THE ANALYSIS OF THE INCIDENTS OF ELECTORAL MALPRACTICES IN THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN OYO STATE

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ABSTRACT
Conducted amidst notable electoral reforms and technological advancements especially the Electoral Act 2022 and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State, Nigeria, though improved, was tainted by rampant electoral frauds involving vote buying, ballot box theft, voter intimidation, and technological malfunctions. This paper investigates the nature and forms of these malpractices, evaluates how well electoral reforms serve to regulate them, and studies their influence on voter confidence, participation, and the legal validity and acceptability of the election result. Using Institutional Theory, the paper looks at how institutional shortcomings drove ongoing electoral fraud by means of a qualitative research approach based on secondary sources including reports, media analysis, and academic publications. The findings indicate that while legal and technological innovations were commendable, their implementation was affected by systemic inefficiencies, inadequate training, and poor enforcement strategies. The study concludes with recommendations intended to enhance electoral integrity, institutional responsibility, and democratic government in Nigeria.

Introduction

Persistent challenges have from time past characterised Nigeria's electoral system, including electoral frauds such vote buying, ballot box theft, and result tampering. Often, these problems have called into question the legitimacy of elections and damaged people's confidence in the democratic system. The 2023 presidential election in Oyo State was no exception, as reports of irregularities and malpractices surfaced during and after the electoral process.

Oyo State, located in the southwestern region of Nigeria, has a diverse political landscape with

a history of competitive elections. In the 2019 general elections, the state witnessed a significant shift in political power, with the People's Democratic Party (PDP) gaining prominence. However, the 2023 presidential election saw the All Progressives Congress (APC) reclaiming dominance, as its candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, secured victory in the state. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Tinubu garnered 449,884 votes, defeating his closest rivals, Atiku Abubakar of the PDP and Peter Obi of the Labour Party, who received 182,977 and 99,110 votes respectively (Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), 2023).

Various reports indicated cases of electoral fraud during the election despite the official results. For instance, in Ibadan Southeast Local Government Area, there were claims of overvoting in certain polling units and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was said not to have been used in some locations. Such events called into question the integrity of the electoral process and the efficacy of technological interventions such as BVAS in reducing electoral fraud (Vanguard News. 2024).

During the 2023 elections in Oyo State, the spread of false election results also presented notable difficulties. Warning people not to share unofficial election results on social media, the Oyo State Police Command underlined that such behaviour could provoke violence and compromise public order. This emphasises the need for effective communication tools to offset misleading stories and the part misinformation plays in aggravating electoral conflicts (Daily Post Nigeria. 2023).

INEC took various steps meant to improve the legitimacy of the electoral system in reaction to these difficulties. The commission increased the number of polling units in Oyo State to 6,390 and registered an additional 340,938 voters to improve voter access and reduce overcrowding. Despite these efforts, the reported irregularities underscore the persistent issues affecting Nigeria's electoral system and the need for comprehensive reforms to address them (The Nation Newspaper, 2022).

The paper focused on the following objectives; to find and examine the particular types of electoral fraud that took place during the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State. To investigate how well electoral reforms and technological innovations—e.g., BVAS—help to reduce electoral malpractices in Oyo State. And to evaluate how electoral malpractices influence voter confidence, participation, and the general legitimacy of the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State.

Statement of the Problem

Malpractice in elections continues to be a major problem in Nigeria's democratic process, compromising the integrity of elections and weakening public confidence in democratic institutions. Reports of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and the circulation of false election results during the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State illustrated these problems. For example, the Oyo State Police Command cautioned people against spreading unverified election results on social media, stressing the possibility of violence and disturbance of public order caused by false information (Pulse Nigeria, 2023).

Although national-level studies have shown electoral anomalies all around Nigeria during the 2023 elections (Mene, 2024), there is an obvious gap in the literature on localised studies concentrating particularly on Oyo State. A thorough knowledge of the particular socio-political dynamics and elements influencing electoral malpractices in the state is hampered by this lack of localised research. Moreover, current studies frequently ignore the state-level electoral fraud mitigation potential of technological interventions like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS).

Filling this gap is essential for creating focused plans to fight electoral malpractices in Oyo State. Focussing on the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State, this paper offers insightful analysis of the specific problems encountered throughout the electoral process and guide the creation of localised interventions to improve the integrity of next elections.

Conceptual Clarification

Deliberate acts that skew the electoral process define electoral malpractice, hence compromising its fairness and integrity. Among these include voter intimidation, ballot box snatching, result fabrication, result falsification, and vote-buying. Such malpractices undermine public confidence in democratic institutions and impede the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria (Wali, 2024).

Technological innovations like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) were introduced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to improve election integrity. The efficacy of these technologies in reducing electoral fraud, however, has been hampered by issues including technical glitches and inadequate competence among electoral officials (Nachanuya & Joseph, 2024).

Empirical studies have highlighted the prevalence and impact of electoral malpractices in Nigeria: Mene (2024) conducted a quantitative study across six Nigerian states, revealing that political influence, security challenges, media bias, and perceived corruption significantly contributed to electoral irregularities during the 2023 general elections. The study emphasized the pertinence of stringent regulatory frameworks to enhance electoral transparency.

Wali (2024) likewise looked at Nigeria's election-related legal frameworks, finding ongoing problems including vote-buying, voter intimidation, and judicial inefficiencies eroding electoral integrity. The report recommended improving judicial procedures and increasing INEC's operational capability.

Ejiofor et al. (2024) examined the reasons and consequences of electoral fraud in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023. Major causes of electoral fraud, according to the report, were poverty, greed, ignorance, corruption, and lack of patriotism. It also underlined the detrimental effects of such malpractices on Nigeria's growth and suggested actions like giving INEC complete autonomy and setting up electoral mobile courts for quick prosecution of violators.

Several theoretical frameworks provide insights into the phenomenon of electoral malpractices in Nigeria: Utilitarianism Theory posits that actions are right if they promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Applying this to electoral practices, it suggests that electoral actors should prioritize the collective well-being over personal gains. The commonness of election malpractices, therefore, points to a departure from utilitarian values since actions motivated by personal or political objectives can cause great societal damage (Ejiofor et al., 2024).

From the Marxist Theory of the State viewpoint, the ruling class uses state institutions to preserve its power, hence using the state as a tool of class dominance. In the Nigerian setting, this theory clarifies how political elites use electoral procedures, sometimes illegally, to sustain their power (Ovuoh & Okafor, 2021).

Radical Political Economy Framework**:** Proposed by scholars like Claude Ake, this framework suggests that the high value placed on political office in Nigeria lead to intense competition and, consequently, electoral malpractices. The state's inability to mediate political conflicts due to internal factionalism exacerbates this issue, turning elections into zero-sum games where the winner takes all (Ikpe, 2015).

The literature reveals that electoral malpractices in Nigeria are driven by a combination of socio-economic factors, institutional weaknesses, and the high premium placed on political power. While technological and legal reforms have been introduced to address these challenges, their effectiveness is limited by systemic issues such as corruption, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and political interference. A comprehensive approach that includes strengthening institutions, enhancing civic education, and promoting a culture of accountability is essential to mitigate electoral malpractices and foster democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Methodology

It is a qualitative study based on secondary data. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena, such as electoral misconduct, in their natural contexts (Creswell, 2014). By focusing on in-depth analysis, this approach allows for a richer understanding of the underlying factors, stakeholders' perceptions, and institutional weaknesses that contributed to electoral irregularities in the state.

A descriptive and interpretive research design is employed to provide a detailed account of the types, causes, and implications of electoral malpractices observed during the 2023 presidential election. This design facilitates the exploration of patterns in political behaviour and institutional responses, particularly the effectiveness of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and other electoral reforms implemented by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data. These include: Official election reports from INEC. Academic journal articles and peer-reviewed publications. Election observer reports (e.g., European Union Election Observation Mission, YIAGA Africa). News reports from credible media outlets such as *The Guardian Nigeria*, *Vanguard*, and *Premium Times*, and Legal documents and press statements from relevant government agencies.

Documents were selected based on relevance, credibility, and publication date, with a focus on materials produced between 2022 and 2024. The data was analysed using thematic content analysis**,** which involves identifying, coding, and interpreting patterns and themes related to electoral malpractice (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method enables the extraction of insights about systemic issues, electoral behaviours, and institutional challenges.

Theoretical Framework

Particularly for the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State, Institutional Theory offers a useful tool for examining the ongoing electoral malpractices in Nigeria. At its heart, Institutional Theory argues that formal rules, norms, and procedures establish institutions that shape the behaviour of actors within a system and affect results by means of established practices and expectations (Scott, 2014).

In the context of Nigeria, institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the judiciary, and security agencies are pivotal in shaping the electoral landscape. These institutions are tasked with ensuring free, fair, and credible elections. However, Institutional Theory highlights that when institutional rules are weak, inconsistently applied, or influenced by political interests, they can foster environments conducive to malpractice (North, 1990).

Despite the introduction of reforms—such as the Electoral Act 2022 and the deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS)—institutional weaknesses persist. Reports from the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State documented instances of vote-buying, delays in BVAS deployment, and allegations of partiality by electoral officials (YIAGA Africa, 2023). These lapses reflect not just technological or procedural failures, but a deeper institutional problem where formal rules are undermined by informal practices and political manipulation.

Institutional theory also introduces the concept of isomorphism, which refers to the tendency of institutions to conform to norms and behaviours prevalent in their environment to gain legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In the Nigerian context, political actors often conform to informal rules such as bribery or coercion—to remain competitive in elections, especially when such behaviours are normalized and go unpunished. This creates a cycle where electoral malpractice becomes institutionalized and self-reinforcing.

The theory further explains how institutional voids—the absence or weakness of mechanisms that ensure compliance and accountability—allow for malpractices to flourish. In Oyo State, the failure to swiftly prosecute electoral offenders and enforce legal consequences contributes to a culture of impunity. This institutional gap undermines democratic norms and reduces public trust in the electoral process (Wali, 2024).

Applying institutional theory underscores that technical reforms alone are insufficient. There must be strengthening of institutional capacity, autonomy, and integrity. For example:

i. INEC must not only have the legal authority but also the operational independence to enforce electoral laws.

ii. Electoral tribunals must be insulated and protected from political influence to adjudicate disputes fairly.

iii. Civic institutions should be empowered to monitor elections and demand accountability.

By reinforcing institutional norms and ensuring consistent application of rules, it is possible to disrupt the cycle of malpractice and promote a culture of democratic integrity.

Forms of electoral malpractices that occurred during the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State

Several kinds of electoral misconduct that challenged the integrity of the electoral process plagued the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State, Nigeria. These malpractices not only

affected the fairness of the election but also damaged public confidence in democratic institutions.

1. Ballot Box Snatching and Electoral Violence

Ballot box snatching was a significant issue during the election. In Ogbomosho South Local Government Area, heavily armed thugs invaded polling units, snatching already thumb-printed ballot papers and disrupting the voting process. Former Governor Senator Rashidi Ladoja reported similar incidents in areas such as Iwo Road, Aperin, and Oja Igbo, attributing these occurrences to inadequate security presence (Ripples Nigeria. 2023, March 20).

The Oyo State Police Command confirmed the arrest of 18 individuals involved in electoral offences, including ballot box snatching and related violence. These arrests were accompanied by the recovery of seven firearms and 30 live cartridges, indicating the severity of the electoral violence (Blueprint Newspapers. 2023, March 15).

2. Vote Buying and Voter Inducement

Vote buying was another prevalent malpractice during the election. Although specific incidents in Oyo State were not detailed in the available reports, the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) arrested individuals in various states for vote buying, highlighting the widespread nature of this issue (Daily Post Nigeria.2023, February 26).

The prevalence of vote buying undermines the democratic process by influencing voters' choices through financial incentives, thereby compromising the principle of free and fair elections.

3. Dissemination of Fake Election Results

The circulation of fake election results on social media platforms posed a significant challenge during the election. The Oyo State Police Command warned residents against spreading unverified results, noting that such actions led to tensions and attempted attacks on polling units. Law enforcement agencies had to intervene to prevent potential violence resulting from the dissemination of false information (Daily Post Nigeria. 2023, February 25).

The 2023 presidential election in Oyo State was significantly affected by electoral malpractices, including ballot box snatching, vote buying, and the spread of fake election results. These problems underline the necessity of thorough electoral reforms, improved security policies, and greater public knowledge to guarantee the integrity of coming elections.

The effectiveness of electoral reforms and technological innovations in curbing electoral malpractices in Oyo State

Primarily because of the use of technology and legislative reforms meant to improve the integrity of the electoral process, the 2023 presidential election was a notable turning point in Nigeria's electoral past. Key to these initiatives were the implementation of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the passage of the Electoral Act 2022. This study looks at how well these policies reduce electoral fraud in the state.

1. Implementation of BVAS in Oyo State

Prior to the general elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conducted mock accreditation exercises across Oyo State to assess the functionality of the BVAS devices. The Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC), Dr. Adeniran Tella, affirmed the success of these exercises, describing BVAS as a "game changer" for the upcoming elections. The devices were lauded for their efficiency in authenticating and verifying voters, as well as uploading accreditation data, thereby enhancing transparency and reducing the likelihood of electoral fraud (Voice of Nigeria, 2023).

2. Impact of the Electoral Act 2022

The Electoral Act 2022 introduced several provisions aimed at strengthening the electoral process. Notably, it mandated the use of electronic devices, such as BVAS, for voter accreditation and result transmission. Additionally, the Act provided clearer definitions for electoral offenses, including overvoting, and stipulated that any polling unit where the number of votes cast exceeds the number of accredited voters would have its results cancelled. These provisions were instrumental in promoting accountability and deterring malpractice (S.P.A. Ajibade & Co, 2022).

3. Challenges and Limitations

Despite the advancements, the deployment of BVAS was not without challenges. Reports indicated instances of device malfunctioning, including failures to start and battery issues, which disrupted the accreditation process in some polling units. Furthermore, discrepancies between the voter register in the BVAS and the printed voter register were observed, leading to confusion and delays (The Cable, 2023).

Moreover, the failure of INEC's Result Viewing Portal (IReV) to function optimally on election day raised concerns about the transparency of the result collation process. The Commonwealth Observer Group noted that the lack of adequate testing and limited training of polling staff contributed to these technological shortcomings, thereby affecting the overall credibility of the elections (Biometric Update, 2024).

4. Incidences of Electoral Malpractices

Despite the technological and legislative reforms, traditional forms of electoral malpractice persisted. Instances of vote buying were reported, with observers noting the distribution of money and food items to influence voters' choices. Additionally, there were cases of ballot box snatching and voter intimidation, particularly in areas with limited security presence. These incidents underscored the need for comprehensive strategies that address both technological and human factors in the electoral process (Ripples Nigeria, 2023).

Indeed**,** the introduction of BVAS and the Electoral Act 2022 represented significant strides toward enhancing the integrity of Nigeria's electoral process. In Oyo State, these measures contributed to improved voter accreditation and a reduction in certain forms of electoral fraud. However, the challenges encountered, including technological malfunctions and persistent traditional malpractices, highlight the need for continuous improvements. Future efforts should focus on comprehensive training for electoral staff, robust testing of technological tools, and stringent enforcement of electoral laws to ensure free, fair, and credible elections.

The impact of electoral malpractices on voter trust, participation, and the overall legitimacy of the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State.

The 2023 presidential election in Oyo State, Nigeria, was marred by various electoral malpractices that significantly impacted voter trust, participation, and the overall legitimacy of the electoral process. These malpractices compromised the democratic values and called into question the reliability of the electoral system.

Impact on Voter Trust

Electoral malpractices eroded public confidence in the electoral process. The failure of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to transmit election results electronically in real-time, as promised, led to widespread scepticism about the transparency and fairness of the election. This breach of trust was highlighted by Laolu Akande, spokesperson for former Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, who stated that INEC's actions broke Nigerians' trust during the presidential poll (Pulse Nigeria. 2023, February 27).

Furthermore, the European Union (EU) observers reported that the shortcomings in law and electoral administration hindered the conduct of well-run and inclusive elections, damaging trust in INEC (Al Jazeera. 2023, June 29).

Impact on Voter Participation

The erosion of trust due to electoral malpractices contributed to a significant decline in voter turnout. Out of the total 93.47 million registered voters, only 24.9 million participated in the 2023 presidential and National Assembly elections, representing a 26.72% turnout—the lowest since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 (This Day Live. 2024, August 17).

In Oyo State, incidents of vote-buying, voter intimidation, and logistical challenges further discouraged voter participation. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) reported attempts to intimidate voters and INEC officials by party supporters and thugs, leading to disruptions in the voting process.

Impact on Electoral Legitimacy

These malpractices' cumulative impact raises questions about the validity of the presidential election in 2023. Citing widespread violence, rigging, and irregularities, opposition parties and civil society groups condemned the electoral procedure. The European Union observer mission said that operational failures and lack of

transparency undermined confidence in the process and called into question the right to vote. These problems resulted in legal disputes and demands for electoral reforms to restore the integrity of Nigeria's democratic system.

The 2023 presidential election in Oyo State highlighted significant challenges in Nigeria's electoral system. Electoral malpractices undermined voter trust, reduced participation, and questioned the legitimacy of the election outcomes. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms, including strengthening electoral laws, enhancing transparency, and ensuring accountability to rebuild public confidence in the democratic process.

Conclusion

The 2023 presidential election in Oyo State, though conducted under the umbrella of significant reforms and technological innovations such as the Electoral Act 2022 and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), was still fraught with notable electoral malpractices. These included ballot box snatching, vote buying, voter intimidation, and technological failures. While the introduction of BVAS enhanced voter accreditation and was intended to reduce fraud, the inability of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to fully deploy and manage this technology contributed to operational inefficiencies and loss of public trust.

The persistent occurrence of electoral misconduct undermined the principles of free and fair elections, significantly eroding voter trust, decreasing voter turnout, and compromising the legitimacy of the electoral outcome. Despite advancements in legal and technical frameworks, the lived experience of voters and observers indicated that substantial gaps remain in the implementation and enforcement of electoral reforms.

Recommendations

Strengthening INEC Capacity and Independence: There is a pressing need to enhance the operational and technical capacity of INEC. This includes regular training for electoral officials, efficient logistics management, and timely deployment of sensitive materials. Moreover, the independence of the commission should be reinforced to reduce political interference and ensure impartiality.

Improving Technological Infrastructure and Testing: While BVAS and IReV are promising tools, their reliability must be ensured through rigorous pre-election testing, continuous improvements, and provision of backup systems. Clear guidelines on the use and troubleshooting of these technologies should be established and widely disseminated.

Effective Prosecution of Electoral Offenders: The culture of impunity surrounding electoral offences must be broken. INEC, in collaboration with law enforcement agencies, should ensure the arrest, prosecution, and punishment of individuals involved in vote buying, ballot snatching, and violence to deter future misconduct.

Civic Education and Voter Sensitization: There should be sustained efforts to educate the electorate on their rights and the implications of electoral fraud. Civil society organizations and media houses should collaborate with the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to carry out voter sensitization campaigns, especially in rural and semi-urban communities.

Security Sector Reform and Electoral Protection: Electoral security must be prioritized. Security agencies should be better trained in non-partisan election monitoring and rapid response to incidents of violence and intimidation. Deployment should be strategic and based on intelligence reports about flashpoints.

Strengthening Legal and Institutional Frameworks: Existing legal frameworks should be reviewed to address new dimensions of electoral malpractice. Additionally, the Electoral Act should be strictly implemented, and loopholes that allow manipulation must be closed through legislative amendments.

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