa Programme described the 2007 elections in Nigeria as "an election-like event" that fell far below international standards, representing a notable regression. He argued that the failure of the ruling class to recognise the deteriorating political environment posed a severe threat to Nigeria's fledgling democracy, with only the evident enthusiasm of citizens offering hope for future democratic processes. This degradation of electoral standards led international election observers to exercise restraint in their critique, while their involvement continued to face scepticism within Nigeria.

The same challenges marked the 2011 general elections, with international election observers maintaining a strong interest in Nigeria's democratisation journey. The IRI noted that, despite Nigeria's history of violent elections, the 2011

elections showed improvements with reduced violence and apparent preparedness among election officials. However, the IRI still reported failures in maintaining ballot secrecy, issues with underage voting, inappropriate campaigning, and significant post-election violence—the worst in Nigeria’s history—that compromised the election’s integrity. The NDI also highlighted logistical issues, such as delays and postponements, which hampered the process.

Although international election observers’ warnings and reports were largely unheeded, they continued their involvement in the electoral process. The lead-up to the 2015 elections was particularly tense, marked by fiery campaigning, hate speech, and even threats. International election observers, together with committed Nigerians, ensured both incumbent Goodluck Jonathan and challenger Muhammadu Buhari pledged to fair conduct and acceptance of results. Despite the election’s postponement and heightened tension, the IRI acknowledged significant progress in areas such as sorting, counting, and professional conduct among officials. Nonetheless, issues like delayed materials distribution, lack of ballot secrecy, low turnout, limited female participation, and isolated violence remained challenges.

As in previous elections, the 2019 general elections witnessed considerable international monitoring. The African Union (AU) noted that, despite political intimidation and violence, the 2019 elections showed notable improvements, such as increased youth involvement due to the Not Too Young to Run Act, better preparation by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and heightened civil society engagement. However, the AU lamented Nigeria’s failure to implement electoral reforms and advised INEC to prevent last-minute postponements in future elections. Similarly, the EU Election Observation Mission acknowledged modest improvements but noted continuing challenges, such as barriers faced by internally displaced persons, delays in election materials despite the postponement, limited access to state media by smaller parties, and sporadic violence.

The IRI and NDI both criticised the 2019 elections for not meeting expectations. They highlighted issues such as voter intimidation, ballot snatching, and election-related violence, despite the heavy presence of security personnel. Additionally, low voter turnout, the lowest since 1999, and lack of internal democracy within major parties were significant concerns. These groups called for reforms in Nigeria’s electoral framework, conflict resolution, election security, internal party democracy, and voter education. In line with these observations, the Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (ISDA) criticised the electoral process for being marred by violence, lack of security, and threats from armed groups. The ISDA noted that insecurity prevented elections from taking place in some areas, with further concerns around the lack of electoral preparedness by INEC and security agencies.

In summary, international election observers have played a vital role in Nigerian elections since 1999, especially as Nigeria has transitioned through various democratic administrations. However, while international observers have maintained partnerships with INEC and other stakeholders, Nigeria’s elections have continued to be mired in controversy, casting doubt on the efficacy of these observations and the ongoing challenges facing Nigeria’s democratic development.

3. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Understanding the underlying reasons and motivations for international entities to monitor elections in Nigeria

Regarding election observation, there has been debate about the ideas of electoral observation and election monitoring in the body of existing literature. Election monitoring "is an inherent aspect of the election management system and has a function in the administration of the election," according to the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) Guidelines on Election Observation (2011:5). Election monitoring in Nigeria is limited to INEC and its legally approved workers. Momoh (2012), cited in Abebisi & Loremiyan (2013), expressed a similar opinion, stating that monitoring entails an optimistic role for the monitor, who has power as guaranteed by statutory books and laws; however, a monitor is not an observer because he is legally empowered to steer political parties in the right direction. Election observation, however, is defined as: The deliberate collection of information about an electoral process and the rendering of knowledgeable decisions regarding its conduct based on the information gathered by individuals who are not naturally authorised to intervene in the process and whose involvement in mediation or technical assistance activities should not be such that it jeopardises their primary observation responsibilities (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1999:3).

Similarly, election observation is defined as follows by the INEC Guidelines for Election Observation (2011:3): it is the process by which elections in a given nation or locality are checked against predetermined standards by an independent and unbiased body of observers with the goal of determining whether the elections adhere to acknowledged guarantees of democratic participation, pointing out problems and obstacles, and offering suggestions on how the procedure can be strengthened going forward. Election observation has been further simplified by the INEC Guidelines for Election Observation (2023), which now only include three main activities: observing election-related processes and activities to gather information; interpreting that information in light of election laws and fundamental democratic principles to

determine whether the elections meet legal and international credibility standards; and summarising the results of that analysis and the conclusions drawn from them in a document or report. Consequently, one way to address the election-related issues that have beset these nations is to incorporate both local and foreign observers in the electoral processes of developing democracies. The two primary categories of observers are also native and foreign. Domestic observers are those who are supported by civil society groups that are established, headquartered, or situated in a certain nation and whose operations are governed by the legal framework of that nation. The term "international observers" refers to those who are sent by or work for nonprofit groups headquartered outside of the nation holding elections, as well as intergovernmental agencies and international organisations (Adebisi & Loremikan, 2013).

The idea of foreign monitors observing elections is not also recent. In 1857, there was the first election with foreign observers. This occurred when a plebiscite in Moldavia and Wallachia was supervised by delegates of France, Britain, Prussia, Russia, Austria, and Turkey (Beigbeder, 1994, quoted in Brahm, 2004). In addition to other intervening variables, the Second World War opened up new opportunities for the election observation practice. In addition to the UN's "first generation" engagement in paying elections to guarantee their impartiality and freedom, the decolonisation process in Korea and Germany in the 1950s and 1960s expedited election monitoring by the UN (Brahm, 2004). With the end of the Cold War and growing international agreement on the value of democracy, "second generation" election observation missions expanded and became more common (Brahm, 2004). Election observation took on a solid form in the post-Cold War era, when several regions—Africa in particular and post-Communist Eastern Europe in general—engaged in multiparty elections for the first time (Hyde & Kelly, 2011; Hyde & Marinov, 2012; Straus & Taylor 2012). Assessing elections trajectories in Nigeria will revealed so many deficiencies that often create room for local and international elections observers to be involved in the nations electoral process. The credibility of general elections in Nigeria has always been seriously questioned, as is necessary to state. Elections have been held without the need for harsh competitions or contentious aftermaths since 1964. It is seldom disputed that corruption and irregularities are commonplace in Nigerian elections (Agbor, Okoro & Adams, 2011, Omilusi, 2013). The media and political party operatives were accustomed to witnessing and tracking elections prior to the presidential elections held on June 12, 1993. However, because certain media outlets had overt or covert support for one or more of the parties, their observations, along with those of party operatives, were obviously biased or unfair. Comparably, by providing reports that favoured their respective parties, the party agents also displayed prejudice (Adebisi & Loremikan, 2013). The first election observation in Nigeria took place on June 12, 1993, when observation groups showed up to watch the presidential contest. Even though the concept was entirely novel at the time, it has since flourished and integrated itself into the nation's election system, including local observation organisations (Banjo, 2004). The 3000 certified local and foreign observers said that election was the most equitable and best in Nigerian political history (Awopeju, 2011; Adebisi & Loremikan, 2013).

About 12,000 licensed election observers evaluated the 27 February 1999 presidential contest between Olusegun Obasanjo, the former president of Nigeria, and Olu Falae, the former minister of finance. Of them, about 2,000 international observers were selected from a variety of organisations. While the Commonwealth dispatched a 23-member Commonwealth Observer Group (COG), the European Union (EU) deployed 100 observers. Additionally, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dispatched nearly 10,000 local observers (Banjo, 2004). On the request of Ephraim Akpata, the previous chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and General Abdul Salam Abubakar, the former military Head of State, they were present to monitor the election (Ofuoku, 1999). Despite the calm atmosphere and noticeable presence of election monitors at the 1999 General Elections, observers observed instances of various forms of electoral corruption. There are several examples of election fraud, such as putting ballots into boxes and fabricating voter registrations. According to Jimmy Carter, observers in his group saw suspicious occurrences and obvious electoral fraud (Banjo, 2004; National Democratic Institute, 1999; Awopeju, 2011). As per Abubakar's (2015) report, the Jimmy Carter Centre for Democracy, a US-based organisation that watched the presidential election, decided that it was unfeasible for it to provide an accurate assessment of the election's outcome.

Observers who followed the 1993 presidential election were much outnumbered by those who watched the 1999 presidential election. For the 1999 election, the INEC licensed 12,000 domestic and international observers (Ofuoku, 2004 quoted in Awopeju, 2011). In a same spirit, more domestic and international observers turned out for the 2003 General Elections than for the ones before. For example, in the 2003 presidential and governorship elections, the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), a confederation of 170 human rights and civil society organisations, deployed 10,000 observers; the International Republican Institute (IRI) sent 42 monitors to cover 12 states; the National Democratic Institute (NDI) brought 50 observers from 12 countries in Africa, Europe, and North America; and the European Union Observers Mission (EU-EOM) sent 118 observers throughout Nigeria (Banjo, 2004). The 2003 General Elections fared poorly due to apparent election rigging, similar to what happened in the 1999 elections. According to

several post-election reports from international observers, corruption also plagued Nigeria's 2003 elections (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2007; Carl Le Van, Pitso & Alao, 2003; Awopeju, 2011). As a result, Nigeria was unable to pass Huntington's two-turnover test, which calls for two peaceful transfers of power. "It is dubious if the elections can be said to be representative of the desire of the people," stated Nigeria's TMG (HRW, 2004:11).

Numerous reports claim that, by any international measure, the 2007 General Elections were not "free and fair" (Collier and Vicente, 2010). This stance is in line with the evaluations of three significant institutional observation teams: Transition Monitoring Group, Human Rights Watch, and the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EO). The EU EO asserted that the 2007 elections revealed substantial evidence of fraud, despite the HRW reporting, among other things, that: rigging, violence, and intimidation were so widespread and on such blatant display that they made a mockery of the electoral process...where voting did take place, many voters stayed away from the polls (Collier & Vincente, 2010). The number of dead had topped 300 by the time voting concluded (Agbor et al, 2011: 96). As a result, the reports from observers of the 2007 General Elections were replete with dire predictions of election malfeasance. The elections that took place in April 2007 seem to be the worst in Nigeria's electoral history. The results of the 2011 general elections were favourable in the eyes of election observers for the first time in the history of the Fourth Republic of Nigeria. They claimed that there was no fraud or any unethical behaviour during the free and fair elections. Nevertheless, other analysts have disputed this assertion. Awowole-Browne (2011) and Agbor et al. (2011) speculate that in some state capitals where they focused their observation exercises, this would be feasible. Nonetheless, there were several instances of vote box stuffing, multiple thumb prints, agreements made by security and election officials, and wrongdoing by the major parties. A significant amount of election rigging occurred in numerous Nigerian cities and rural regions. "Beyond the veneer of the clean bill of health granted to the presidential election lurk the claims of enormous fraud, and irregularities perpetrated by Jonathan's PDP," as stated by Obineche (2011:41).

But the 2015 General Election produced a surprise and made political history in Nigeria. It was the first time the ruling party had been defeated by an opposition political party. Fortunately, the Election was adjudged the fairest and credible in the Fourth Republic since 1999. There were many contestants as it was the usual tradition. This time, Muhammadu Buhari contested under the platform of the All Progressives Congress (APC) which was a merger of four mega parties and a faction of the PDP. President Jonathan received 44.96% of the vote, while APC candidate Muhammadu Buhari received 53.96%. Out of the 31 seats up for grabs in the governorship race, the incumbent PDP won 12 and the APC won 19. The APC secured 60 Senate seats in the National Assembly, while the PDP secured 49 seats. APC gained 225 seats in the House of Representatives, PDP 125, and 10 seats were won by other parties (Sule, 2018). The Election was commended, praised and regarded as credible by analysts, voters, the electoral body itself, international observers and political parties and contestants altogether.

The 2019 Nigerian General Election maintained hopes for ongoing civilian government in the nation while strengthening democratic practices there. It was accompanied, like previous elections, by tension, perceived violence and threats, political bewilderment, and imbroglios. Ninety-three political parties were registered with the INEC, and seventy-three of them ran for the presidency. However, the campaign was mostly between Muhammadu Buhari's incumbent APC and Atiku Abubakar's main opposition PDP. According to the results, the PDP received 41.18% of the vote, the APC received 55.54%, and other parties received 3.28% of the total (Sule, 2019). Out of the 36 states that contested elections for governorships, the incumbent APC won 15 of them while the major opposition PDP won 14. As of the time this research was written, INEC had reported that the APC had won 65 seats in the National Assembly's Senate chamber, 43 seats for the PDP, and 1 seat for the YPP. Not one seat has been announced yet. While PDP has 115 members, APGA 9, PRP 2, ADC 3, ADP 1, AA 2, SDP 1, LP 1, and APM 1 have seats in the House of Representatives, APC has 217. During this study, eight (8) have not yet been given a definitive allocation. Overall, the results pointed to a resounding triumph for the ruling APC.

With the relative success achieved in the 2015 general elections, the Nigerian electorate were hopeful that a standard had been set, below which future elections should not fall. Thus, the goal of the 2019 elections was to build on the progress achieved in 2015. Rather than this, the 2019 general elections were observed by the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, which exposed significant irregularities that called into doubt the legitimacy of the process. Situation Room released a Threshold Document for a Credible Election¹ to assist establish a shared expectation for the elections. It outlined minimal standards for a credible election in 2019 and drew inspiration from regional and global frameworks. Non-partisan security agencies, voter register integrity, card reader malfunctions during elections, transparent results collation, effective and responsible election administration, political parties, no limitations on opposition campaigns, violence prevention, and electoral accountability are some of the topics covered by these requirements. These requirements were categorised under duties that the political parties, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the security services, and other governmental organisations had to perform. The Situation Room has concluded

that the 2019 general elections did not satisfy the necessary standards to be considered credible due to the failures seen throughout the monitoring process. This raises grave concerns about Nigeria's democracy and the country's ability to hold elections in the future.

In all, election monitoring by international entities has become a common practice in global politics, particularly in countries like Nigeria. Understanding the reasons and motivations behind this practice involves exploring political, social, and strategic factors that drive international interest in electoral processes. International election monitoring is often motivated by a desire to promote democracy and good governance. Organizations such as the United Nations, European Union, and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) advocate for free, fair, and transparent elections as a cornerstone of democratic societies. Monitoring helps ensure that elections are conducted in a manner that respects democratic principles, which can lead to stronger and more stable institutions. By ensuring electoral integrity, international observers can boost public confidence in the electoral process, encouraging broader political participation. Observers work to ensure that all eligible voters are able to exercise their rights to vote without intimidation or discrimination.

In countries with history of electoral violence, such as Nigeria, the presence of international observers can deter violence and provide early warnings of potential conflicts. International monitoring enhances the legitimacy and credibility of elections both domestically and internationally. International entities monitor elections in Nigeria for a multitude of reasons, ranging from promoting democracy and human rights to ensuring regional stability and securing strategic interests. This multifaceted approach reflects the complex interplay of ethical, political, and strategic considerations that underpin international election monitoring efforts.

Elections in Nigeria face significant challenges, including fraud, violence, institutional failures, and lack of transparency. These issues necessitate the involvement of international observers to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of the electoral process, support democratic processes, prevent violence, ensure human rights, and strengthen international relations. Through their impartial assessments and recommendations, international observers can play critical roles in improving Nigeria's electoral system and promoting democratic governance.

Summary of Findings

The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria marked a critical moment in the country's democratic journey, with election observers' missions playing pivotal roles in monitoring and assessing the electoral process. This study synthesizes and assesses the performance of election observer's missions during the 2023 presidential election. The study revealed that the performance of election observer's missions was significantly impacted by logistical challenges, including delays in deployment, inadequate transportation, and difficulties accessing remote areas. These challenges limited the scope and depth of observations, leading to gaps in coverage and potentially missing critical irregularities. Strategies to address logistical challenges involve enhanced planning, logistical support, and coordination with local authorities. It was also discovered that security threats and violence in conflict-prone regions posed serious challenges to observer's missions, limiting their ability to monitor the electoral process comprehensively. Political resistance and lack of cooperation from certain political actors was also discovered to have hindered the work of observer's missions, impacting their access to key electoral activities.

Some of the key issues observed, along with assessments from various international organizations includes the fact that the elections were marred by instances of electoral violence, including clashes between rival political factions, attacks on polling stations, and intimidation of voters. The European Union (EU) and African Union (AU) expressed concerns over the violence, emphasizing the need for security measures to protect voters and ensure a peaceful electoral process. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) called for restraint and dialogue among political actors to prevent further escalation of violence. Reports of voter intimidation, irregularities in voter registration, and allegations of vote rigging were widespread, raising questions about the fairness and integrity of the elections. The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), a Nigerian civil society organization, raised concerns about the lack of transparency in campaign financing, as well as the opacity surrounding the procurement and use of electoral technology. The EU and AU emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability in electoral processes, urging Nigerian authorities to enhance transparency in campaign financing and electoral operations.

Furthermore, the observers report highlighted existing ethnic and regional divides, with candidates often mobilizing support along ethnic or regional lines, leading to polarization and identity-based politics. ECOWAS and the AU including The UN raised critical questions about ethnic rhetoric from supporters of the ruling party towards the candidate of the Labour Party. Concerns were raised about restrictions on media freedom, including censorship, harassment of journalists, and the spread of disinformation through social media platform. International organizations such as the EU, AU, and UN emphasized the importance of media freedom and called on Nigerian authorities to respect press freedom

and ensure journalists' safety. Civil society groups and media watchdogs highlighted the need for media pluralism, fact-checking mechanisms, and digital literacy programmes to counter disinformation and promote informed public discourse.

Overall, the 2023 Nigerian presidential elections faced significant challenges related to electoral violence, irregularities, transparency, polarization, and media. The key findings of this study is that the role of election observers during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria highlight significant challenges related to logistics, security, political cooperation, impartiality, transparency, and technology. These findings underscore the importance of addressing these challenges to enhance the effectiveness, credibility, and impact of future election observer's missions in Nigeria.

4. CONCLUSION

Reports of international election observers groups, over time, have come to be a yardstick for measuring democratic consolidation – especially in the Global South. In the case of Nigeria, reports on the 2023 general elections appeared to have a common decimal – a disappointing performance by the electoral umpire. With a colossal damage having been done to the integrity of the electoral process in Nigeria, dwelling so much on that would be self-defeatist, to say the least. What should preoccupy the mind of every genuine democrat in Nigeria is how such colossal failures can be by-passed in the next round of general elections. All hands are required to be on deck in this instance. If the figures used to declare the presidential election result are anything to go by, one would conclude that there was very low turnout of voters during the election. Such a conclusion is questionable given the difficulty in ascertaining how the electoral umpire arrived at the figures declared. On the contrary, there was massive turnout of voters across Nigeria – despite obvious attempts to suppress and intimidate voters in order to disenfranchise them. This massive turnout and participation of voters need to be encouraged and sustained in 2027. To do this, emphasis should be laid on the fact that aberrations as witnessed in 2023 are not norms and, therefore, must not be allowed to become enshrined.

On the positive side, the reports serve as catalyst for accountability and reform efforts. They highlight areas of concern such as transparency, electoral violence, and media freedom, prompting national authorities to take corrective measures, conduct investigations, and implement reforms to address these issues. In addition, Civil society organizations, media watchdogs, and advocacy groups often use these reports to advocate for electoral reforms, promote transparency, and hold political leaders accountable. The findings serve as valuable tools for mobilizing public awareness and engagement in democratic processes.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the conclusion drawn from the study, addressing these challenges related to logistics, security, political cooperation, impartiality, transparency, and media are essential to enhance the effectiveness, credibility, and impact of future election observers missions in Nigeria. Collaborative efforts involving international organizations, local authorities, civil society groups, and media watchdogs are crucial for improving the electoral process and upholding democratic principles. Specifically, however the following recommendations are outlined:

- 1. Enhance Logistical Support:** Government should provide adequate resources and support for timely deployment of election observers missions. Improve transportation infrastructure and arrangements to ensure access to remote areas.
- 2. Strengthen Security Measures:** Government should implement robust security measures to protect observers, voters, and electoral facilities, especially in conflict-prone regions. Foster dialogue among political actors to prevent violence and ensure a peaceful electoral environment.
- 3. Promote Political Cooperation:** Encourage cooperation and transparency among political parties, electoral authorities, and observer's missions to facilitate unhindered observation of key electoral activities.
- 4. Improve Transparency and Accountability:** Enhance transparency in campaign financing, electoral operations, and the use of technology. Strengthen oversight mechanisms to ensure accountability and integrity in the electoral process.
- 5. Mitigate Ethnic and Regional Divides:** Promote inclusive politics and discourage identity-based mobilization by candidates. Foster national unity and cohesion through initiatives that bridge ethnic and regional divides.
- 6. Protect Media Freedom:** Safeguard media freedom and ensure the safety of journalists covering elections. This can be done through Implementation of measures to counter censorship, harassment, and disinformation spread through media platforms.
- 7. Empower Civil Society and Media Watchdogs:** Support civil society organizations and media watchdogs in their role as independent monitors of the electoral processes. Promote media pluralism, facts-checking mechanisms, and digital literacy programmes to counter disinformation which will help checkmate the spread of hate speeches and fake news.

8. Enhance Observers Impartiality: Ensure observers missions to maintain impartiality and independence from political influence. This should be done by Implementing clear guidelines and standards for observers conduct and reporting.

9. Increase Stakeholder Engagement: Foster dialogues and collaborations among international organizations, local authorities, political parties, civil society, and media to address electoral challenges collectively. Encourage constructive engagements and cooperation among all stakeholders to promote democratic values and principles will go a long way in strengthening the democratic space

10. Build Capacity for Electoral Technology: Invest in training and capacity-building for electoral officials and observers on the use of electoral technology. This can be enhanced further by ensuring transparency and accountability in the procurement, deployment, and use of electoral technology tools.

Implementing these recommendations requires concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including government institutions, electoral bodies, political parties, civil society organizations, media entities, and international partners. By addressing these key areas, Nigeria can improve the effectiveness, credibility, and impact of future election observers missions and strengthen its democratic processes.

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