

INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND THE CHALLENGES OF ELECTION ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Election administration has traditionally been the responsibility of Nigeria's election management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). However, a critical question remains: Is INEC truly independent? Nigerians aspire to an electoral process that reflects the will of the people, one that is free, fair, transparent, and devoid of violence, maladministration, and controversy. Assessing the extent to which these aspirations are realised requires an examination of the challenges faced by INEC in administering elections. This paper explores the difficulties encountered by INEC in conducting elections in Nigeria. The study adopts the Marxist theory of the state as its analytical framework and employs both primary and secondary data sources, with qualitative analysis. The findings reveal that INEC's administrative capacity significantly impacts election credibility. Although the commission is officially designated as independent, it lacks the operational autonomy necessary to ensure truly free, fair, and credible elections. The paper argues that structural and systemic constraints hinder INEC's effectiveness. To address these challenges, it recommends genuine independence for the electoral body, including both financial and operational autonomy.

Keywords: Election administration, INEC, electoral integrity, political autonomy, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Nigeria's democratic trajectory is intricately tied to the integrity of its electoral process. At the heart of this process lies the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), a constitutionally empowered body tasked with administering and supervising elections. While INEC is legally designated as an independent institution, questions persist about the extent of its autonomy and effectiveness in fulfilling its mandate. Concerns surrounding political interference, administrative inefficiency, and inadequate resource control continue to cast doubt on the credibility of Nigeria's elections (Obi, 2020). As electoral outcomes remain contested and public trust in electoral institutions wanes, a critical assessment of INEC's operational environment becomes imperative. This paper examines the challenges of election administration in Nigeria, with a focus on the structural and systemic constraints that hinder

the performance of INEC. Drawing on the Marxist theory of the state, the paper situates INEC within the broader power relations of Nigerian society, emphasising how the ruling class influences state institutions to maintain its dominance. For example, the recurrence of electoral violence, logistical setbacks, and selective law enforcement illustrate the ways in which INEC's institutional weaknesses are both shaped by and reflective of Nigeria's political economy (Oviasuyi & Lawrence, 2021). To elaborate these arguments, the paper adopts a seven-part structure. Following the introductory section, the following section reviews relevant literature on electoral governance and the institutional evolution of INEC. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework, elaborating on the Marxist theory of the state and its relevance to electoral administration. The methodology section outlines the data sources and analytical methods employed. Subsequently, the findings section presents the key administrative, financial, and political challenges faced by INEC, supported by empirical evidence. The discussion section connects these findings to broader systemic issues and evaluates the implications for democratic consolidation. Finally, the paper concludes with policy recommendations designed to enhance INEC's independence and electoral credibility in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review

The administration of elections in Nigeria is marred by systemic and institutional challenges that erode the credibility and effectiveness of the process. At the center of these issues is the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), whose mandate is to organise, oversee, and deliver free and fair elections. While INEC is constitutionally established as an independent body, its actual autonomy is often compromised in practice. A significant challenge is political interference, especially in the areas of funding and appointments. INEC's financial dependence on the executive arm of government raises concerns about its impartiality and ability to resist external pressure (Ezeani, 2020).

Closely tied to political interference is the issue of electoral violence and insecurity. The recurring pattern of violence before, during, and after elections continues to pose a serious threat to electoral integrity. These acts of violence often target INEC officials, security personnel, and voters, disrupting the electoral process and intimidating the electorate (Omaka & Ome, 2015). Compounding this problem are logistical and operational inefficiencies. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) frequently struggles with the timely

delivery and distribution of sensitive electoral materials, voter registration equipment, and staffing, resulting in delays and confusion on election day (Uzochukwu et al., 2015).

Technological failures have also hampered INEC's performance. Although the introduction of biometric verification and electronic transmission of results was intended to enhance transparency, their implementation has been marred by inadequate infrastructure, equipment malfunctions, and a lack of technical expertise among electoral staff (Arowolo, 2022). These failures not only delay the process but also lead to disputes over the accuracy and authenticity of election results. As a consequence, public confidence in the electoral system continues to wane.

Voter apathy and disenfranchisement are additional issues undermining INEC's work. Many eligible voters are either unwilling to participate due to a lack of faith in the system or are unable to vote because of administrative hurdles such as incomplete voter registration, lack of voter cards, or misinformation about polling units (Oladapo & Mbalisi, 2018). Corruption further erodes the system, with instances of vote buying, ballot box snatching, and result falsification regularly reported. Despite legal frameworks criminalising these acts, enforcement remains weak, and perpetrators are seldom held accountable (Igbokwe-Ibeto et al., 2019).

Finally, legal and judicial constraints also present a significant barrier to electoral credibility. The current legal framework governing elections contains ambiguities that often lead to prolonged post-election litigation. These legal bottlenecks delay the resolution of electoral disputes and cast doubt on the legitimacy of elected officials (Onwe, 2011). In many cases, courts have been accused of partisanship or of delivering judgments that contradict public expectations, further weakening democratic trust.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs the Marxist theory of the state as its theoretical framework for examining the dynamics of electoral administration in Nigeria. According to Marxist theory, the state is not a neutral arbiter of societal interests but rather an instrument used by the dominant economic class to maintain its power and suppress opposition. In the context of Nigeria's electoral system, this framework helps expose how the structure and operation of institutions, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), are deeply influenced by elite interests, thereby constraining their ability to function independently and equitably.

Several scholarly works support the relevance of the Marxist lens in understanding the dysfunctions within Nigeria's electoral system. Ugwunna and Godson (2021) argue that electoral fraud in Nigeria is rooted in elite efforts to manipulate the electoral process in ways that protect their political and economic dominance. The authors contend that elections in Nigeria often fail to serve as a genuine mechanism for popular representation, instead functioning as a tool through which ruling elites perpetuate their control (Ugwunna & Godson, 2021).

Similarly, Nwachukwu (2018) employs the Marxist theory to examine the persistence of electoral violence in Nigeria, directly linking it to elite struggles for power. The paper emphasises how the ruling class exploits violence and institutional weaknesses within INEC to undermine electoral integrity and sustain their hegemony (Nwachukwu, 2018). This perspective aligns with the broader Marxist assertion that state institutions, including electoral bodies, are shaped by the imperatives of the dominant class rather than the needs of the populace.

Further reinforcing this argument, Eleagu and Eleagu (2019) apply a Marxist analysis to historical electoral trends in Nigeria, demonstrating that elections have consistently been characterised by violence, fraud, and manipulation —practices that benefit elite actors while eroding public trust and participation. The study emphasises that citizen observers and democratic reforms often struggle to overcome these deeply entrenched power asymmetries (Eleagu & Eleagu, 2019).

Additionally, Nwangwu and Ononogbu (2016) extend the Marxist critique to the realm of electoral law and campaign finance. They argue that the legal frameworks governing elections are often deliberately ambiguous or underenforced to serve the interests of "political entrepreneurs," a term they use to describe the politically connected elite who benefit from maintaining a dysfunctional electoral order (Nwangwu & Ononogbu, 2016). These arguments construct a compelling model for understanding the challenges INEC and Nigeria's electoral system encounter, highlighting the continued need for comprehensive reforms to address systemic and structural inconsistencies in Nigeria.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the challenges faced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in conducting credible elections in Nigeria. The research relies on secondary data sources, with a focus on archival research and document analysis to uncover the operational, financial, and political obstacles impacting INEC's autonomy and performance. Secondary data was sourced from existing literature, including scholarly articles, official INEC reports, and media coverage of election-related issues. Previous election reports, especially those from the 2015 and 2019 general elections, were critically analyzed to assess how INEC responded to past challenges. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how institutional weaknesses and political manipulation have shaped the quality of elections in Nigeria. The data gathered through documents were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allows for the identification of recurring themes and patterns. In particular, the analysis focused on issues of electoral integrity, operational inefficiencies, political manipulation, and the role of external actors in influencing INEC's actions. The findings were organized to reflect the primary factors affecting INEC's capacity to administer free, fair, and credible elections. This methodological approach aligns with previous studies that have used qualitative techniques to explore election administration in Nigeria. For instance, Mba (2022) utilized qualitative analysis to examine INEC's performance in the 2015 elections, revealing that despite reforms, the commission's autonomy remained constrained by political pressures (Mba, 2022). Similarly, Sule et al. (2017) adopted a qualitative approach to examine the role of INEC in monitoring campaign finance, highlighting the limitations posed by inadequate political will and weak legal frameworks (Sule et al., 2017).

5. Findings

The analysis of electoral administration in Nigeria reveals several interrelated challenges that significantly impede the ability of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to conduct free, fair, and credible elections. These challenges are primarily rooted in political interference, logistical inefficiencies, electoral violence, and institutional limitations, all of which contribute to the erosion of public trust in the electoral process.

A central issue identified in the findings is the persistent political interference in the operations of INEC. Despite being constitutionally designated as an independent body, the commission continues to struggle with external pressures from political elites, particularly regarding leadership appointments, funding, and operational directives. This political influence undermines INEC's autonomy, making it difficult for the body to perform its duties impartially and transparently. The lack of independence is further compounded by the executive's control over financial resources, which affects INEC's ability to carry out its activities effectively. As noted by Aboh and Obem (2022), such interference has contributed to systemic challenges within INEC that hinder its ability to deliver a credible electoral process.

In addition to political interference, electoral violence remains a persistent problem that jeopardizes the integrity of elections in Nigeria. The period leading up to, during, and after elections is often marked by violence that targets INEC staff, security personnel, and voters. This violence disrupts the electoral process, particularly in regions with political tensions, and often leads to delays, destruction of election materials, and widespread intimidation of the electorate. The 2023 general elections were no exception, as widespread insecurity created an environment of uncertainty, further exacerbating the challenges faced by INEC in conducting a fair election. Abumbe and Owa (2024) highlighted that such violence, coupled with inadequate security measures, severely undermines the transparency and credibility of the electoral system.

Logistical and operational challenges also significantly affect INEC's performance. Despite the introduction of technological innovations such as the Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and electronic result transmission, operational failures such as delays in the delivery of materials and malfunctioning electronic systems have plagued recent elections. In particular, the 2015 elections were marred by logistical failures that compromised the timely distribution of materials and the efficiency of electoral processes, leading to confusion and frustration among voters and officials alike. According to Eze and James (2016), these operational shortcomings contribute to the overall inefficiency of the commission, calling into question its capacity to handle elections on a national scale.

Furthermore, corruption and electoral malpractices continue to undermine the credibility of INEC and the electoral process as a whole. Practices such as vote buying, ballot box snatching, and result manipulation are endemic within Nigeria's electoral system. Despite the legal

frameworks designed to curb such malpractices, weak enforcement and a lack of political will to address corruption have allowed these practices to persist. This problem is further exacerbated by a lack of transparency in the election process, leading to disputes over election outcomes and a lack of public confidence in the integrity of the system. Orji (2016) emphasized that these corrupt practices not only discredit the electoral body but also perpetuate a cycle of political manipulation and disenfranchisement, further alienating the electorate.

Lastly, the legal and institutional constraints within Nigeria's electoral framework present significant challenges. The electoral laws often contain ambiguities that create opportunities for legal loopholes, resulting in prolonged post-election litigation that delays the resolution of disputes. This uncertainty undermines the legitimacy of elected officials and contributes to the public's dissatisfaction with the electoral process. Additionally, the weak enforcement of electoral laws allows offenders to act with impunity, further eroding trust in the system. As Saka and Sesa (2024) argue, the inability of the judiciary to effectively address electoral disputes and the lack of accountability for electoral offenders have compounded the crisis of electoral legitimacy in Nigeria.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for comprehensive electoral reforms in Nigeria to address the persistent challenges undermining the credibility of the electoral process. Based on the identified obstacles, one of the most critical reforms is the full institutional and operational autonomy of INEC. Despite legal provisions for independence, the commission remains vulnerable to political interference. Strengthening INEC's autonomy, particularly in financial and operational matters, will help mitigate undue external influence and ensure that its actions are not swayed by political interests. There is a pressing need for reforms that provide INEC with both the financial independence and the structural capacity to carry out its responsibilities without political constraints (Arowolo, 2013).

Furthermore, INEC must be equipped with the necessary logistical resources to handle the complexity of organizing national elections. This includes timely delivery of electoral materials, adequate training for ad-hoc staff, and the provision of functional technological infrastructure. The failure of the Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) during

previous elections illustrates the need for comprehensive planning and better coordination (Okoh, 2005).

Reforms in the electoral laws are also necessary to close the existing loopholes that enable electoral malpractices such as vote-buying, ballot box stuffing, and result manipulation. A robust legal framework that strictly enforces electoral integrity, combined with the establishment of an independent Electoral Offences Commission, would serve as a deterrent to electoral fraud. Strengthening the enforcement of these laws will ensure greater accountability and transparency in the electoral process (Ekong & Anthony, 2016).

The recurrent issue of electoral violence must be addressed through stronger security measures, improved coordination with security agencies, and stricter punishment for perpetrators of electoral-related violence. Ensuring the safety of voters, INEC officials, and party agents is crucial for a peaceful electoral process. Moreover, political parties should be held accountable for any involvement in or incitement to electoral violence (Ihugba & Alfred, 2019).

Comprehensive voter education campaigns are necessary to combat voter apathy and misinformation. Educating the electorate on the voting process, their rights, and the importance of participation can help increase voter turnout and reduce disenfranchisement. Additionally, media engagement and public awareness campaigns can play a significant role in improving the transparency of the electoral process and fostering greater trust in INEC's activities (Abubakar & Yahaya, 2018).

Finally, the political will to implement electoral reforms is crucial. The success of any reform depends on the commitment of all stakeholders, particularly the political elites, to adhere to democratic principles. As noted by Shehu et al. (2017), reforms will only be effective if there is genuine political will from all political actors to respect the rule of law and uphold the integrity of the electoral process (Shehu et al., 2017).

7. Conclusion

The administration of elections in Nigeria has long been fraught with challenges that undermine the integrity and credibility of the electoral process. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), while legally designated as an independent body, continues to grapple with political interference, logistical inefficiencies, electoral violence, and systemic corruption.

These challenges not only hinder INEC's ability to conduct free, fair, and credible elections but also perpetuate a cycle of distrust and disenfranchisement among the electorate. The findings of this study reveal that the issues facing INEC are deeply rooted in Nigeria's political and institutional framework. Political elites' control over key aspects of electoral management, including funding and leadership appointments, has diminished INEC's operational autonomy, leaving it vulnerable to external manipulation. Furthermore, the failure to effectively address electoral violence, inadequate logistical preparation, and widespread corruption within the electoral system have compounded these issues, eroding public confidence in the electoral process. Despite these significant challenges, the potential for reform remains. The recommendations outlined in this paper emphasize the need for comprehensive electoral reforms aimed at ensuring the independence of INEC, improving its logistical and operational capacity, strengthening legal frameworks, and addressing electoral violence. By focusing on institutional autonomy, electoral transparency, and political will, these reforms have the potential to significantly improve the credibility of Nigeria's elections and foster a more robust democratic system. For Nigeria to achieve genuine democratic consolidation, it is crucial that these reforms are implemented with commitment and urgency. The success of the electoral process depends not only on the institutional changes within INEC but also on the broader political will to create an environment that supports democratic principles and electoral integrity. Only through sustained efforts to address these systemic challenges can Nigeria hope to conduct elections that reflect the true will of its people and contribute to the long-term stability of its democracy.

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