

Issues and Challenges of Election Postponement in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examines the circumstances that led to the postponement of election by Nigeria's electoral body at different periods in the nation's democratic history. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 2011, 2015 and 2019 rescheduled general elections dates that perplexed Nigerian voters and political parties. The shift in the dates of the elections generated suspicion and anxiety in the country that resulted in differing interpretations on the negative or positive intention of INEC for postponing the elections to a later date. The study used secondary data such as books, journals, newspapers and magazines, and content analysis as its methodology. The Independent Model of Electoral Management as put forward by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2014) was adopted as the framework that guides this paper. The model states that the autonomy of an electoral body provides it with leverage to take decisions outside the control of other organs of government, thereby ensuring a level playing ground for all political parties towards attaining the conduct of free and fair elections. The study found out that the postponement of elections in 2011, 2015 and 2019 were anchored on rational grounds, even though majority of Nigerians were shocked to hear the shift. In the end, all the polls shifted were certified credible by local and international observers. The study recommends that the federal government should always release funds on time to aid in advance preparations for elections by INEC. So also, INEC should prepare adequately to forestall future re-occurrence of election postponement in the country.

Keywords: Challenges, Commission, Election issues, Postponement and Voters.

Introduction

Election is the veritable mechanism for ensuring legitimate transfer of power from one government to another in a democratic system. The credibility of elections as conducted by the electoral body is the pathway to democratic consolidation in any polity. The dexterity by which INEC conduct credible, free and fair elections devoid of suspicion is the hallmark of its legitimacy at national and global levels. The public confidence in the ability of the electoral umpire to deliver a well-organized election to the satisfaction of stakeholders is critical to the survival of democracy in Nigeria. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, INEC has postponed elections three times in 2011, 2015 and 2019. In 2011, the Presidential and National Assembly elections were shifted from April 2nd to April 4th. Similarly, Nigeria's 2015 General Elections earlier slated for 14th February and 28th February, 2015 for the National Assembly and Presidential elections, and Governorship and State Assembly elections were rescheduled for 28th March and 11th April 2015 respectively. The announcement by INEC on 7th February, 2015 on postponement of the elections was a shock to Nigerians and the international community (Global Post, 2015). So also, the 2019 General Elections were shifted due to operational problems. The Presidential and National Assembly elections were shifted from February 16th, 2019 to February 23rd, 2019, while the Governorship and State Assembly elections took place on March 9th, 2019 (Mohammed, 2019).

Following a letter written by the National Security Adviser (NSA) to INEC on Wednesday, 4th February, 2015; the NSA, the Armed Services and other Intelligence Agencies at the National Council of State meeting – the highest advisory to the President comprising past and present leaders in Nigeria - held on Thursday, 5th February 2015, unanimously agreed that the safety and security of election operations could not be guaranteed. They also emphasized that the Security Services needed at least six weeks within which to conclude a major military operation against the insurgency in the Northeast Nigeria; and that during this operation, the military would be concentrating its attention in the theatre of operations such that they might not be able to provide the traditional support they render to the Police and other agencies during elections (Jega, 2015). Consequently, INEC had to reschedule the elections to 28th March, and 11th April, 2015, relying on Section 26 (1) of the Electoral Act 2010, as amended. According to Jega (2015) the total number of Permanent Voter Cards (PVC's) collected as at 5th February 2015, was 45,829,808, representing 66.58% of the total number of registered voters. Consequently, INEC promised to use the period of the extension to keep on perfecting its systems and processes for conducting the best elections in Nigeria's history. In particular, it was expected to resolve all outstanding issues related to non-collection of PVCs, which agitate the minds of many Nigerians (Jega, 2015).

In some established democracies, alternative electoral systems result from the choice by political parties which is predictably based on each alternative system's expected effects, both immediate and long-term, on their electoral self' interests (Boix, 1999). In emerging democracies, on the contrary, what form of electoral system is most appropriate for the consolidation of democratic rule is rarely debated among political leaders, electoral administrators and civil society elements (Barkan, Densham & Rushton, 2006). Similarly, Maskell (2004) is of the view that unlike more established democratic systems, electoral formula in most developing countries impacts on the form of representation of parties in the legislature, other factors, like the importance of presidential rule, the regional distribution of voters, and manipulation of constituency design also impact on party representation and contribute to the observed dominance of one party. Electoral systems are broadly grouped into three major categories with their own variations: the plurality system, the majority system and the proportional representation system. The plurality system is variously called first-past-the-post or winner-takes-all. This system is based on territorially demarcated single member constituencies, with the candidate or party getting the greater number of votes winning in only one round even if the proportion of the votes gained does not constitute a majority (Shively, 1999). However, this system constitutes structural inadequacy and an obstacle to democracy in Africa's highly ethnicized politics as the votes cast for the losers are considered wasted in the sense that they do not serve as effective instruments for expressing the voters' will (Bauer, 2001).

The majority system is a modification of the plurality system as the candidate only wins if he or she receives an absolute majority of the votes cast in the constituency, that is, win more than 50 % of the total votes cast (Bauer, 2001). An effect of both the plurality system and the majority system is that they tend to exaggerate the parliamentary representation of the largest political party (Maskell, 2004). The proportional representation system treats the entire state as one constituency or provides for multimember constituencies. The purpose of this system is to ensure that all political parties are guaranteed a place in legislatures. It is perceived as constituting the most adequate system to govern any society with a high degree of segmentation (Boix, 1999). Although it may also entrench political engagement along ethnic lines if it does not take into account the existing political traditions and the degree of civic and voter education so crucial to its

effectiveness. Under the proportional representation system, there are two variations namely the single transferable vote and the party list system. The single transferable vote emphasizes the personal rather than the territorial principle and provides for a candidate to obtain a quota of votes which is approximately the number of votes equal to the total votes cast divided by the number of seats to be filled. In the party list system, each competing party receives a specific percentage of seats proportional to the total number of votes gained (Bauer, 2001).

Methodology

The study derived its data from secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers and magazines. Qualitative method through content analysis was adopted in achieving the mandate of the paper in critically evaluating the data utilized for the study. The study was restricted to the 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections because they were subjected to postponement under the current democratic dispensation that began in 1999 which is the focus of the paper.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts the Independent Model of Electoral Management as put forward by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2014) as its guide. This model is applicable to countries that have autonomous electoral management body. The electoral body in this case is independent of any government agency, ministry or department. It could in some instances be accountable to the legislature, the judiciary or the Head of State. The electoral body in the context of this model possess administrative and financial autonomy.

This model fits Nigeria's situation. The Independent National Electoral Commission in Nigeria is autonomous and executes electoral programmes without any governmental organ interference. In that regard, INEC is empowered under the Electoral Act Section 26 (1) as amended to postpone election on grounds of natural disasters, and other emergencies. This provision gives INEC the decision making leverage to postpone elections as the case with 2011, 2015 and 2019.

Conceptual Clarification

Election

Election is the process by which eligible citizens within a given nation choose candidates of their choice to occupy positions of authority for specific duration as enshrined in the constitution (Mohammed, 2014). Agbu (2016) also provides a potent definition of election as the procedure that allows members of a state, organization, or community to choose representatives who will hold positions of authority within it, and which promotes public accountability. Elections are classified into two major categories, namely; general and primary elections. General election is normally a nationwide activity in which political parties vie for offices at central and regional levels. Primary election on the other hand is conducted at party level to select party flagbearers that will contest in general election.

The Independent National Electoral Commission and Election Postponement in Nigeria

The electoral legal framework in Nigeria allows for temporary postponement of election in times of declared public emergency. The postponement must be deemed necessary in the circumstances and should not be contrary to the provisions of the Electoral Act. Long postponement of election is counter to national and international obligation to allow citizens to hold their government accountable. The postponement of elections in 2011, 2015 and 2019 were necessitated by logistical and security concerns, even though it generated skepticism and condemnation from sections of

stakeholders and the public. The 2011 elections were delayed due to INEC's late deployment of electoral materials. According to Professor Attahiru Jega the then INEC Chairman, the 2011 election was postponed due to:

..... the unanticipated emergency we have experienced with late arrival of result sheets in many parts of the country. The result sheets are central to the elections and their integrity... In order to maintain the integrity of the elections and retain effective control of the process, the commission has taken the difficult but necessary decision to postpone the National Assembly elections to Monday April, 4th 2011 (cited in Yusuf, 2019, p. 1).

The shift of the elections in 2011 was received with mixed reactions. There was significant despondency among voters and political parties which resulted to suspicion that INEC was working for the government in order to preclude the possibility of defeat of the incumbent. Others perceived the postponement as part of institutional intricacies confronted by the commission, and should be given the chance to organize a befitting election acceptable to Nigerians (Erezi, 2019). In 2015, the Presidential and National Assembly elections were shifted from February 4th to March 28th, while the Governorship and State Assembly elections were moved from February 28th to April 11th, 2015. The elections were postponed due to security challenges. According to Mohammed (2019, p.101):

Unlike the unfortunate postponement of the 2011 general elections, which were essentially informed by the challenges of logistics, particularly in the supply of election materials, the 2015 postponement was purely on security matters of considerable attention.

The postponement of the 2015 elections attracted national and international reactions. The U.S State Department expressed the American government's disappointment over the delay in the conduct of the polls. It called for restraint and respect for democratic rules by all stakeholders towards ensuring the conduct of credible elections (Global Post, 2015). The All Progressives Congress (APC) felt bitter on the postponement of the 2015 polls. The worry by the APC was hinged on the believe that the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and its candidate President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan will utilize the shift to regroup and mobilize, because he was behind the APC candidate Muhammadu Buhari in the opinion polls (Global Post, 2015).

The 2019 general elections equally suffered from the dilemma of postponement. The Presidential and National Assembly elections were rescheduled and took place on February 23rd, 2019, while the Governorship and State Assembly elections were held on March 9th, 2019. The major reasons given for the shift were logistics, bad weather and late delivery of election materials. According to Professor Mahmood Yakubu the INEC Chairman, the election was postponed because:

Following a careful review of the implementation of its logistics and operational plan, and the determination to conduct free, fair and credible elections, the commission came to the conclusion that proceeding with the elections as scheduled is no longer feasible (cited in Erezi, 2019, p. 1).

The shift of the 2019 general elections by INEC sparked vociferous attacks and condemnations from political parties and other stakeholders in the country. The former Governor of Ekiti State and PDP chieftain Ayodele Fayose stated that:

INEC under Professor Mahmood Yakubu is obviously acting a script prepared by the Presidency cabal but Nigerians will defeat them all together. I said it two weeks ago that they were considering postponement, they have only succeeded in making their situation worse. Nigerians will defeat this tyranny ultimately (cited in Busari & Kabir, 2019, p. 2).

The Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity to the Vice President, Laolu Akande stated that:

The postponement is disappointing. Mr. President was already in Daura in Katsina State and VP already in Lagos to vote this morning before the postponement just announced by INEC. This is truly disappointing, but the march to the Next Level continues (cited in Busari & Kabir, 2019, p. 2).

In response to Laolu Akande's statement, the Spokesman of the Coalition of United Political Parties of Nigeria, Imo Ugochinyere made it clear that:

The President (Muhammadu Buhari) was not sincere in his claim that he was disappointed by the electoral body's decision to postpone the election. Buhari who is the Presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress was only pained by the decision because the INEC did not resort to staggered elections as desired by the Presidency which was why your government security forces sabotaged election materials distribution (cited in Adetayo. 2019, p.3).

Alhaji Atiku Abubakar who was the Presidential candidate of the opposition party PDP also reacted to the postponement of the 2019 elections saying that "by instigating this postponement, the Buhari administration hopes to disenfranchise the Nigerian electorate in order to ensure that turnout is low on the rescheduled date" (cited in Mumbere, 2019, p. 2). Atiku's pronouncement was a direct indictment of the APC, claiming that the party wanted to use the shift of date to manipulate the elections to its favour.

The postponement of these elections created tension in the polity and which put the integrity of INEC at stake. The implications of the shifts include suspicion of vote rigging, voter apathy, distortion of schedules of international election observers and disenchantment by the opposition parties (Yusuf, 2019). Other key factors that lead to postponement of elections in Nigeria are:

- i. **Late preparation and prompt release of funds:** The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has not been utilizing ample period of four years in-between general elections to fully prepare for conducting credible election. INEC preparations are in some instances impaired by late release of funds to the commission by the government which affect the hiring of ad-hoc staff, logistics and delivery of sensitive materials to polling stations across the country. The late delivery of election materials simultaneously throughout the nation can create lopsidedness in the conduct of election which can force INEC to shift election from the initial date to another (Busari & Kabir, 2019).
- ii. **Election materials diversion:** One of the means by which electoral malpractice is perpetrated by intending persons or groups is in the process of delivery of election materials particularly to the hinterland. Unscrupulous politicians do connive with INEC officials, security agents and ad-hoc staff to rig election. The electoral body is compelled to postpone election when intelligence report indicates possibility of malpractice being planned (Erezi, 2019).

- iii. **Attitude of political parties:** Political parties especially those in opposition do spread news of plan by government in power to rig election. The information may be true or fake, which put INEC in dilemma. In trying to ensure fair play and level playing ground for all the political parties and contestants, the electoral body is pushed under duress to postpone election in order to clarify issues and protect its image (Adetayo, 2019).
- iv. **Court order:** A court judgement can compel the electoral body to postpone election to give a candidate or political party ample time to prepare for election. In a situation where a candidate is denied opportunity to vie for party primaries and later given the chance to contest due to court injunction, same court can force INEC to shift election to give adequate time for the candidate to prepare to face opponents (Agbu, 2016).

Challenges to Election Postponement in Nigeria

Suspension of investment and business decisions: The postponement of general elections can trigger economic uncertainty. It may force foreign and local investors to delay investment decisions pending the outcome of the elections to enable them know the strategic/investment direction of the in-coming administration. Owing to increased uncertainty, existing businesses do delay business decisions such as new product decisions, innovation decisions, and business expansion/market development decisions until the coast was clear. Thus, the postponement of the general elections in Nigeria at any given time is a bottleneck for domestic and foreign investment flow. Delayed investment and business decisions, and the grounding of governance, among others mean that potential value addition to the economy would always be truncated during the period of extension of election dates. Furthermore, individuals and firms would have limited choice in terms of consumption, and production decisions thereby restricting their functioning (Mehdi & Ayati, 2012).

The postponement of the 2015 general elections for six weeks by the Independent National Electoral Commission had adverse impact on the Nigerian economy to the tune of \$2bn (over N400bn) loss. It was discovered that the devaluation of the naira against the United States dollar affected the domestic airline operators as they tried to procure their spare parts abroad (Encomium Magazine, 2015). Beyond the logistic and financial implications of the postponement of the general elections, two major international research firms, Renaissance Capital and Standard Chartered Research, believe the Nigerian financial authorities may have to take some pre-emptive measures in order to tame the effects of the dwindling oil price on the economy before the new election dates (Encomium Magazine, 2015).

Heightened political tension: The sudden postponement of election barely a week to the due date generated avoidable agitations which heated up the polity. The general public was disturbed and sparked doubts as to the real intention behind the postponement. Tension was renewed with greater vigour as the new dates of elections drew nearer. The opposition parties and their supporters were jittery about the direction of the democratic process with INEC's referee status under scrutiny (Mumbere, 2019).

Diminishing credibility of INEC: The postponement of election by INEC in 2011, 2015 and 2019 leaves much to be desired with respect to the integrity and capacity of the electoral body to conduct free and fair election in Nigeria. Postponement of election increases public doubt about INEC's effectiveness in serving as an important institution for the sustainability and consolidation of democratic system in the country. The consequences of shift in election date even if plausible is

indeed undesirable because of the suspicion it generates and public outcry against it (Busari & Kabir. 2019).

Conclusion

The study examined the issues and challenges of election postponements in Nigeria with emphasis on 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections. The shift in elections at different occasions cast doubts on the capability of INEC to organize credible and hitch-free elections in Nigeria. The nation's democratic sustainability depends significantly on a sound electoral system managed by a capable electoral body. The reasons put forward by INEC for postponing the elections might be plausible but were hardly acceptable to many Nigerians. Adequate preparation for elections by INEC is necessary in order to avoid undue postponements in the future.

Recommendations

- i. The Nigerian government should increase financial allocation to INEC and release funds on time to enable the commission to prepare adequately to conduct elections devoid of postponement.
- ii. The Independent National Electoral Commission should intensify its collaboration with security agencies in order to obtain intelligence report to enable it foil any attempt by individuals or groups that can lead to election postponement.
- iii. The autonomy of the electoral body should be sustained without interference from any organ of government. It will go a long way in boosting INEC's potentials to effectively manage the electoral process that is hitch-free.

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