

Research Article

Government interference in election administration and lethal electoral irregularities in Nigeria

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Extant literature is replete with fine-grained explanations of problems of electoral irregularities in developing countries, but how government interference in the electoral process leads to electoral irregularities and undermines credible elections is unacknowledged. Thus, this study shows how Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has failed to assert its independence to guarantee credible elections due to government interference in its election management. The study leverages rich available documents, key informant interviews, and personal experience premised on in-depth descriptive statistical and content analyses. The analyses of data elicited from these methods reveal that government interference in INEC membership composition, finances, and operations considerably accounts for recurring lethal electoral irregularities and deflates public confidence in the electoral process to stunning lows in Nigeria. They also expose the weakness of government-driven reforms and underscore the need for voter-driven reformation for an electoral system that is acceptable to Nigerian voters.

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Introduction

Developing countries have become an example of mixed realities when it comes to election management. In Africa, while some elections are comparatively credible and peaceful, others are grossly marked by varying degrees of irregularities with militarization of the electoral process (Deglow & Fjelde, 2023; Onuoha et al., 2020; Brosché, Fjelde & Höglund, 2020; Fjelde & Höglund, 2014). In some states, the irregularities merely manifest in electoral malpractice, but are marked by violence with lethal consequences in others (Birch, Daxecker & Höglund, 2020; Angerbrandt, 2018). There are cases in which electoral management bodies (EMBs) demonstrate confidence and assert their independence in the face of difficulty to organize acceptable elections in some countries but not always the case in most situations. The poorly organized 2017 and 2019 presidential elections in Kenya and Malawi respectively were voided by the courts in their landmark judgements due to fraud (de Freytas-Tamura, 2017; Kell, 2020). In other African countries like Nigeria, the courts have certified such flawed elections.

Developing countries are not only concerned about electoral challenges as advanced democracies like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada have had their fair share. For instance, since the 2000 U.S. presidential election in Florida, American election politics shifted from the usual issue-based debates on democratic development to debates about voter fraud, suppression of votes, and the danger of online voting to democracy (Dill, 2016; Wang, 2012; Minnite, 2010). Voting in the world-acclaimed unbreachable bastion of democracy is being viewed from the prism of intolerant to defeat, invasion, and voting wars (Araneta, 2022; Hansen, 2012). The 2020 U.S. presidential election is characterized by citizens' distrust in the electoral process (Kousser, 2023; Pildes, 2020). Despite this, management of elections in these countries is comparatively undertaken by strong institutions that constrain individual excesses unlike in most developing countries.

Accordingly, while Onapako's (2014) finding limited the use of violence as an election rigging toll to the incumbent, Fjelde and Höglund (2014) argue that the tool can also be deployed by both those in government and opposition, even though it is more associated with the incumbent (Straus & Taylor, 2009). A burgeoning literature confirms a correlation between electoral irregularities and depleting value of democracy in terms of electoral integrity and voter participation (e.g., van Baalen, 2023; Gutiérrez-Romero & LeBas, 2020; Klaus, 2020; Onuoha et al., 2020). In Nigeria, election preparation and deployment of security personnel to secure the election environment are done in a fashion akin to a nation in a war situation. Election management has not only been contentious, controversial, and contested, but they have also become violent, deadly, and life-taking (Onuoha et al., 2020; Mbah, Nwangwu & Ugwu, 2019; Angerbrandt, 2018; Ashindorbe, 2018). There is an argument that Nigerian elections exude a sense of ethnoreligious dislikes expressed in hate speech that often leads to election violence (Ezeibe, 2020). To contribute to this debate,

the study specifically undertakes a micro-level analysis of Nigeria's fourth republic vis-à-vis the phenomenon of government interference in election management. As a primary election administration institution, the Nigerian government interferes in Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC's) membership composition, finances, and operations to increase its winning chances either to remain in power or for its preferred candidates and, most times, this defines the irregularities that characterize the process.

Thus, the study argues that INEC has all it takes to guarantee credible elections by virtue of relevant sections of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN, 1999) that guarantee its independence. The CFRN provides in Section 158 that INEC "shall not be subject to any other authority or person" in discharging its election management duties in accordance with the laws. Following this provision, INEC has made some improvements in discharging its electoral duties (Nwangwu, Mbah & Otu, 2018). However, elections in Nigeria have not only been contentious, controversial, and contested (Onuoha et al., 2020; Mbah, Nwangwu & Ugwu, 2019), but they have also become consistently violent, deadly, and life-taking (Angerbrandt, 2018; Ashindorbe, 2018).

Materials for this study are sourced from rich available literature, key informant interviews, and personal experience as active participants in Nigerian elections. There are six major sections in this study. After this introduction, the sections are: (i) conceptual understanding, (ii) theoretical understanding, (iii) methodology that underpins the study, (iv) results, (v) discussion, and (vi) comparative discussion of findings in other African countries like Ghana and Zambia. It ends with a concluding section that depicts its recommendations and the need for further studies.

Conceptual understanding of electoral irregularities and voter participation

Electoral irregularities have always been a thorn in the flesh of credible election management. They represent flawed or manipulated elections that deflate voter participation (Birch, Daxecker & Höglund, 2020). As a complex concept that represents a subtle deviation from established electoral procedures, electoral irregularities manifest in various forms as electoral malpractice, manipulation, and even government interference to increase one's political mileage. It can begin with flawed voter registration through electoral malpractice and progress into life-taking thuggery and violence. In Nigerian, elections are undermined by electoral irregularities that triggered a series of opposition protests and resulted in the demand for election cancellation and removal of some key INEC officers (EU Election Observation Mission [EOM], 2015). Electoral irregularities run at variance with the global standards on credible elections captured in Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government (the United Nations, 1948).

Again, flawed elections arising from irregularities can trigger electoral violence, undermine free choice, and lead to unanticipated consequences (Birch, Daxecker & Höglund, 2020). They can also endanger the quality of democracy and the political process (Mahmood, 2020) and undermine confidence in elected authorities, damage voter turnout, trigger protests, exacerbate conflict, and occasionally lead to regime change (Norris, 2014). Evidently, Norris (2014) argues that flawed, or even failed, contests are thought to wreck fragile progress. Undoubtedly, manipulated electoral contests jeopardize and exacerbate tensions between those celebrating the winning candidates and those sympathetic to the losing candidates. This, ultimately, has serious undermining effects on the legitimacy of democratic systems.

Impliedly, electoral irregularities vitiate the idea of credibility, undermine voter participation, and result in a minority electoral democracy in which less number of voters determines political leaders against the majority demand of democracy. Irregularity-free elections reflect a high degree of integrity, which requires an atmosphere free of interference, fear, intimidation, or manipulation at any stage of the electoral process (Global Commission on Election, Democracy and Security, 2014). Ladipo (2022) notes that election rigging begins from an unreliable register of voters, suggesting that an election with integrity begins from a voter register with integrity. A secure and peaceful election environment facilitates free, fair and credible elections. Tranquil conditions in and around voting sites lessen the problems that could compromise the integrity of records, turnout, or election results. Voters must be able to vote without fear and monitors must be able to observe without intimidation. Candidates must be able to campaign without the fear that their supporters will be harmed or even killed.

Voter participation denotes inclusivity and inclusivity implies the involvement of all willing eligible voters in the electoral process. Voter participation is inextricably linked to voter turnout, which is measured as a percentage of votes cast at an election, including invalid votes (Solijonov, 2016). Voter turnout is one of the crucial indicators of how citizens participate in the decision-making on leadership recruitment and the governance of their country. Higher voter turnout is in most cases a sign of the vitality of democracy, while lower turnout depicts voter apathy

and mistrust of the political process (Solijonov, 2016; Mahmud, 2015; Dettrey & Schwindt-Bayer, 2009). High voter participation gives legitimacy to those in power, increases the authority of the democratic system, and leads to the absence or less occurrence of violence and instability (Franklin, 2004; Powell, 1986).

Government interference in election management in Nigeria

The Nigerian government has a proclivity to interfere in every stratum of the Nigerian society and electoral management body is not an exception. As subtle manipulative strategy, government interferes in election management to influence the electoral process and determine its outcomes usually in its favour. There is a problem with INEC's institutional design that creates room for this interference. The problem emanates from the 1999 CFRN which recognizes INEC as an independent electoral body, but subjects its administrative autonomy to presidential oversight by way of appointment and even sack of its key officers: the Chairman, 12 National Electoral Commissioners, and 37 Resident Electoral Commissioners (cf. Sections 158, 154 and Part I of the Third Schedule to the CFRN, 1999).

Furthermore, INEC finances are subjected to presidential supervision through the Budget Monitoring and Price Unit and Federal Ministry of Finance between 1999 and January 2022 (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2002, 2006, 2010), instead of legislative oversight by the federal legislature. Although the touted Electoral Act of 2022 provides for the early (not later than one year) release of election funds to INEC, the president (instead of budgetary procedures with legislative oversight) still retains the power to release INEC funds in the extant Act. This retention, which is the situation till date despite INEC reform measures, places a question mark on the pursuit of credible and clean elections in Nigeria.

Thus, since 1999, elections organized by INEC have questions of interference by the government (Omotola, 2010). Although INEC has made relative efforts to improve the electoral process and these have led to various interventions. These interventions have facilitated the adoption of manual and electronic methods or their combination at various election seasons. However, they have suffered the fate of poor implementation owing to government interference. For instance, the use of new technologies, a journey that began in Nigeria with the automated fingerprint identification system (AFIS) in 2011 (Ladipo, 2022), suffocates because INEC needlessly depends hand-in-cap on the government for requisite support. This explains the reality that surrounds poor technology policy implementation in the country, which heralded selective piecemeal implementation and saw INEC use of the AFIS being restricted to biometric voter registration. Interestingly, the registration, which was the fallout of the irregularities that grossly marred the 1998-9 transition elections and the 2007 general elections, laid the foundation for the production of permanent voter's cards (PVCs) and the adoption of more reliable smart card readers, which replaced the AFIS during the 2015 elections.¹

Thus, from 2015, the smart card readers became a legal condition or requirement to participate in Nigerian elections (INEC, 2015a) even though the legality of these biometric devices is highly debatable (Nigeria Civil Society [NCS] Situation Room, 2015a). The challenges that heralded the use of these devices in the 2015 elections forced INEC to jettison its biometric guidelines and adopted the use of fraud-promoting Incidence Forms. In specific terms, this directive violated Clause 8(b) of INEC guidelines on the use of card readers for accreditation (INEC, 2015b). The guidelines did not make any provisions for any other means in the event of card reader failure. Thus, Iwuoha (2018) averred that the Commission nevertheless went ahead to violate its set rules by clearing voters by hand, thereby undermining the very purpose for which biometric technology was adopted.

The directive by INEC to use Incidence Forms implied the adoption of a dual accreditation procedure and a reversion to the problem it set out to address. The dual accreditation procedure is one in which voters are either electronically accredited with smart card readers or manually with Incidence Forms. These forms were introduced to remedy the problems of device failures. Unfortunately, its introduction removed the electronic safeguard the devices provided by way of securing the electoral process and exposed it to possible manipulations like ghost voting beyond the actual number of voters that came out to vote (NCS Situation Room, 2015b). This also paved the way for politicians to inflate accreditation figures to allow for double/multiple thumb printing. Although the 2019 INEC guidelines provided for the use of Incidence Forms for voter accreditation (INEC, 2019), their use exacerbated the problem of electoral fraud during the 2019 elections (cf. Onapajo, 2020).

The repeal of the amended 2010 Electoral Act by the Electoral Act of 2022 eliminates the use of Incidence Forms and any form of manual accreditation. It recognizes the biometric voter accreditation system (BiVAS) as the only tool for accreditation. Although the BiVAS machine is also used for the electronic transmission of results, voting in Nigeria is presently governed by manual methods. Thus, Nigeria's electoral system is presently governed by biometric voter registration and accreditation, manual voting, and a combination of manual and electronic result management. Despite these interventions, elections in Nigeria still bear the imprints of electoral irregularities and these distort the democratic

value of credible management of elections, occasioned by government interference. In all, Nigeria has held seven quadrennial general elections intermediated by eight off-cycle governorship elections that emanate from contested governorship election outcomes (Obiagu et al., 2022).

Theoretical understanding of illiberal democracy

The study adopts illiberal democracy as a framework of analysis to explain how government interference in election administration undermines the democratic process within the context Nigeria. Before the early 1990s, the use of illiberal democracy to describe a system that has features of democracy but does not behave like democracy in operations was not in the lexicon of political scientists.² Thus, the illiberal democracy thesis is traceable to Bell et al.'s 1995 book: *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*. The authors used the illiberal democracy argument to challenge Francis Fukuyama's 1991 end-of-history thesis, which contended that political history was culminating in the global rule of liberal democracy embedded in capitalism. They queried Fukuyama's thesis for not representing the situation in Pacific Asia where illiberal democratic features have defined the practice of democracy in the region, a situation electoral reforms and the rev for biometric devices as anti-rigging tools have not remedied. The theory was further developed and popularized by liberal scholars like Zakaria (1997), Christie (1998), Sajó (2021), and Wagrandl (2021).

Accordingly, an illiberal democracy, which Nigeria exemplified, is a government system that hides its nondemocratic credentials behind formal democratic institutions (Bonet & Zamorano, 2021). While some scholars and authors query the existence of illiberal democracy, others who believe in its reality do not have a common ground on how to describe it (Self, 2022; Mounk, 2020; Plattner, 2019). There is a contention that illiberal democratic leaders may ignore constitutional term limits on their tenureship and jeopardize democratic growth in their countries (Mounk, 2020). In Africa, some countries grapple with unpopular sit-tight imperial presidents who have indulged in term-limit extensions beyond the usual constitutional two-term limits to remain in power for decades.

The continent is further bedeviled by other challenges that include 'smart' African politicians that outsmart modern digital technologies to manipulate the electoral process and determine its outcome, contested election outcomes, and the recent breakdown of democratic systems emanating from "constitutional" military coups in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, and Burkina Faso, as well as failed coup attempts reported in Central African Republic and Guinea-Bissau (Sany, 2022). In fact, the continent has had to contend with the calculated suppression of dissent and criminalization or persecution of popular opposition candidates in 'make-belief' multiparty competitive elections (Cheeseman, 2021), the changing value of violence as a lucrative strategy for leadership recruitment (Obiagu et al., 2022; Obiagu, Udeji-Okppalaku & Udeh, 2021); the unending large-scale insurgency and insecurity that arose from unfulfilled election promises (Anku, 2022). Again, illiberal democracy, as opposed to liberal democracy, which protects individual rights and limits government operations, hampers democratic values on fundamental human rights (Plattner, 2019).

Elections in an illiberal democratic setting are usually manipulated or rigged and their outcomes are deliberately altered. They rarely provide the opportunities for voters to choose their country's leaders through the assessment of their policies encapsulated in their manifestos. Most times, electoral contests merely serve the purpose of legitimizing the government and thereby consolidating the incumbent (Nyssönen & Metsälä, 2020). The authors just referenced further note that when elections are manipulated, they endanger the operation and pseudomization of democracy. In this context, elections and other democratic institutions become adapted patterns of authoritarianism.

There is a contention as to whether illiberal democracy has anything in common with democracy. Some scholars like Sajó (2021) and Wagrandl (2021) argue that illiberal democracy should be counted as a type of democracy because it is democratic in a plebiscitarian sense and more true to democracy's roots. In reverse, some critical scholars contend that it should be acknowledged or recognized by its authoritarian operations and, as such, should be associated with authoritarianism (cf. Christie, 1998; Diamond, 2002; Schedler, 2006; DeVotta, 2010). These scholars further argue that classifying illiberal democracy as democratic is overly mild to illiberal regimes. They suggest such descriptions as electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, and soft authoritarianism as being adequate for illiberal democracy. These unending arguments are best appreciated by exploring government interference in election management in a historical context in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopted key informant interviews, available documents, and personal experience as active participants in Nigerian elections since 1999. This is meant to generate detailed information to explain how government interference in election management triggers electoral irregularities and results in lethal election violence and voter apathy. The key informant interviews comprised mainly people (adults from 18 years) considered to be knowledgeable or aware of happenings within the Nigerian electoral community and who understand how its affairs are organized.

For convenience and easy to execute, we purposively selected three informants from 12 Nigerian federating states (two each from the si geo-political zones in Nigeria). The 12 states fall within the acceptable 30 percent statistical sampling ratio of 36 Nigeria's states and a federal capital territory (ECT), Abuja. To ensure equal selection opportunity, simple random sampling technique was adopted to extract the views of the cumulative 36 informants from the population of informed voters, party candidates, key INEC staff, election observers, and media groups. However, 21 interviews were successfully conducted (see Table 1). The 21 valid interviews represent an average of 58.3 percent response rate. We recorded the least response rate from the northeast geo-political zone with 50% (which is satisfactory based on our 50% benchmark) while the South-east recorded the highest response rate. These are face-to-face and phone interviews, and interview schedules, conveniently interfaced with a research assistants and the use of relevant social media instruments in Nigeria (Table 1). Subsequently, references will be made to these interviews based on the serial numbers in Table 1.

S/Nº	G-p Zone	State	Medium	Nº of SI	ZT (Nº)	ZRR (%)
1.	North-central	Benue	ISTRA/PC	3		
2.	North-central	Niger	ISTRA/WhatsApp	1	4	66.7
3.	North-east	Adamawa	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	1		
4.	North-east	Taraba	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	3	50.0
5.	North-west	Kaduna	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2		
6.	North-west	Kano	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	4	66.7
7.	South-east	Enugu	FTE/PC/WhatsApp	2		
8.	South-east	Imo	FTE/PC/WhatsApp	3	5	83.3
9.	South-south	C/River	ISTRA/PC/Gmail	2		
10.	South-south	Rivers	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	4	66.7
11.	South-west	Lagos	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2		
12.	South-west	Oyo	ISTRA/PC/Gmail	2	4	66.7
Total				24	24	

Table 1 Interviews and Interview Schedule Administration and Collection

Note: G-p means geo-political, SI means successful interview, ZT means zonal total, ZRR means zonal response rate, ISTRA means interview schedule through research assistant, and PC means phone call. Computation for ZRR is based on 3 interviews from two selected states in each geo-political zone.

The data elicited from available documents and informant interviews were analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics and content analysis. All statistical computations are done with web-based Social Science Statistics software. The descriptive statistical tools adopted include charts and simple percentages. While we made efforts to use the mean to centrally measure the average differences in Nigeria's election data, the level of

deviation was standardized, and the difference between the mean and median was determined with the skewness analysis. The study is expressed in categorical variables in which chi-square is used for association statistics to ascertain the suppressing effects of lethal election violence on voter participation.

Study area

Nigeria is a federation that comprises northern and southern blocs, divided into six geopolitical zones with a total of 36 federating states and an FCT, Abuja. There are 774 local government areas (LGAs: 768 in 36 states, 6 in Abuja) that make up Nigeria's electoral constituencies. A total of 176,846 polling units spread across 8,809 INEC-created registration areas/wards for election management in the federation. Thus, the management of elections in Nigeria falls within the INEC purview.

The INEC is a federal executive body established to organize elections for various offices like president/vice, governors/deputies, federal and state lawmakers, and area council members. It derives its legal existence as a body corporate with perpetual succession from Section 153(1) (f) of the CFRN (1999). Given that elections are taken to be the fulcrum that pivots the lever of democratic operations, the INEC occupies a strategic position in the practice of democracy in Nigeria as elsewhere in the world. Hence, some scholars have needlessly taken elections to be the equivalence of democracy, even when autocratic settings are associated with elections (Mackie, 2009).

Irrespective of perspectives, elections have come to embody the most defining feature of representative democracy. Although election management generally connotes the idea of multi-stakeholders, electoral bodies largely play a significant role that other stakeholders are not privileged to play. Like judges who are seen as final arbiters, EMB officers are the electoral umpires who should be firm in all their decisions to ensure credible elections and valid votes are counted to reflect voters' choices in the determination of winners.

Results

In this section of the study, statistical data (results) are presented and analyzed to support our argument that government interference in election administration is at the back of the deplorable state of democracy in Nigeria. This condition arises from life-taking electoral irregularities that have consistently defined Nigerian elections and resulted in voter disinterest between 1998-9 and 2023. Thus, the presentation and analysis of government interference are done in three sub-sections: (i) INEC membership composition together with other staff, (ii) INEC finances, and (iii) INEC operations.

Results for membership composition of Independent National Electoral Commission

The Nigerian President is empowered in Section 5 of the 1999 CFRN to exercise the executive powers of the Federation, which include the appointment of 13 INEC principal officers in consultation with the Council of State subject to confirmation by the Nigerian Senate. These officers recruit other INEC staff by exercising delegated presidential powers (Akinduro, 2011).

Excluding the chairman, the 12 INEC members are appointed two from each of the six geopolitical zones that make up the Federation. Their appointments are for five-year tenure and renewable once and are governed by Nigeria's federal character principle, which is a quota system/formula that promotes national unity and equitable representation of Nigerian entities based on LGA or state of origin (See Sections 14(3) and Section 171(5) of the 1999 CFRN). The CFRN further provides that members of the Commission shall be persons of unquestionable integrity and not less than fifty years and forty years of age, respectively.

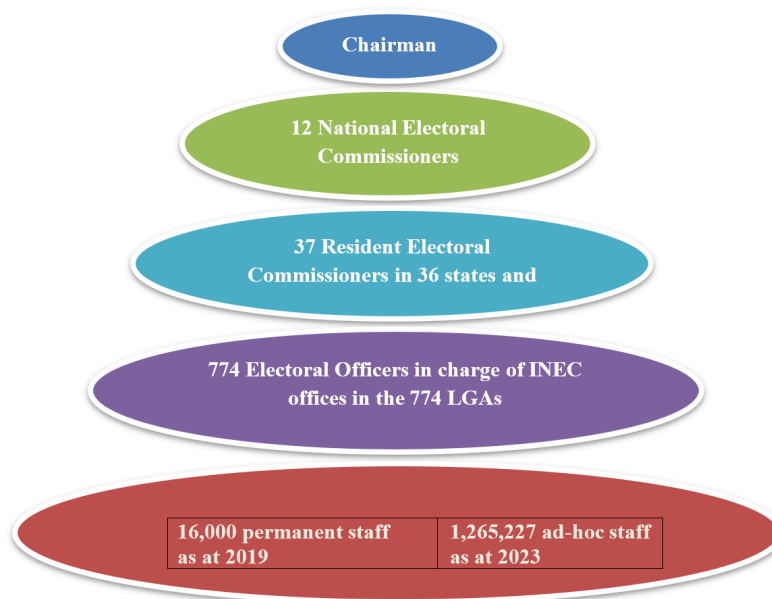


Figure 1. The organizational chart/hierarchy of INEC principal officers and staff

Source: authors' compilation with data from CFRN (1999), Akinwale (2023)

As of 2019, there are about 16,000 permanent staff under INEC's employ to manage elections in 119,974 polling units. This figure, which represents a fraction of one permanent INEC staff to 7.5 polling units and falls short of the expected balance, is complemented with ad-hoc (temporary) staff. As part of its 2021 reform, INEC increased the total number of polling units from 119,974 to 176,846. The Commission engages these staff temporarily to make up for the shortfall in the permanent staff for election duty. Recently, INEC engaged about 1,265,227 ad-hoc staff for the 2023 elections (see Figure 1 and Table 2 for these statistics).

Election year	Nº of ad-hoc staff	Nº of polling units
2011	300,000	119,974
2015	750,000	119,974
2019	814,453	119,974
2023	1,265,227	176,846

Table 2. Summary of INEC ad-hoc staff and polling units in Nigeria, 2011 – 2023

Source: Authors' compilation with data from Jega (2012), *The Punch* (2019), PLAC (2021), Akinwale (2023)

The management of national (presidential and National Assembly) and subnational (governorship, state assembly, and FCT area council) elections in Nigeria has exposed how INEC's poor staff and leadership recruitments are reflected in poor election preparation and postponement. According to SBM Intelligence (2023), the financial costs of election postponement both for INEC and the Nigerian economy are quite significant. Postponing any aspect of elections until a later time questions the credibility of the process. It also results in a staggering loss arising from the suspension of economic activities and movement restrictions. The author estimated the cost of postponing the 2019 elections to be \$2.23 billion because its primary and secondary effects cost Nigeria 2% of its \$420 billion Gross Domestic Product.

Results for Independent National Electoral Commission's finances

From 1999 to 2018, the INEC received ₦450 billion as election expenditures from Nigeria's Federal Government.³ The amount allocated for elections steadily increased from ₦1.5 billion in 1999 to ₦305 billion in 2023, which amounted to ₦931.5 billion between 1999 and 2023 (see Table 3 for specific details). Figure 2 shows how the government delays in releasing election funds to INEC. YIAGA Africa (2020a) observes that the cost of conducting elections in Nigeria was very exorbitant compared to an average of 35 percent turnout in the 2011, 2015, and 2019 elections, in which INEC wasted billions of Naira on producing a large number of unused ballots.

Election year	Election budget (in billion ₦)	Cost per voter (₦)
1999	1.5	26
2003	120*	995
2007	60.5	983
2011	139	1,893
2015	116.3	1,691
2019	189.2	2,249
2023	305	3,263
Total	931.5	11,100

Table 3. INEC Budgets for election management in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023

Source: Authors' computation with data from YIAGA Africa (2020a), International IDEA (2023), Lawal (2023), The Punch (2022), Olugbondiyan (2006)

Note: *₦120b was proposed, but the amount government released is not in the public domain.

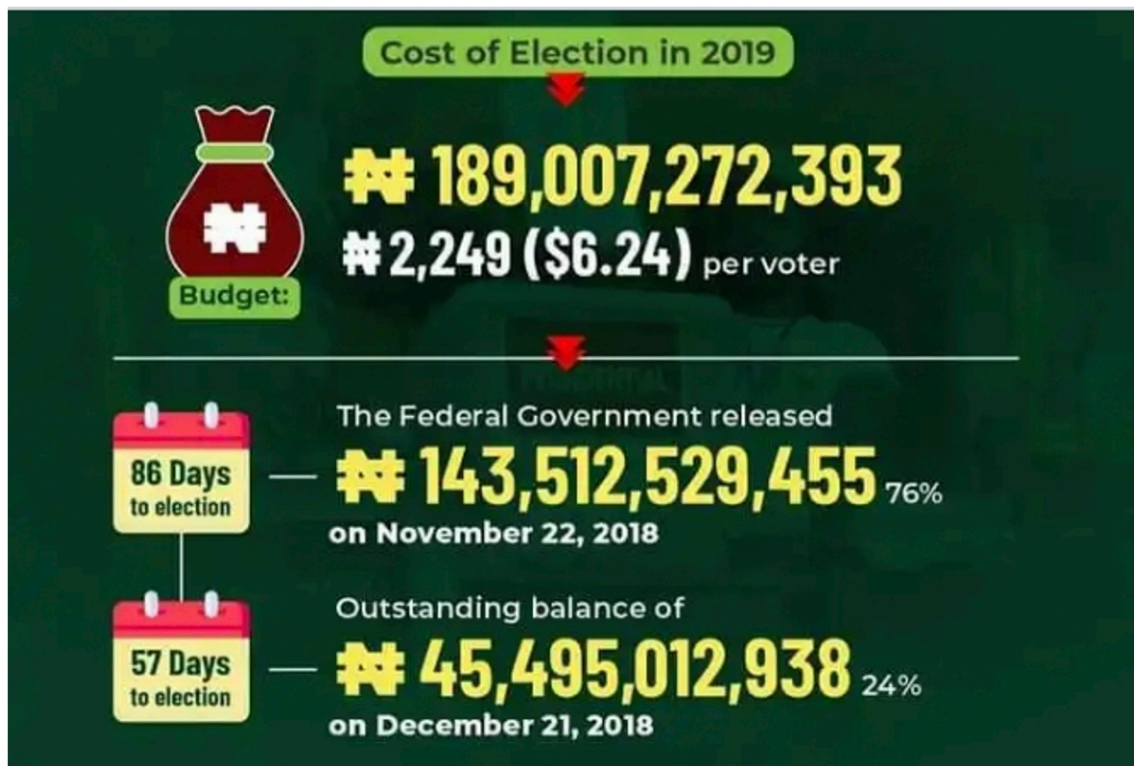


Figure 2. Government Delay in Releasing Election Funds to INEC

Source: YIAGA Africa (2020b)

For instance, INEC printed over 427.5 million ballot papers (of currency quality) in 2019 for 80 million registered voters in the six scheduled elections: comprising FCT area councils, state houses of assembly, governorships, Federal House of Representatives, Senate, and presidential. However, less than 30 million ballots were used in the six elections (YIAGA Africa, 2020a).

Results for Independent National Electoral Commission's operations

The Nigerian elections are associated with loss of lives, displacement of persons, and destruction of property. In specific terms, the 1998–9 transition elections claimed 80 lives, with 100 and 300 respectively recorded during the 2003 and 2007 elections (Mac-Leva, 2022). There is this born-to-rule conviction or a feeling of entitlement that Nigerian leadership is an inheritance to northern Nigeria from the British colonial masters at independence (see Northern Elders in Sahara Reporters, 2021). This partly explains why a presidential election that fails to produce a northern candidate is considered fraudulent and is followed by a violent protest. The riots that erupted following the declaration of the 2011 presidential election winner claimed 800 lives (in addition to 165 deaths recorded during the campaign and the elections). Within three days of rioting, 65,000 people were displaced in 12 northern states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The number of deaths decreased to 106 in the 2015 elections in which a northern opposition presidential candidate won.

The insecurity that overshadowed many parts of Nigeria worsened the incidents of electoral violence during the 2019 elections. There were cases of unrestrained violence and reports of about 16 deaths across eight states which increased to 39 within 48 hours in the Nigerian states of Borno, Bayelsa, Rivers, Yobe, Kogi, Ebonyi, Lagos, and Zamfara during the 2019 elections. Hired political thugs disrupted voting and set election materials on fire in some places like Okota, Isolo, and Oshodi (NCS Situation Room, 2019). The electoral irregularities that characterized the 2019 elections and the associated violence that followed the irregularities led to a loss of 756 Nigerians in which the northern part of Nigeria maintained its lead

as the hotbed of electoral violence with 570 deaths. There was a report of 137 deaths during the recently held 2023 elections. Table 4 reveals these statistics.

S/Nº	Region	Incident	Nº of death
1.	North-central	23	111
2.	North-east	16	146
3.	North-west	20	172
4.	South-east	7	14
5.	South-south	59	120
6.	South-west	36	63
7.	North-west (Kajuru LGA)	2*	141
Total		163	756

Table 4. Summary of Violent Incidents and Casualties in the 2019 Elections

Source: SBM Intelligence (2019)

*Note: *The figure is not verified by SMB Intelligence, but was reported in other media sources.*

Table 5 contains a progression of statistical data on the number of deaths arising from enduring lethal electoral irregularities that in Nigeria between 1998-9 and 2023. The data are divided into three periods: pre-technology intervention (1999-2007), technology intervention (2011), and post-technological intervention (2015-2023). The statistics indicate that, in 25 years, elections held in Nigeria were all violent, bloody, and lethal with a total of 2,444 deaths: 480 between 1999 and 2007, 965 in 2011, and 999 between 2015 and 2023. The devices, which were introduced to curb electoral malpractice that usually triggered violence, did not fundamentally address the concern. Thus, technology-embedded elections held between 2015 and 2023 also had features of irregularities, violence, and deaths.

Before Technology Intervention, 1998/9 – 2007			Technology Intervention in 2011		After Technology Intervention, 2015 – 2023		
Election Year	Nº of Death		Election Year	Nº of Death		Election Year	Nº of Death
1998-9	80					2015	106
2003	100	X	2011	965	X	2019	756
2007	300					2023	137
TOTAL	480			965			999

Table 5. Trend in Bloody Nigerian Elections between 1998-9 and 2023

Source: Compiled by Researcher with data from Mac-Leva (2022), Bekoe (2011), Human Rights Watch (2007, 2011), SBM Intelligence (2019)

Similarly, statistics in Table 6 show voter participation expressed in voter turnout in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023, which suggests a serious consistent decline from 2003. This decline is linked to the consistent manifestation of irregularities in all elections organized by INEC. These irregularities deflated public confidence in INEC management of Nigerian elections.

Election year	Total registered voters	Total valid votes	Voter turnout (%)
1999	57,938,945	30,280,052	52.26
2003	60,823,022	42,018,735	69.08
2007	61,567,036	35,397,517	57.49
2011	73,528,040	39,469,484	53.68
2015	67,422,005	29,432,083	43.65
2019	82,344,107	28,614,190	34.75
2023	93,469,009	24,965,572	26.71

Table 6. Summarized trend in voter participation in Nigeria, 1999–2023

Source: International IDEA (2023)

Descriptive statistics

The statistics in Tables 5 and 6 are cross-tabulated in Table 7 to ascertain if the two categorical variables (government interference as a form of electoral irregularities that leads to lethal violent elections and voter participation) are related. From the computations, the chi-square (calculated) is 1153.9043, which is greater than its critical value (5.991), with df of 2 and p-value of < 0.00001, significant at $p < .05$. These results show the suppressing effect of the lethal violent election on voter participation (i.e., a positive relationship) within the period under consideration. The statistics are further presented in Figures 3 and 4 for a better graphic explanation.

	Pre-TI period (1998/9–2007)	TI period (2011)	Post-TI period (2015–2023)	Row totals
Election-related death	480 (1148.49) [389.11]	965 (410.24) [750.17]	999 (885.26) [14.61]	2444
Voter participation	107696304 (107696058.43) [0.00]	38468484 (38468289.83) [0.00]	83011845 (83012284.73) [0.00]	229176633
Column totals	107696784	38469449	83012844	229179077 (GT)

Table 7. Cross-tabulation statistics from data in Tables 5 and 6

Note: Pre-TI=pre-technology intervention, TI=technology intervention, post-TI=post-technology intervention, GT=grand totals.

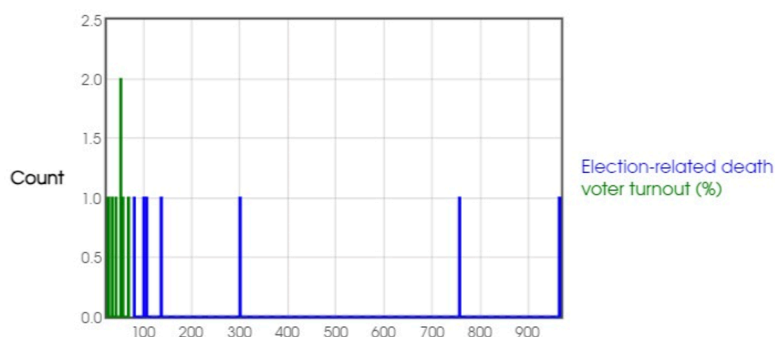


Figure 3. Summary of descriptive statistics: Election-related death and voter turnout in Nigeria, 1999-2023

Source: Authors' computation

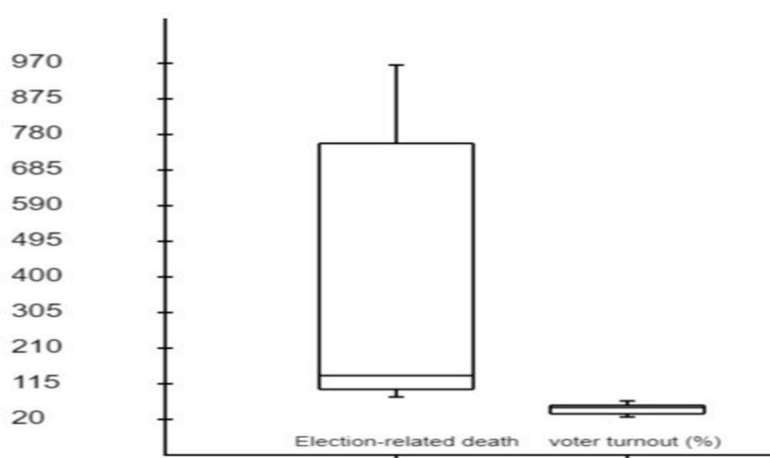


Figure 4. Box plot of descriptive statistics for election-related death and voter turnout in Nigeria between 1998-9 and 2023

Source: Authors' computation

Discussion

There are essential elements that form the basis for discussion of the prevailing results to buttress our argument. The succeeding sub-sections are aligned with the study's results.

Interference in INEC Membership Composition and Control of INEC Personnel in Nigeria

Nigeria operates a highly centralized federal system in which the president appropriates and wields enormous executive powers over the entire affairs of the Federation. The president exercises these powers by appointing government officials and determining their remunerations. In so doing and because institutions in Nigeria are relatively weak to check the excesses of some strong Nigerian politicians, the president appoints and also influences how INEC principal officers discharge their statutory election functions.

Given the nature of its assignment on competing interests, the CFRN guarantees INEC independence to ensure its neutrality and impartiality. The 1999 CFRN and the extant Electoral Act contain the underlying set of rules, principles, and laws that form the basis for the conduct of elections in Nigeria (Adebiyi & Olowa, 2022). This set of rules, principles, and laws is provided to empower the INEC to dispassionately deploy any working strategies through electoral reforms and the use of technologies for election management without giving undue advantage to any candidate or

political party. However, the INEC has not truly asserted this independence owing to government interference, which emanates from the constitutional provision that empowers an interested party to appoint its principal officers and other staff. This renders INEC impotent to guarantee credible elections in Nigeria.

Again, the appointment of these officers has shown how a president can abuse such constitutional power through a process that is strange to the CFRN in favour of his kin and member of his political party (The Guardian, 2015; Akinwale, 2019; Ugbede, 2019; Iroanusi, 2020). The role of these officers in Nigerian elections has become worrisome to many Nigerians (NCS Situation Room, 2019; Momah, 2016). The primary reason for these abuses is because the president is an active participant in the electoral process coupled with challenging economic situations that expose some Nigerians to tow a less dignified path. Furthermore, INEC is expected to meet the demands of the merit system under public service governance within the constitutional framework of federal character in recruiting its election staff (permanent/ad-hoc).⁴ However, like recruitments in other government institutions in Nigeria, ethnoreligious favouritism, patronage, and submission of lists of preferred candidates by politicians overshadow the aforementioned demands. The danger with this system is that it creates room to engage inexperienced staff at the expense of best available hands, which has implications for the recurring logistical problems that crystalize in election postponements in Nigeria.

Interestingly, many Nigerians welcomed the Electoral Act, of 2022, with lots of praise because it explicitly authorizes the use of electronic technologies for voter registration, poll administration, and result management in Nigeria (FRN, 2022). But without prescient knowledge, the Act remains an offshoot of the faulty 1999 CFRN, which recognizes INEC as an appendage of the Nigerian presidency. These legislative documents subject INEC autonomy to presidential supervision through government institutions under the presidency. Thus, the INEC leadership selection process at federal and state levels has charges of irregularities. The documents lack clear provisions for their effective implementation, which exposes INEC to partiality perception. The 2023 elections depict how enduring systemic weaknesses undermine voter participation (EU EOM, 2023). Presently, INEC has become a willing tool in the manipulative hands of some Nigerian politicians, with their suppressive strategies to discourage the use of new technologies for election administration.

Politics bothers on who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936), and political behaviour within the context of politics is about the authoritative allocation of values for society or the distribution of rewards in wealth, power, and status that the system may provide (Easton, 1953). The federal executive branch of the Nigerian government determines who gets what, when, and how, and authoritatively allocates values in terms of who makes the list of the membership composition of the board of the Commission. In other words, INEC is a statutory electoral body duly established by the highest law (the Constitution) in Nigeria, but the same law has placed some limitations on its ability to function independently to provide a level playing ground for all Nigerians to participate in the electoral process.

Of the 21 valid key informants we recorded in this study, 19 informants representing 90.5 percent of the total heave blame on INEC's poor performance on the appointment of its key officers by the president. Their views suggest that the president should not appoint INEC key officers. Two respondents (9.5%) believe that the problem is not about who appoints but about wrongdoing having a commensurate consequence. One of the latter respondents further maintains that if any officer should be prosecuted according to law for electoral malfeasance, it will serve as a deterrent to future violators of electoral laws (Interview S/Nº 4. In this country, such violators seem to be celebrated and that is the major problem with Nigerian elections (Interview S/Nºs 4, 8).

The appointment of INEC key officers plays a catalytic role in the policy direction of INEC in terms of how and what strategies (like technology use) to adopt for election management. Most Nigerian politicians are fraudulent and will not support INEC to implement an anti-rigging policy, which will get them out of the game (Interview S/Nº 12). Furthermore, this appointment, to a large extent, has taken an ethnoreligious dimension, which undermines meritocracy and leads to poor performance of the officers in implementing a policy that will ensure credible elections in the country (Interview S/Nº 1).

Interference in INEC Finances and Financial Dependence on Government

Apart from the human element in any organization, finance is another important aspect. It is regarded as an organizational life wire (Ogunna, 1999; Ezeani, 2006). Bertrand Russell advanced the argument that, in everything, power lies with those who control finance, not with those who know the matter upon which the money is to be spent. The recruitment, remuneration, training, and motivation of election staff for effective performance, as well as procurement and deployment of new technologies to enhance its operations, require a huge amount of money.

Regrettably, this strategic organizational asset (INEC finances) is under the supervisory purview of the Nigerian presidency. Prior to the enactment of the Electoral Act of 2022, elections were governed by such legal instruments as the CFRN of 1999 and the Electoral Acts of 2002, 2006, and 2010.⁵ During these periods, funds disbursement for election management was a major challenge that led to substantial poor reparation of elections. For instance, voter registration was delayed in 2003 and 2007 because of the delayed fund disbursement (Akinduro, 2011). In October 2006, several INEC checks were not honored because the Budget Monitoring and Price Unit within the Office of the President did not clear INEC payments for critical electoral materials (National Democratic Institute, 2008). During the 2019 election season, the INEC budget for the 2019 elections was ₦189,007,272,393. Regrettably, 86 days before the elections being November 22, 2018, the Federal Government partly released ₦143,512,529,455, which represented 76 percent of the total sum. On December 21, 2018, 57 days to the elections, the outstanding balance of ₦45,495,012,938 was released (see Figure 3). This does not augur well for election planning and preparation.

Additionally, the amended Electoral Act of 2010 required the Commission to submit its financial year estimate of expenditure and income to the Ministry of Finance. In Section 5(1) and (2), the Act directed the Commission to keep proper accounts, which must be audited by the Auditor General of the Federation (FRN, 2010). This Act was repealed and replaced with the Electoral Act, of 2022, which provided for early release of INEC funds, but the power to release these funds still resides with the President (FRN, 2023). A situation where the government delays or engages in the piecemeal release of funds to INEC vitiates the very essence of INEC autonomy, makes it susceptible to political influence, and undermines its ability to guarantee credible elections.

Interference in INEC Operations and Manipulation of the Electoral Process

Two essential components that are very crucial to the operations of any modern organization are human and financial elements, and whoever controls these elements invariably is in firm control of the organization and its operations. Because INEC is not in firm control of its human and financial elements as it is currently constituted, its efforts to organize credible elections have not achieved appreciable results, measured by the unending incidence of irregularities that embody elections in Nigeria. The use of biometric devices to provide the opportunity for voters to determine their elected leaders through the ballots is sabotaged at the level of implementation by those who control the INEC. Although INEC policy implementation has a tint of decentralization at state and local levels, policymaking by INEC follows the centralized model. This is because the operations of INEC state and local government offices strictly follow the directives from the central office (CFRN, 1999; Akinduro, 2011).

We maintain that INEC and the various reform measures it has initiated represent a top-down approach to the plethora of electoral problems bedeviling Nigeria without the requisite buy-in from the people. In modern administrative practice, the one-single approach has not demonstrated efficiency and effectiveness in optimally addressing complex issues without buy-ins from other relevant stakeholders. Following this absence of a participatory framework in which stakeholder contributions are not factored into INEC policy turnout, the stakeholder operations during elections usually run at cross purposes with the INEC implementation process. Even when INEC uses its Information and Voter Education Committee to mobilize the people through its voter sensitization programmes, the reality during the implementation stage deviates from the policy objectives and information acquired through the programmes. Thus, Mthethwa (2012) asserts that it is an entrenched practice in administration that when people are allowed to freely participate in policymaking and their views form part of the policies, they will also ensure that the policy objectives come to fruition during the implementation stage. This provides an insight into why there are always issues with INEC in terms of policy implementation during elections.

Thus, one can convincingly argue that INEC's claims of reforms have mainly served the purpose of belongingness and receiving assistance from development partners as frequent failures to dispassionately implement its reform objectives have demonstrated. Additionally, considering election preparation, the environment of the election period is one of intense politicking and heightened tension (Abada et al., 2023), and the deployment of men (both poll officials and security personnel) and materials are done in a fashion akin to a war situation (Mbah, Nwangwu & Ugwu, 2019). The environment also depicts an atmosphere of poor democratic orientation on the side of Nigerian politicians who rarely believe in the dual nature of electoral contests: every election inevitably produces either a winner or a loser. This situation is also exacerbated by the notion that access to power guarantees access to state resources (Onuoha, 2008), and the lucrative benefits and privileges attached to public offices in the country (Abada et al., 2023).

Thus, those who control the Nigerian government are in a firm grip on the INEC and influence its operations to increase their odds of victory in any electoral contests. This depicts why Nigerian elections are undermined by incidences of violent electoral irregularities with their attendant loss of lives and property (see Angerbrandt, 2018; Onapajo, 2014). Elections held in this situation cannot be free and fair and will not wear the hallowed toga of credibility (see Onuoha et al., 2020; Merloe, 2008). Ideally, elections are supposed to be a peaceful contest among political actors and their outcomes will either produce winners or losers (Fjelde & Höglund, 2022). However, in the case of Nigeria, elections have become a must-win contest characterized by lethal bloodshed. The biometric devices introduced to address election-related issues by reducing human interface have turned out to facilitate them on account of government interference in biometric policy implementation, thereby making every election season in Nigeria a life-taking period.

Comparative discussion of findings in Africa

The 1990s is regarded as a glorious period for Africa in its quest for representative electoral democracy. Some scholars like Schraeder (1995) and Anku (2022) have oft-referred the period as Africa's third wave of democratization, springtime, or second independence. This period began with the 1990 protest against an undemocratic rule in the Republic of Benin to the 1999 commencement of democratic rule in Nigeria – one of the biggest countries on the continent. Between 1990 and 1999, many African countries dethroned dictatorial, military or one-party state and embraced multiparty politics embedded in electoral democratic practice. These countries respectively established their EMBs as statutory authorities and constitutionally charged them with election administration in line with global practice.

Their independence is also enshrined in the constitutions to ensure they organize credible elections and deepen democracy on the continent. For instance, Articles 45 of the 1991 Zambian Constitution, Article 46 of the 1992 Ghanaian Constitution, and Section 158 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, respectively guaranteed the independence or autonomy of the Zambian, Ghanaian, and Nigerian EMBs. Furthermore, the electoral body's principal officers like the chairman, deputy chairmen, and other critical members are all appointed by their respective presidents (see Article 43 of Ghana Constitution, 1992; Article 5 of Electoral Commission of Zambia Act, 2016; Section 154 and Part I of the Third Schedule to the 1999 CFRN).

The fact that some of the 1990s political transitions in Africa later took divergent directions demonstrates the divergent illiberalities of modern democracy, reflected in its composite nature, and the complexity of the African peculiarity (Carbone & Cassani, 2016). The prevailing reality today is that some of the elections held in Africa have turned out bad and lethal, thereby waning public trust in them and undermining their democratic features as a peaceful strategy for competing interest mediation. Recent flawed elections in Africa include Nigeria's 2023 presidential election with claims of altered results and voter suppression and Sierra Leone's 2023 presidential election in which a winner is declared amid 'statistical inconsistencies' and fraud (Nwonwu, Mwai & Igonikon, 2023; Reuters, 2023). The widely held optimism in the 1990s that multiparty elections would provide the basis on which voters choose leaders that would promote the security of their lives and property as well as better their lots is today dying because it is either the power to govern does not truly emanate from the voters or a proportional minority is responsible for leadership recruitment. Nigeria represents this situation in Africa due to government interference in election administration.

Again, the 2017 fraud-infected presidential election in Kenya and the 2019 Malawian "tipex" presidential poll were all monitored and certified by both local and foreign election observers, but the elections were voided by the Kenyan and Malawian supreme courts on the grounds of irrepressible electoral irregularities that represent a deflection of the electoral laws (Gruenbaum, 2020; de Freytas-Tamura, 2017). These raise questions about the usefulness of election observers and cast indelible aspersions on their armchair election observations. Similarly, elections in Nigeria, particularly the poorly managed 2011 elections received the certification of election observers as being credible (Human Rights Watch, 2011). But unlike in Kenya and Malawi, the Nigerian courts joined the league of election certification institutions and have always upheld all (whether fraud-infested or not) presidential elections held in the country since 1999.

Flawed elections leading to violence sometimes remain unnoticed in otherwise peaceful societies and, in some cases, they coexist with electoral violence without the shadow of the gun to destabilize the societies (Staniland, 2014). For illustration, elections in Benin, Malawi, and Zambia have witnessed isolated incidents of violence without leading to instances of large-scale communal conflict or civil war (Fjelde & Höglund, 2022; Brosché, Fjelde & Höglund, 2020). These countries are domiciled in a continent where elections are heavily characterized by large-scale bloodshed. Unlike this scenario, a significant share of electoral violence is committed in societies where different forms of violence co-exist with

ethnocommunal violence, civil violence, insurgency leading to militarization of the electoral process (Onuoha et al., 2020; Harish and Toha 2017; Goldsmith, 2015). This is the situation in some African countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire where elections are far from being peaceful with electoral violence occurring in parallel to existing long-standing armed conflicts (Fjelde & Höglund, 2022; Brosché, Fjelde & Höglund, 2020).

Conclusion

This study makes an empirical contribution to the problem of government interference in election management in Nigeria. It focuses on how this interference cripples INEC independence, affects its membership composition, finances, and operations, and results in lethal electoral irregularities in Nigeria. The 1999 CFRN on which basis INEC derives its existential legal impetus, contains various crisis-ridden and ambiguous provisions, which Nigerian politicians leverage to hold it hostage. By its nomenclature and constitutional recognition as a statutory federal body, INEC conveys the notion of independence. By this, INEC is expected to exercise its independence in determining functional strategies to improve the quality of Nigerian elections. But the reality is that INEC independence exists in the attachment of “independent” to its name. It has not truly demonstrated its independence in providing a level playing ground for parties and their candidates seeking to gain power through elections.

Consequently, since INEC is not in firm control of its key officers and finances, its operations are what the politicians make of them. This explains why many Nigerians have serious misgivings about Nigerian elections regarding the constitutional provision which empowers the president to appoint INEC principal officers, control its finances, and subtly determine its operations. This constitutional INEC design delinks the institutional INEC independence from its operational independence, which existence is determined by the government. With this design, elections in Nigeria have charges of partial implementation of electoral rules, result alterations, snatching of election materials, arrest and kidnapping of poll staff, manipulation of the electoral process, vote buying, and violent disruption (Electoral Reform Committee, 2008; Olaniyan, 2020).

The study queries the voter turnouts because the basis (voter register) on which it is measured is questionable. Cases of underage voters, double registrations, and infiltration with names of dead people and foreigners surround the register in Nigeria (Vanguard, 2022; NCS Situation Room, 2015; EU EOM, 2015). Again, INEC does not have any database to identify Nigerians with party affiliation to enable it to ascertain the affiliation status of its ad-hoc staff before their engagement in election management. In the absence of this database, one can conveniently make a logical case that the retinue of INEC ad-hoc staff is mostly party loyalists who can subtly operate within the system to help politicians to influence the electoral process, determine its outcomes, jeopardize the credibility of the process, and shrinks the public confidence to stunning lows.

These findings underscore the need for voter-driven electoral reforms since government-determined ones have not addressed the fundamental problems with the electoral system in Nigeria. Instructively, this study does not claim to offer a one-swoop explanation to the myriad of electoral problems facing democratic operations in developing countries by exposing the enduring systemic interference in election management in Nigeria. It leaves other plausible explanations in the domain of further studies. Such studies should explore other factors and explain why the various legislative reforms in Nigeria as elsewhere have failed to address the fundamental problems relating to EMB's operational independence, logistics arrangements, and/or budgeting challenges.

Footnotes

¹ The card is a chip-embedded biometric device that contains the bio-data of every eligible Nigerian voter.

² The features include existence of electoral bodies, periodic multiparty elections, and judicial systems.

³ The figure is derived from Adetutu Balogun's Twitter Handle: <https://twitter.com/Tutsy22/status/1100635830534717443>.

⁴ We maintain that merit and quota system has its problem and contradiction.

⁵ The Electoral Act of 2010 was amended in 2015.

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