

ASSESSING THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION (INEC) ON DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the roles and challenges of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The study adopted the qualitative research method. Relevant data were obtained through the secondary sources. Qualitative data in the form of internet materials and other electronic materials were used. The data generated were analyzed using the discourse analytic method. Systems theory is adopted as a theoretical framework of analysis. Findings reveal that INEC's performance since the beginning of Nigeria's fourth republic in 1999 has been commendable even in the face of some challenges. These challenges ranges from legal frameworks, election management, and incumbent interference to manipulate the electoral process in their favour. There is also manipulation by political parties which encumbered INEC to effectively discharge its mandate. Some of the recommendations made are that the 2022 Electoral Act should be amended allowing for complete independence of INEC from the stranglehold of the executive and political parties. Also, INEC should be unbundled into six geo-political zones to enhance a more robust election administration in Nigeria. Additionally, the reports of the previous committees on re-structuring INEC and vital aspects of election management in Nigeria should be implemented.

Keywords: INEC, Roles, Challenges, Democratic Consolidation, Nigeria

Introduction

Elections are the most important indicator of the presence or absence of democracy in any society. Elections are very central to the principle and practice of democracy anywhere in the world and the management of elections by any election management body is significant to the electoral process and by implication, the consolidation of democracy in any country (Odoziobodo, 2015). Elections are more than just events; they are the lifeblood of representative democracy. In a democratic system, sovereignty resides in the people, and elections provide a mechanism for the people to exercise that sovereignty by choosing their representatives. This act of choosing ensures that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed. Regular, free, and fair elections enable citizens to participate in shaping their political landscape and ensure that governments are accountable to the electorate. The right to vote and the opportunity to stand for election are fundamental rights in a democracy. The electoral process involves competition and it creates an avenue for competitive party politics which Schumpeter (1975) cited in Odoziobodo, (2015) opines, entails competition among the different political parties. However, this competition has to be regulated so that the players compete within lay down rules and regulations. Election management body, within the context of this work, refers to a body which has the sole responsibility of determining those who are eligible voters, receiving and validating the nominations of contestants from political parties, conducting elections, counting of votes and declaration of results. Election management body plays a vital role in the overall quality and efficacy of the electoral processes. However, the challenges of elections in Nigeria revolve mostly around the

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the election management body saddled with the responsibility of organizing and managing elections in Nigeria since the beginning of the fourth republic in 1999 (Edet, Umoh & Akpakpan, 2021).

INEC is a critical institution that safeguard the integrity of the electoral process. Their responsibilities extend beyond simply organizing elections; they include voter registration, delimitation of electoral boundaries, voter education, and the resolution of electoral disputes. The impartiality, professionalism, and capacity of EMBs are essential for building trust in the electoral process and ensuring that election results are accepted by all stakeholders. When EMBs are weak or perceived to be biased, it can undermine the legitimacy of elections and destabilize the democratic process. The competitive nature of elections is a defining characteristic of democracy. Political parties and candidates compete for the support of voters, offering different policy platforms and visions for the future. This competition fosters debate, discussion, and the exchange of ideas, which are essential for a healthy democracy. However, this competition must occur within a framework of rules and regulations to ensure fairness, transparency, and prevent electoral malpractices. These regulations often encompass campaign finance, media access, and electoral dispute resolution mechanisms. Furthermore, democratic elections adhere to principles such as universal suffrage, secret ballot, and the freedom of association and expression.

In Nigeria, the integrity of elections has become a contentious issue due to recurring incidents of electoral fraud, violence, and systemic weaknesses in the electoral process. Allegations of vote buying, ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, and manipulation of results have cast doubt on the credibility of several election cycles. These malpractices not only hinder the expression of the genuine will of the people but also threaten the foundations of democratic governance. The perception that elections are predetermined or easily manipulated erodes public trust in democratic institutions and diminishes citizens' motivation to participate in future elections.

Moreover, the influence of powerful political elites and the use of state apparatus to tilt the electoral process in favor of incumbents or favored candidates have further complicated the issue of electoral integrity. The lack of accountability for those who perpetrate electoral offenses, combined with delayed or weak judicial responses to election petitions, has emboldened anti-democratic behavior. The failure to enforce electoral laws consistently creates a climate of impunity that undermines reforms and weakens democratic consolidation.

Technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and electronic transmission of results were introduced to improve transparency and credibility. However, inconsistent deployment, technical failures, and allegations of tampering with these systems have also sparked public outcry and legal battles. This highlights the need for not only institutional reforms but also political will and civic engagement to uphold the sanctity of the electoral process in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the roles and challenges Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives are;

- i. To examine the roles of INEC towards the consolidation of electoral process in Nigeria.
- ii. To identify the challenges of deploying new technology introduced by INEC in consolidating Nigeria's democracy

Research Questions

- i. What are the roles of INEC towards the consolidation of electoral process in Nigeria?
- ii. What are the challenges of deploying new technology introduced by INEC in consolidating Nigeria's democracy?

Statement of the Problem

Since 1999 when Nigeria returned to democratic rule, the country had witnessed complete seven cycles of general elections. These are; the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections. These elections from 1999 to 2023 appears to have marred with a lot of irregularities, and in the end, the candidates presented by INEC as the right winners seems not to have won the elections.

This is as a result of irregularities on the side of INEC to adhere to its functions strictly. This was quite noticeable in the just concluded 2023 general elections which were the seventh elections since the return of democracy in Nigeria. The elections were marred with many shortcomings starting with the high cost of purchasing nomination forms which made many competent candidates decline due to the huge money involved. Before the 2023 general elections, the government of Nigeria together with the election Umpire (INEC) promised Nigerians that they will conduct the freest and fairest elections using the new device (BVAS). But however, the presidential and National Assembly elections witnessed lots of irregularities such as rigging, underage voting, vote buying, and inability of BVAS to upload results and widespread violence. What transpired in the 2023 elections were totally against what was written in the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria as amended in 2011. NEC has been conducting off cycle elections and observers use to praise the conduct of these off-cycle elections and the conduct of off all stakeholders involved in the off-cycle elections. It is expected that INEC and stakeholders will replicate this performance in the general elections, unfortunately this is not the case. The 2019 and 2023 general elections appear to have been criticized for lack of transparency and far from being a free and fair elections.

Despite over two decades of democratic governance and repeated electoral cycles in Nigeria, questions around the credibility, transparency, and effectiveness of the electoral process continue to dominate public discourse. Numerous studies have examined Nigeria's electoral challenges, but there remains a persistent gap in understanding why systemic irregularities and institutional underperformance, particularly on the part of INEC, continue to undermine election integrity, even after the adoption of new technologies and electoral reforms.

Furthermore, while some literature has acknowledged the success of off-cycle elections, there is limited scholarly inquiry into why these successes are not replicated in nationwide general elections. The disparity between the conduct of isolated elections and broader national polls indicates a deeper issue that has not been sufficiently analyzed. Additionally, there is a need to critically assess the role of electoral innovations like BVAS and whether their implementation has genuinely improved electoral integrity or merely provided a facade of reform.

This study therefore, seeks to fill this gap by evaluating the performance of INEC in improvement of Nigeria's election and by examining the institutional, political, and technological factors that continue to impede credible elections. By doing so, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of election management challenges and offer insights that can inform policy and reform strategies to strengthen democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is established by section 153 (f) of the 1999 constitution as amended and saddled with the responsibility of organizing general elections into the offices of the President, National Assembly, Governors and State Houses of Assembly. Impliedly, election is a process and not an event. It involves both rules and structures. Lending credence to the aforesaid, Jinadu explains that by election process: Is meant the rules, procedures and activities relating to among others, the establishment of electoral bodies, the appointment of their members, the registration of voters, the nomination of candidates, balloting, counting of the ballots, the declaration of results, the selection and training of electoral officials, constituency delimitation, voter education and in some cases, registration of political parties and supervision of party nomination congresses (Jinadu, 1997 cited in Mgba, 2017).

The basis of representative democracies is a process of elections that is fair and competitive. This is the role of electoral institutions, which relates to determining how elections are contested, how the act of voting results in the election of political representatives and the determination of which political leaders form executive leadership for the next few years (Carter and Farrell, 2009). Election management body is an organization that has the sole purpose of and is legally responsible for managing some or all elements that are essential for the conduct of elections and direct democracy instruments such as referendum and recall votes. In addition to these essential elements, election management body may undertake other tasks that assist in the conduct and organization of elections which relates to voter registration, constituency delimitation, voter education and information, preliminary electoral dispute and resolution, etc.

INEC and the electoral process in Nigeria

Electoral process involves all the preliminary activities leading to the eventual conduct of elections and declaration of final results of the election in a polity. It is a continuous process, with specific period such as in Nigeria, every four (4) years is set aside to hold elections, and

preparations for the next set of elections are often immediate and continuous. The electoral cycle is divided into pre-electoral process, electoral and post-electoral phase (Houkpe & Gueye 2010).

The pre-electoral stage stretches from the actual preparation for conducting forthcoming elections to the end of electioneering campaign. It is the preparatory phase initially devised for the execution of the task necessary for the conduct of elections. It includes among others sensitisation of the citizens, electioneering campaign, compilation and updating of voters' register, training of electoral officials among others. The voting phase depicts the stage at which elections are conducted which may last few days, weeks or months. This phase includes the electorate voting for the candidates of their choice, collation of results and declaration of results. The post-election stage involves activities that occurs after the declaration of results and could include disputes, violence, litigation and swearing in of winners (Afolabi, 2018; Ezeador, 2023).

INEC and Electoral reforms in Nigeria

The need for a reform of the election management body and the electoral Process rose after the 2007 and 2011 elections. Despite the success of 2011 general elections, some critical flaws still prevailed, a weak constitutional and legal framework; endemic procedural irregularities; logistical inefficiencies; intimidation, violence and other electoral frauds. The lack of independence for Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) is more evident in the procedures for appointing members of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs). Current laws provide for EMB members to be appointed by the President, a practice which is widely seen as repugnant to EMB independence and neutral. Prior to 2015 elections, INEC carried out further reforms and introduced a new biometric register of voters, a Re-Modified Open Ballot System (REMOBS), improved security features on sensitive electoral materials, such as serial numbering, colour-coding of ballot papers and result sheets, security coding of ballot boxes, a more transparent framework for results collation and making returns, among others. INEC being armed with several technological innovations conducted more credible general elections in 2015 (Udeala, 2015).

While the 2015 General Elections represent a great achievement, these elections also demonstrated that more institutional reforms and capacity building are required to make the electoral processes in Nigeria more credible, transparent and sustainable. It was against the background of reported cases of electoral malpractices in some States of the Federation during the 2015 general elections among other reasons, which President Muhammadu Buhari promised to carry out more electoral reforms (Alechenu, 2015). President Muhammadu Buhari who was at the receiving end of flawed electoral system for 12 years promised to carry out more reforms that will fundamentally change electoral governance in Nigeria. When historians and analysts begin to chronicles actors, villains and heroes that contributed in deepening and consolidating Nigeria's democracy through purposeful engagement, one individual that will feature prominently is President Muhammadu Buhari. His participation and enrichment of the democratic system and the legal system is beyond quantifications. His doggedness, patience,

perseverance, sacrifice and strict adherence to the rule of law in seeking electoral redress and justice from a flawed process without compromising his principle and integrity, distinguished him among others (Bukhari, 2015).

Challenges and Prospects of INEC's Technology Innovation towards Consolidating Democratic Process in Nigeria

In Nigeria and Africa in general, one of the objectives of the transition to democracy has been a free and fair electoral system, the hallmark of liberal democracy. According to the International Institute of Democratic and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2001) cited in Ismai'la and Othman, (2015), liberal democracy is a procedural system involving open political competition, with multi party, civic and political rights guaranteed by law and accountability operating through an electoral relationship between citizens and their representatives. However, the citizens of Nigeria have clearly been denied a true experience of liberal democracy. According to IDEA (2001) cited in Isma'ila and Othman, (2015), important institutional factors that are major impediment to the electoral process in Nigeria include the limited autonomy of various electoral bodies (particularly their lack of financial empowerment) and their weak human resource base. Unreliable voters register combined with serious logistical and communication problems are characteristics of the flawed electoral process.

1. **Persistence of Violence ahead of, and During Elections:** Electoral violence is the bane of elections in Nigeria. Nigeria has a long history of violence during elections, and it is very appalling that it repeats in the 2023 general elections. This violence took place in almost all 36 States in Nigeria. Lagos for instance was the epic centre. Thugs were largely used by political parties to disrupt elections in some places like Rivers, Lagos, Enugu, Abia, Adamawa etc.
2. **Vote Buying:** In Nigeria, money plays an important role in choosing who becomes a leader. Election in Nigeria is no longer based on competency, but on who has more money that is why it is a "do or die affair". Money politics has become a common feature in Africa. The majority of Nigerian politicians still buy votes, and this has become a serious challenge facing the electoral process as it makes election results not to be a true representation of the people. According to Omotola, (2011) there were unsubstantiated allegations that the PDP also deployed a whopping N107-billion (about \$16 050-million) within three days to the presidential election to buy votes, the lion's share of which was reportedly allocated to the northern part of the country, considered to be the stronghold of the opposition CPC.
3. **Electoral Acts: In as much INEC** is independent, sometimes the National Assembly enacts Laws that can hinder INEC in its operations. Electronic voting had been on for so long, but INEC cannot implement it unless permitted by an electoral act. The Electoral Acts provided that for someone to become a president, the candidate must get 25% of votes in all 36 states and also win in FCT. This provision has been interpreted differently by legal experts and has been a subject of litigations as seen in the 2023 presidential election.

4. **Underage Voter:** The underage voter is another challenge facing the electoral process in Nigeria. Despite the deployment of the new technology BVAS, these underage voters surfaced again in the 2023 general elections and were seen voting on election days. The questions are who registered these people? Why were they allowed to vote since they are underage? This reveals the weakness on the side of the INEC to adhere to its functions (Ismail'la and Othman, 2015; Ezeador, 2023).
5. **Logistics:** During elections, there is always difficulty in moving people, sensitive and non-sensitive materials to different destinations. This logistic problem has been the reason elections do not start on time or even do not hold at all. Still, INEC equally contributes to worsening these problems. Sometimes INEC fails to plan ahead of time. These delays can be prevented by planning ahead of time and not making arrangements on the day of the elections. The INEC should also ensure that they make provisions for safe places where the ad-hoc staff will stay. The issue of allowing them to converge at the INEC offices on the day of the election is improper and can cause delays (Ismail'la and Othman, 2015).

Theoretical Framework of Analysis: System Theory of the Political System

In this work, the Easton's system theory is adopted as the theoretical framework. According to Easton (1956) cited in Hanumanthapa, (2023), the political system gets both challenges and supports from society, and it responds to the difficulties of the demands in order to preserve itself with the assistance of the support it receives. The requests and supports received by the political system from society are inputs that become outputs via a conversion process. The political system developed a number of communication channels through which demands could be persuaded or pressurized to become significantly diluted, as well as a number of reduction processes through which demands could be forced to convert themselves into specific issues, without which, it should be noted, they would not be able to feed the political system's conversion process properly (Hanumanthapa, 2023).

The election management body as a system is faced with many challenges, demands are placed on it from the environment and these comprises, individuals, political parties, interest groups etc.. This demands serve as inputs, which the election management body converts into policy actions. The innovations introduced by the election management body like the use of technology in conduct of the 2019 and 2023 general elections were a respond to the demand made on it. The Eastonian system theory fits adequately with the role the election management body is expected to carry in a political system like Nigeria. First, demands enumerate some of the demands from the society including electronic voting that are needed to be implemented by INEC towards ensuring free, fair, and credible elections in Nigeria goes to it, these demands re converted into implementable policies, a feedback comes to it from the (environment, stakeholders etc) which is converted into actionable policies and activities.

Methodology

This study is purely qualitative research design. Relevant data were obtained through the secondary source. These include textbooks, journals, newspaper publications and browsing of

the internet. Content analysis was used in the presentation and interpretation of data obtained from documents, reports, and official releases of government records

The Role of INEC in Consolidating Democratic Process in Nigeria

INEC has been central to organizing and regulating elections in Nigeria since the return to democratic rule in 1999. The Commission is responsible for voter registration, election logistics, ballot printing and distribution, vote collation, and declaration of results. Through these roles, INEC serves as the institutional backbone of Nigeria's electoral democracy.

Despite significant political interference and logistical constraints, INEC has contributed to the progressive development of Nigeria's electoral culture. Its gradual improvement in electoral procedures, particularly with respect to voter education and the training of electoral staff, demonstrates a commitment to institutionalizing democratic values. The relative success of certain off-cycle elections often praised by domestic and international observers' shows that INEC can effectively discharge its mandate under certain conditions, particularly where political violence and executive interference are minimal.

However, the persistence of elite manipulation, weak legal enforcement, and INEC's partial dependence on the executive arm of government for funding and appointments continue to undermine its autonomy. These systemic issues limit INEC's ability to act decisively against electoral malpractice and diminish public confidence in the Commission.

Challenges and Prospects of Technological Innovations Introduced by INEC

A critical component of democratic consolidation in recent election cycles has been INEC's adoption of technological innovations, particularly the Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the electronic transmission of results. These innovations were intended to minimize human manipulation, improve the credibility of election results, and foster transparency.

However, the 2023 general elections exposed multiple challenges associated with the implementation of these technologies. These included inconsistent functionality of the BVAS machines, failure to electronically transmit results as promised, and logistical lapses that delayed voting or excluded some polling units from participating. The gap between INEC's public commitments and actual execution generated public distrust and legal controversies, particularly during the presidential election.

Moreover, systemic issues such as underage voter registration, vote buying, and political thuggery persisted despite the technological upgrades. These problems suggest that while digital innovations are important, they cannot substitute for broader structural and institutional reforms. Without corresponding investment in voter education, staff training, infrastructure, and legal enforcement, technological tools may be rendered ineffective or manipulated by powerful political actors.

Nevertheless, the prospects for technological innovations remain promising. If properly deployed and supported by legislative backing, civic education, and secure infrastructure, technology can enhance electoral integrity. The increasing use of real-time result viewing

portals and digital accreditation can foster transparency and public oversight, which are key components of democratic consolidation.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has persistently worked hard to conduct free, fair, credible and acceptable elections in Nigeria, but with all the efforts of the INEC, Nigeria is still faced with numerous challenges which undermine the credibility of its elections. Abubakar (2012) revealed that, the appointment of Professor Muhammad Attahiru Jega was a sign of a new beginning for organizing a free, and credible elections compared to previous elections. Also, the adoption of the Direct Data Capture Machines and other technological tools to help in the electoral process was seen as a step in the right direction.

These technological tools and innovations were brought in to reduce, or stop completely, manipulations and rigging. These have not helped the electoral process to a very large extent. Nigeria is still bedeviled by numerous electoral issues which have led to both international and local media/observers questioning the credibility of elections and election results in Nigeria. It is on this note that the study tried to identify and examine the factors or the challenges undermining free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria, despite all the efforts of INEC (Chukwu, 2020).

INEC conducted the elections that ushered in the 4th Republic in 1999. This was largely supervised by the military in a bid to hand over power to civilian administration. Since then it organized general elections in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 as well as supplementary elections in different states and constituencies. The 2003 general elections which was the first civilian-to-civilian transition since 1999 were condemned by local and international observers (Chukwu, 2020).

A closer look at all the election management bodies Nigeria has had from 1959 to date reveals a disturbing degree of partiality and gross incompetence in the discharge of those sacred duties they were established to perform for Nigeria. Of course, in the opinion of Luqman (2009) cited in Ojukwu, Umeifekwem, and Okeke (2023), their inability to effectively manage the conduct and administration of elections and electoral process has had deleterious effects on the nation's efforts at instituting credible and virile democratic system. The most glaring of such effects was the truncation of the democratic process through military intervention in the nation's politics (Odoziobodo, 2015). It is important to note that as at the time of conducting the 2023 general election, ten general elections had already been conducted in Nigeria since political independence in 1960. These included 1964, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. Of this number, the military conducted the 1979, 1993, and 1999 transition elections as the country transitioned from military to civilian governments. On the other hand, the 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 as well as the 2019 general elections were organized by civilian governments as transition from one civilian administration to another (Chukwu, 2020).

According to Oronsaye (2008) cited in Ojukwu (2020), it is instructive to mention that the seven civilian government organized elections, that is, 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections suffered credibility problems resulting from the perception of the electorate that the elections were not free and fair and therefore, not credible. They accused the different

electoral commissions FEDECO, NEC, NECON and INEC, respectively of being partisan and pandering to the whims and machinations of the government in power. In particular, several election-monitoring groups, both domestic and international the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the Yiaga Africa, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) West Africa, IFRA-Nigeria had adjudged the 2023 elections as the worst election ever conducted in the history of Nigeria since independence. This observation was occasioned by the poor preparation and execution of the election by INEC leading to disputed results in virtually all elections held for various political offices in 2023 (Ojukwu, Umeifekwem, & Okeke 2023).

According to Ojukwu, Umeifekwem, and Okeke (2023), INEC introduced new technologies to improve administration of the 2023 polls, including BVAS and IReV. The BVAS was used to biometrically verify voters as part of the accreditation process and to electronically transmit a photo of polling unit-level results at the end of the Election Day to the IReV online portal. Publishing polling unit-level results through IReV was widely anticipated to be a significant improvement to election transparency from the 2019 polls. However, the success of these technologies is dependent on their administration, functionality on a national scale, and public confidence in the systems (IRI/NDI report, 2023).

While INEC successfully piloted both systems during three off-cycle elections, it never conducted a full nationwide stress test in advance of the February elections. In January 2023, after the procurement of BVAS machines for the 2023 elections was completed, the BVAS hardware and software was field tested at INEC state offices. Citizen observers Yiaga-Africa were able to observe the field tests in some, but not all, locations, as the exercise was reportedly not intended to be open to the public (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Positively, INEC conducted a public mock accreditation exercise on February 4 during which time results and accreditation data were also transmitted to the IReV using the BVAS machines. However, the exercise involved only 436, or less than one-third of one percent, of the polling units in the country and public participation was low. The underlined is not properly structure.

Discussion of Findings

Since the beginning of the fourth republic, the Election management body (INEC) has conducted seven cycles of elections. First, the election management body register eligible voters register new Political Parties or those that merged, display voters register, delineate constituency, rout voter's education and perform other functions as required by law. The election management body is also required to conduct the Presidential, governorship and Legislative elections. All these functions it is established is performed by the election management body with every election cycle in Nigeria since 1999 when the fourth republic started. It is also discovered it was the national Assembly that was responsible for sequencing election in 1999 but after the 2003 election, there was an amendment to the electoral law and INEC assumed the responsibility for election sequencing. As a response to issues and

challenges arising from elections, the election management body has been carrying out innovations and changes with the overall aim of ensuring the conduct of a free and fair election responsive to global best practice. It is discovered INEC has been able to introduce the use of technology at all levels of the electoral process. It also deploys the use of technology in the 2019 and 2023 general elections. However, it was also discovered that the use of technology in these elections has some challenges which affects the credibility of these elections. A summary of this study reveals that the election management body has been pushing for amendments to the electoral Act which would further a better performance. It is also worthy of note that stakeholders in the electoral process have always found a way of beating technology and other innovations put in place by INEC to improve elections and the electoral process in Nigeria. The adoption of the Electoral Act of 2022 made several changes to the conduct and timelines of political party primaries to promote transparency and ease electoral preparations. The Act enabled consensus primaries for nominating a party's candidates, in addition to direct and indirect primaries, despite prolonged efforts by civil society and other electoral stakeholders to mandate direct primaries only in the legislation. The Act also added greater clarity on the processes and procedures for each mode of party primary. In the case of a direct primary the list of all party members had to be publicly displayed, and in the case of indirect primaries the names of all of the delegates had to be displayed and provided to all aspirants. Should a party adopt a consensus candidate, the candidates removing themselves from the contest needed to provide signed letters of withdrawal from the race. Despite these clarifying procedures, transparency of the party primaries did not largely improve from 2019 as most parties opted for indirect primaries or consensus candidates, prevented INEC and citizens' observers to monitor the full primary voting process, and used backdoor negotiations to influence candidate selections.

Conclusion

This paper examines the roles, challenges and prospects of the Independent National Electoral commission (INEC) and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. This study has critically examined the functions, obstacles, and future potential of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in relation to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The findings highlight that while INEC has made notable progress in electoral management particularly through technological innovations such as BVAS its effectiveness remains significantly hindered by systemic issues. These include political interference, institutional weaknesses, voter manipulation, and logistical inefficiencies. The gap between electoral reforms and their actual implementation continues to undermine public trust and the credibility of elections, as seen in the flawed conduct of the 2023 general elections. Although off-cycle elections have shown moments of improved transparency, these successes are not yet consistently replicated at the national level. To strengthen Nigeria's democratic process, there is a need for structural reforms that guarantee the full autonomy of INEC, unbundle its operations to reflect Nigeria's geopolitical diversity, and implement the recommendations of previous reform panels. Without

genuine political will, institutional independence, and robust enforcement mechanisms, the prospects for credible and inclusive democratic governance in Nigeria will remain elusive.

Recommendations

1. On the basis of the findings, it is recommended that the Independent National Electoral Commission should be re-organized structurally and institutionally by the parliament to reposition it to be able to conduct free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria.
2. The National Assembly should enact a law towards ensuring that INEC should be unbundled into Six Geo-political zones to enhance robust election management in Nigeria.

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