THE ROLE OF EU AND FOREIGN OBSERVERS IN NIGERIA'S ELECTIONS, 1999-2019

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ABSTRACT

Background: Since Nigeria transitioned from military rule in 1999, the involvement of the European Union (EU) and other foreign observers has become integral to the country's electoral processes, with persistent challenges such as electoral malpractice and weak institutional capacity necessitating external scrutiny to enhance credibility.

Objective: The paper investigates the evolving role, contributions, and limitations of EU and foreign observer missions in Nigeria's elections between 1999 and 2019.

Methods: Adopting a qualitative approach, the paper draws on mission reports, academic literature, and policy analyses to trace the historical development and impact of foreign observers, employing content analysis and insights from scholarly and stakeholder perspectives.

Results: The findings reveal that foreign observers have enhanced transparency, deterred overt fraud, and supported capacity-building initiatives, most notably through recommendations that led to programmes such as the EU-SDGN. However, the paper also identifies notable limitations, including limited observer coverage, an overemphasis on election day, and the lack of enforcement mechanisms to ensure the implementation of recommendations.

Conclusion: While foreign observer missions have contributed positively to Nigeria's democratic trajectory, systemic challenges continue to undermine the sustainability of these reforms.

Key Contributions to Knowledge: The paper extend scholarship by redefining observers as reform catalysts, highlighting their role in institutional capacity-building, a dimension underexplored in prior research.

Recommendations: The paper recommends deeper collaboration between foreign and domestic actors, broader coverage beyond election day, and the development of stronger mechanisms for implementing observer recommendations to achieve sustainable democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 after a prolonged period of military dictatorship marked a pivotal turning point in the nation's political evolution and set the stage for renewed international engagement in its democratisation process. Since then, every cycle of general elections has attracted the attention and active participation of foreign observer missions, with the European Union (EU), African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Commonwealth, the United Nations, and several non-governmental organisations such as the Carter Centre and the National Democratic Institute serving as critical players in the country's electoral landscape (Magnes). Within the broad scholarship on democratic consolidation and electoral integrity in Africa, there is an established consensus that foreign observers contribute to enhancing the legitimacy of electoral processes, acting as external guarantors of transparency, fairness, and public confidence (Carothers; Kelley). Scholars such as Judith Kelley and Thomas Carothers argue that international election observation serves not only as a deterrent to overt electoral fraud but also as a catalyst for institutional reforms, particularly in fragile democracies where domestic institutions may lack autonomy or capacity to resist manipulation.

Despite the wealth of literature on election observation in Africa, gaps persist, particularly in the nuanced understanding of how foreign observer missions impact the evolution of electoral governance in a context as complex and diverse as Nigeria's. While several studies have documented the presence and periodic interventions of international observers (Bishop and Hoeffler; Magnes), there remains a limited in-depth analysis of their long-term contributions beyond immediate election-day assessments. Existing works tend to focus on episodic reporting of electoral irregularities, observer statements, and the short-term aftermath of high-profile elections, such as the 2007 or 2015 general elections, which were marked by either egregious malpractice or notable improvements. However, less attention has been given to the cumulative and strategic influence of observer recommendations in shaping the architecture of Nigeria's electoral institutions, and the ways these interventions interact with local actors, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, and civil society organisations, over multiple election cycles.

Moreover, extant literature tends to emphasise the normative role of foreign observers as arbiters of international standards, without adequately interrogating the practical challenges and limitations these missions face in Nigeria's unique context. These challenges include the logistical difficulties of covering a vast and populous country, the political sensitivities around sovereignty and external influence, the variability in the adoption of observer recommendations, and the persistent gap between observed practice and sustainable reform. For instance, while works by Geisler (2006) and Omotola (2010) acknowledge the value of observer missions in deterring large-scale fraud, they also note the phenomenon of "electoral tourism" and the sometimes-ceremonial nature of international monitoring in the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms.

This paper seeks to extend the existing scholarship by moving beyond episodic and event-focused analysis to provide a longitudinal assessment of the role of the EU and other foreign observers in Nigeria's elections from 1999 to 2019. It interrogates not only the visible contributions of these missions, such as increased transparency and institutional capacity-building, but also the enduring challenges, including limited personnel, overemphasis on election-day activities, and the lack of enforcement power. By drawing on a wide array of sources, including mission reports, academic analyses, policy documents, and stakeholder perspectives, the paper adopts a critical approach to both celebrate and problematise the contributions of foreign observers. The originality of the paper lies in its focus on the intersection between external recommendations and domestic reform, its engagement with underexplored institutional and structural dynamics, and its effort to position foreign observation as a process with both transformative potential and inherent constraints.

In so doing, this paper fills an important gap in the literature by providing a holistic and historically grounded account of how foreign observers, particularly the EU, have shaped and continue to shape the evolving landscape of electoral governance in Nigeria. Ultimately, the paper argues that while foreign observer missions have contributed meaningfully to Nigeria's democratic journey, the persistent gap between observation and actionable, sustainable reform underscores the need for a more integrated, long-term approach to international electoral support.

Conceptual Clarification

Election Observation: Election observation is commonly viewed as the systematic monitoring of electoral processes to ensure adherence to democratic standards, encompassing principles of transparency, fairness, and inclusivity (Kelley 66). Traditionally, foreign observers are regarded as neutral external actors who assess the integrity of electoral processes, deter electoral malpractices, and provide recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic institutions (Moss and Smith). In the Nigerian context, the role of foreign observers is formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which grants them access to all stages of the electoral process, from voter registration to the collation and announcement of results (Daxecker and Schneider 73).

However, this paper reconceptualises election observation as a far more dynamic and multifaceted process. It argues that observation extends beyond mere monitoring to include active capacity-building, advocacy, and support for institutional reforms. For instance, the EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN) programme demonstrates how observation missions increasingly support not only INEC but also political parties, the media, and civil society organisations. This expanded perspective challenges the conventional understanding of observers as passive monitors and positions them instead as active contributors to democratic governance. By advancing this conceptual shift, the study introduces the idea of observers as agents of institutional reform, an important enrichment of both the theoretical and practical understanding of their role in Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research method, relying primarily on secondary data sources to examine the role of foreign observers in Nigeria's elections from 1999 to 2019. Key data were collected from European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) final reports, alongside peer-reviewed academic literature and credible media coverage. A historical analysis was conducted to trace the evolution of observer missions, systematically examining their activities, key findings, and issued recommendations over successive election periods.

Foreign Observers In Nigerian Elections Since 1999

i. The 1999 Elections: A Democratic Dawn

Nigeria's 1999 elections, ushering in the Fourth Republic after decades of military rule, were a pivotal moment, drawing international scrutiny due to the country's history of electoral flaws and the need for global legitimacy (Omotola 534). The presidential contest between Olusegun Obasanjo of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Olu Falae of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and All Peoples Party (APP) saw Obasanjo secure 62.78% of votes, marking a transitional milestone (Omotola 534). Foreign observers, including the Carter Centre and National Democratic Institute (NDI), faced significant challenges, such as poor communication infrastructure, Nigeria's vast landmass, and large population, which hindered comprehensive monitoring (Kelley 66). Despite these obstacles, observers noted the enthusiasm of voters, the dedication of INEC, and the efforts of local groups like the Transition Monitoring Group, signalling hope for electoral transparency. However, irregularities were rampant. Carter Centre officials, including President Jimmy Carter, witnessed ballot-box stuffing, with neatly stacked ballots in numerical order indicating manipulation (Kelley 66). In the South-South zone, voter turnout was often below 10% at polling stations, yet collation reported 100% turnout, typically favouring one party (Bland and Moore 351). These discrepancies highlighted systemic issues in Nigeria's electoral process. The Carter Centre and NDI issued a joint statement recommending stricter enforcement of electoral laws to curb fraud and foster local and international

confidence in Nigeria's nascent democracy (Kelley 96). This call for reform underscored the critical role of observers in identifying flaws and advocating for improvements, though their impact was limited by logistical constraints.

ii. The 2003 Elections: Consolidation and Controversy

The 2003 elections were a landmark as the first under civilian rule in over two decades, with INEC registering 30 political parties, expanding political participation (Osumah and Aghemelo 99). However, pre-election controversies over campaign funding marred the process. President Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku raised over N5.5 billion, violating the 1999 Constitution and the Companies and Allied Matters Act, prompting public outcry over regressive political financing practices (Adetula 39). The EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) reported grave irregularities in states like Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers, including vote-rigging, ballot-box stuffing, and lack of transparency in collation (European Union, 2003). Max Van den Berg, EU mission head, expressed dismay at the poor performance of electoral stakeholders, which undermined the election's credibility (Ogbedi 78). These findings highlighted the challenge of conducting free and fair elections in a politically charged environment, where systemic issues like unregulated campaign financing and weak collation processes persisted. Observers noted that while their presence deterred some overt fraud, the scale of irregularities suggested that observation alone could not address deep-rooted structural deficiencies, a theme that would recur in subsequent elections.

iii. The 2007 Elections: Crisis of Credibility

The 2007 elections were widely regarded as Nigeria's worst, with winner Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua admitting the process lacked credibility (Nwankwo 189). EU observers documented extensive vote-rigging, ballot-box stuffing, and misuse of state resources by incumbents, falling far below international standards (Ogbedi 89). Logistical failures compounded the issues, notably INEC's adoption of an electronic voter registration system despite unreliable power supply, leading to widespread voter disenfranchisement (Herskovits 115). Inadequate training of electoral officials and compromised staff further eroded trust, with INEC under Prof. Maurice Iwu criticised for partiality in states like Edo, Ondo, and Delta (Omotola 44). EU EOM reports highlighted disruptions in counting and collation, including the use of firearms to intimidate opposition representatives, with a deputy governor implicated in one incident (European Union, 2007). Observers recommended clear guidelines for voting, counting, and collation to restore integrity, but their lack of enforcement power limited their impact (Kelley 96). This election exposed the severe limitations of foreign observation in addressing systemic electoral flaws, particularly when institutional weaknesses and political interference were deeply entrenched.

iv. The 2011 Elections: Progress and Persistent Flaws

The 2011 elections marked a turning point under INEC's new chairman, Attahiru Jega, whose reputation for integrity bolstered preparations (Bekoe 19). Early funding and the use of National Youth Service Corps members as polling staff enhanced efficiency, earning praise from EU and NDI observers for improved legal frameworks and stakeholder engagement (Akhaine 441). The elections were a significant improvement over previous polls, reflecting Nigeria's growing democratic capacity. However, collation remained a weak link, with EU observers reporting implausible results in Rivers State, such as zero invalid ballots in Omuma LGA and a 98% turnout in Emohua LGA, suggesting manipulation (Geisler 573). While no centralised fraud was evident, these irregularities underscored ongoing challenges in ensuring transparency (European Union, 2011). Observers recommended strengthening voter education, legal frameworks, and collation processes, emphasising the need for sustained reforms to consolidate democratic gains (Akhaine 441). The 2011 elections highlighted the dual role of observers in acknowledging progress while identifying areas for improvement.

v. The 2015 Elections: Historic Power Alternation

The 2015 elections were contentious, with debates over President Goodluck Jonathan's eligibility due to constitutional term limits, resolved by a court ruling allowing his candidacy (Owen and Usman 455). Opposition intensified amid Boko Haram violence, the formation of the All Progressives Congress (APC), and defections from the PDP. INEC's voter registration and Permanent Voters Card (PVC) distribution faced

logistical challenges, with only 76% of voters collecting PVCs by February, prompting a six-week postponement (European Union, 2015). The PDP's excessive spending violated financing regulations, while the APC faced alleged military harassment, raising concerns about electoral fairness (Owen and Usman 455). Muhammadu Buhari (APC) won with 53.96% of votes, marking Nigeria's first national power alternation, with Jonathan's concession lauded as a democratic milestone (European Union, 2015). EU observers criticised collation weaknesses, with 14 of 43 centres rated negatively due to missing tamper-proof envelopes and inconsistent results checking (European Union, 2015). Implausible results in Rivers State and inflated turnout in South-South states suggested manipulation, though no centralised fraud was found (Geisler 573). Petitions dropped to 611 from 732 in 2011, but ethno-religious voting patterns persisted, highlighting the electorate's polarised orientation (Owen and Usman 455).

vi. The 2019 Elections: Recurring Challenges

The 2019 elections were disrupted by a postponement due to logistical constraints, with violence, vote-buying, and late polling unit openings undermining credibility (Sule et al. 67). INEC's efforts to enhance transparency through stakeholder dialogue were commended, but distrust in its independence persisted (European Union, 2019). EU observers noted improvements in voting procedures but reported intimidation of INEC officials in 20 states and opaque collation processes, with significant flaws in results transparency (European Union, 2019). While no systematic manipulation was detected, minor irregularities reflected a recurring pattern of electoral flaws (Moss and Smith 271). The Buhari administration acknowledged EU recommendations, but spokesperson Festus Keyamo disputed claims of collation opacity, highlighting tensions with observers (Sule et al. 114). Observers recommended enhanced oversight, extended monitoring, and partnerships with local actors to address systemic issues and strengthen Nigeria's electoral process.

Legal Framework for Election Observation in Nigeria

The procedural framework governing foreign observers in Nigeria ensures their operations are legitimate and structured. A written invitation from the Nigerian government or the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is a prerequisite for deploying observer teams, formalising their role in electoral oversight (Daxecker and Schneider 73). This invitation is accompanied by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that outlines the observers' rights, responsibilities, and Nigeria's obligations, including accreditation, access to electoral processes, geographical areas, and security assurances where necessary (Moss and Smith 217). The MoU aligns with the United Nations Declaration on International Election Observation, which specifies minimum conditions for effective observation, such as unrestricted access to all electoral stages, freedom of movement, and the right to issue public statements without interference (Moss and Smith 217).

Since 1999, Nigeria has generally met these conditions, though security concerns in the North-East during the 2011 and 2015 elections limited observer access (European Union, 2015). INEC's administrative regulations further protect observers' rights, detailing accreditation procedures, access to stakeholders, and a Code of Conduct, with penalties for infractions (Daxecker and Schneider 73). These legal provisions ensure observers can monitor polling and counting alongside party representatives, fostering transparency despite occasional constraints.

Independence and Funding Mechanisms of Foreign Observers

The independence of foreign observers is critical to maintaining their neutrality and credibility. Organisations like the European Union Election Observation Missions (EU EOMs), European Centre for Electoral Support, British High Commission, and National Democratic Institute (NDI) operate independently from other agencies within their structures to avoid external influence (Kelley 66). The EU EOMs, a key player since 1999, are formally separated from other EU bodies, reporting to Chief Observers within a hierarchical structure (Roussias and Ruiz-Rufino 116). This separation ensures impartiality in assessing elections marred by issues like vote-buying and collation irregularities, as seen in 2007 and 2019 (European Union, 2007; European Union, 2019).

Funding for these missions is sourced internally, with the EU EOMs drawing from the

European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights within the EU's general budget, subject to strict financial regulations (Kelley 66). This model eliminates reliance on host country resources, preventing obligations to Nigerian political stakeholders and preserving objectivity. Organisationally, foreign missions operate under strict terms of reference and hierarchical reporting lines to chief observers, further insulating them from external interference (Roussias and Rubén, 116–117). By operating within defined terms of reference, observers maintain neutrality, enhancing their credibility in reporting electoral flaws and recommending reforms.

Contributions of the EU and Foreign Observers in Nigeria's Elections

Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, the European Union (EU) and foreign observers have played a pivotal role in shaping the country's electoral process. Beyond detecting and deterring fraud, these observer missions have enhanced credibility, fostered institutional reforms, and encouraged civic participation, significantly contributing to Nigeria's democratic consolidation from 1999 to 2019. The following contributions highlight their impact on Nigeria's electoral landscape.

i. Enhancing Electoral Credibility and Global Perception

The presence of EU and foreign observers signals Nigeria's commitment to democratic norms, enhancing the global perception of its electoral integrity. By issuing public reports, these observers promote transparency and accountability, instilling confidence in the electorate and international community. The EU EOM's 2011 report, for instance, praised INEC's preparations under Attahiru Jega, reinforcing public trust and showcasing Nigeria's democratic aspirations (Akhaine 441). Similarly, the 2015 elections, marked by Goodluck Jonathan's concession and Muhammadu Buhari's conciliatory gesture, were lauded by the Carter Centre and EU observers, demonstrating Nigeria's democratic maturity and challenging stereotypes of African leaders' power obsession (Owen and Usman 455; Carter Centre). These reports validate electoral outcomes, encourage political actors to accept results, and boost foreign investor confidence, as seen in the global recognition of the 2015 power alternation as a democratic milestone.

ii. Providing Technical Assistance for Institutional Reforms

EU and foreign observers have catalysed institutional reforms through actionable recommendations, addressing systemic electoral weaknesses. The EU's Support for Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN), launched in 2016 following EU EOM recommendations from 2015, exemplifies this role by supporting INEC, the National Assembly, political parties, media, and civil society organisations (Roussias and Ruiz-Rufino 89). Designed in collaboration with Nigerian stakeholders, EU-SDGN addresses technical challenges like voter registration and collation, identified as deficient in elections like 2007 and 2015 (European Union, 2015; Geisler, 573). Similarly, NDI and Carter Centre recommendations post-1999 elections advocated for stricter enforcement of electoral laws, influencing INEC's reforms (Kelley 66). These programs extend observer impact beyond election-day monitoring, fostering strong, effective, and legitimate democratic institutions critical for Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

iii. Boosting Public Participation and Morale

The presence of EU and foreign observers encourages civic engagement by reassuring voters of a monitored electoral process. In 2015, despite fears of violence predicting civil unrest, the oversight by EU, AU, and Commonwealth observers motivated citizens to participate without fear of intimidation, resulting in significant voter turnout (Owen and Usman 455). This role as a morale booster counters voter apathy, a recurring issue in Nigeria's elections, and reinforces the democratic principle of popular participation, as seen in the enthusiastic turnout during the 1999 transitional elections (Omotola 534).

iv. Legitimising Electoral Processes and Outcomes

EU and foreign observers ensure elections align with democratic principles of freedom, fairness, and transparency, lending legitimacy to outcomes. Positive reports, such as the EU EOM's 2011 assessment, affirm electoral integrity, while critical findings, like those of the

Carter Centre and EU in 2007, provide evidence for legal challenges, as seen in court cases citing observer reports (Kelley 66; European Union, 2007). This dual role strengthens Nigeria's democratic image, supports judicial recourse for disputed elections, and ensures power transitions align with international standards, enhancing global acceptance of results.

v. Promoting Democratic Norms and Accountability

The oversight by the EU and foreign observers compels political actors to adhere to democratic standards, deterring malpractices and fostering accountability. By documenting violations, such as the misuse of state resources in 2007, observers pressure stakeholders to uphold electoral integrity, as governments seek to avoid negative international portrayals (European Union, 2007; Simpser and Donno, 501). This presence discourages violence and promotes a civic political culture, despite ongoing challenges in Nigeria's electoral process.

Challenges Facing the EU and Foreign Observers in Nigeria

Despite their contributions, EU and foreign observers face significant challenges that constrain their impact, reflecting systemic electoral issues and operational limitations in Nigeria's complex context.

i. Overemphasis on Election Day

The focus on election-day activities, such as voting and counting, neglects pre- and post-election phases, creating loopholes exploited by stakeholders. In 2003, excessive campaign funding violated constitutional regulations, and in 2007, incumbents misused state resources, breaching Article 103(2) of the 2006 Electoral Act (Osumah and Aghemelo 99; Simpser and Donno 501). In 2015, the PDP's expenditure reached nearly 9 billion Naira, nearly doubling its 2011 spending of 5 billion Naira and exceeding the 1 billion Naira limit set by the 2010 Electoral Act, with the APC spending 3 billion Naira, yet these violations went largely unchecked due to observers' election-day focus (Owen and Usman 455). This limitation undermines oversight of critical pre-election factors like campaign financing and voter registry verification.

ii. Premature Preliminary Statements

The practice of issuing preliminary statements within 48–72 hours of polls closing, driven by media pressures, risks mischaracterising elections by omitting unresolved complaints. In 2011, the EU EOM's rushed statement overlooked post-election violence and petitions, reducing report comprehensiveness (European Union, 2011). This haste compromises the ability to provide holistic assessments, as critical issues often emerge post-statement, limiting credibility.

iii. Inadequate Post-Election Monitoring

Limited post-election engagement is a significant weakness, with missions concluding shortly after election day, leaving fatigued observers unprepared for disputes and violence. In 2011, EU and NDI reports minimally addressed post-election issues, and in 2019, intimidation during collation in 20 states was underreported due to insufficient planning (European Union, 2019; Geisler, 573). This gap hinders documentation of stakeholder dissatisfaction, undermining transparency efforts.

iv. Insufficient Observer Coverage and Lack of Domestic Partnerships

With only 79 EU observers for over 1,000 polling units in 2019, coverage was limited, enabling ward-level manipulations, as seen in Rivers State in 2015 and 2019 (European Union, 2019; Geisler 573). Since her Mission began in Nigeria, the EU has not been able to send observers across every polling unit or ward across the country. In fact, the manipulation at the ward level collation is one of the many challenges confronting Nigeria's electoral transparencies, and this has not been tackled by the EU EOM. This issue has persisted through all elections under our study, and if left unresolved, will continue to embolden electoral malpractices and weaken the efforts of the EU EOM. The reluctance to partner with domestic monitors, who offer cultural and linguistic insights, restricts comprehensive oversight. Collaboration with non-partisan local actors could enhance coverage and accuracy, addressing persistent transparency challenges.

v. Lack of Enforcement Power

Observers' inability to enforce recommendations, constrained by Nigeria's sovereignty, limits their impact. In 2007, INEC rejected the EU EOM's report, labelling it "electoral tourism," highlighting perceptions of observers as powerless (Kelley 66). Bureaucratic delays and political resistance, as seen post-2011, hinder reform implementation, rendering observers' advice rather than authoritative (Simpser and Donno 501). This submission from the National Electoral Commission is not farfetched from the fact that the commission perceived the foreign observers to be handicapped and their sole weapon is the report they release after an election.

It is worth noting that since 2003, there has not been a single allegation against the activities and reports of the EU Observers in Nigeria. The EU observers have avoided being caught up in the failed observation picture primarily due to their experience and capacity. The Mission's well-funded status ensures that political stakeholders have little or no influence over its reports. Indeed, democratic institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and even other political factors such as the media and civil society organisations rely heavily on the European Union's technical and financial assistance.

Conclusion

The stark reality of Nigeria's democraticisation process necessitated the involvement of foreign observers in Nigeria's elections, the 1999 elections serving as a launching pad for the activities of foreign observers in Nigeria. The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted role of the European Union (EU) and other foreign observer missions in Nigeria's elections from 1999 to 2019, revealing both their contributions and limitations in shaping the country's democratic trajectory. The analysis demonstrates that foreign observers have significantly enhanced electoral transparency, deterred overt fraud, and acted as catalysts for institutional reforms, notably through initiatives like the EU Support to Democratic Governance in Nigeria (EU-SDGN).

However, this study identifies critical challenges that persist despite the apparent successes of foreign observers. Limited geographical coverage, overemphasis on election-day events, inadequate post-election monitoring, logistical constraints, and, most notably, the lack of enforcement power to ensure the implementation of recommendations remain significant hurdles. While earlier works have pointed to the ceremonial or "tourist" nature of some observation missions, this paper's longitudinal analysis underscores the persistent gap between external observation and actionable, sustainable reform. In this way, the research both corroborates and extends existing scholarship: it supports previous conclusions about the value of foreign observers, but also highlights enduring structural limitations and the need for deeper, system-wide change.

Conceptually and theoretically, the paper reconceptualises foreign observers not just as neutral arbiters or watchdogs, but as reform catalysts capable of influencing the trajectory of democratic development, provided their engagement is sustained, holistic, and well-integrated with domestic actors. This marks a shift from the conventional view and provides a richer framework for understanding the multifaceted impact of foreign observation in Nigeria's evolving electoral landscape.

Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the significant contributions of EU and foreign observers in enhancing transparency, fostering institutional reforms, and promoting civic participation in Nigeria's elections from 1999 to 2019. However, challenges such as limited coverage, overemphasis on election-day activities, inadequate post-election monitoring, lack of enforcement power, and limited stakeholder engagement constrain their impact. To address these issues and strengthen the role of observers in Nigeria's democratic consolidation, the following recommendations are proposed.

i. Strengthen Partnerships with Domestic Actors

To enhance coverage, EU and foreign observers should forge strategic partnerships with credible domestic actors, such as non-partisan election monitors and media organisations. These local actors, familiar with Nigeria's cultural and linguistic contexts, can provide comprehensive data from underserved areas, complementing observer efforts while maintaining impartiality.

ii. Expand Monitoring to Pre- and Post-Election Phases

Observers should allocate resources to monitor critical pre-election processes, including campaign financing, voter registry verification, and vote-buying, as well as post-election phases, such as dispute resolution and result collation. This holistic approach would address systemic loopholes, as seen in the 2007 misuse of state resources and 2019 collation intimidation, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of electoral integrity. Establishing dedicated pre- and post-election monitoring teams would mitigate the limitations of election-day focus, enhancing the credibility of observer reports.

iii. Delay Preliminary Statements and Enhance Post-Election Monitoring Capacity

Observers should delay preliminary statements until all electoral issues, including complaints and post-election developments, are thoroughly reviewed. The development of a structured post-election monitoring plan, deploying dedicated teams to assess result disputes, election petitions, and post-election violence, would address the "weakest link" in observation missions, ensuring comprehensive coverage of sensitive post-election periods. For example, maintaining a robust observer presence for at least two weeks post-election, as recommended by the Carter Centre, would enable better documentation of stakeholder dissatisfaction and judicial outcomes, strengthening electoral transparency (Carter Centre).

iv. Increase Observer Numbers and Technological Resources

EU and foreign observers should increase personnel and leverage technology, such as real-time data collection tools and satellite monitoring, to enhance coverage of polling units and collation processes. This would address ward-level irregularities, as seen in Rivers State in 2015 and 2019, ensuring a more accurate electoral assessment. Allocating additional funding, as supported by the EU's European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, could facilitate this expansion.

v. Strengthen Enforcement Mechanisms Through Diplomatic Engagement

The lack of enforcement power, exemplified by INEC's rejection of the 2007 EU EOM report as "electoral tourism," limits observer impact (Kelley 66). Observers should leverage international diplomatic channels, such as the EU and AU frameworks, to pressure INEC and political stakeholders to implement recommendations, such as improved collation processes in 2011 and 2015 (Akhaine 441; European Union, 2015, 15). Establishing formal follow-up mechanisms, including regular dialogues with INEC and civil society, would ensure recommendations translate into actionable reforms, addressing bureaucratic delays and political resistance (Simpser and Donno 501).

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