

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF REFORMS IN ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined the political economy of electoral reforms in Nigeria through, a Marxist political economy lens, highlighting how oil-driven capitalism and elite patronage shape electoral processes. Despite reforms such as the Electoral Act 2022, which introduced BVAS and IReV, persistent issues, such as vote -buying, violence, and institutional weaknesses, reflect bourgeois control over democratic mechanisms. Using secondary sources, the study traces reforms from colonial times to 2023, revealing elections as tools for capitalist reproduction rather than popular empowerment. Findings show that reforms fail to address structural inequalities, with ethnic divisions masking class struggles. The study recommends state-funded campaign finance, mandatory electronic result transmission, an Electoral Offences Commission, and worker-led civic education to foster class consciousness and credible elections.

Introduction

Nigeria's electoral framework is rooted in the colonial era, but since independence in 1960, elections have often served as battlegrounds for elite power struggles, marked by fraud, ethnic tensions, and economic incentives. The First Republic (1960-1966) collapsed during rigged polls and regional conflicts, leading to military rule until 1999. The Fourth Republic introduced reforms to restore credibility, starting with the Electoral Act of 2006, which aimed to curb ballot stuffing and multiple voting. Further changes in 2010 strengthened the autonomy of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), yet problems such as vote-buying and violence continued in elections from 2011 to 2019.

The lens of political economy reveals how oil revenues and patronage networks shape electoral processes. Nigeria's dependence on crude exports, accounting for 95% of foreign earnings, fuels corruption and clientelism, where politicians distribute resources to secure votes. Ethnic and religious divisions amplify this, turning elections into zero-sum contests for control over state funds. In the run-up 2023, the Electoral Act 2022 introduced the BVAS and electronic result transmission via the INEC Result Viewing portal (IReV) to minimize manipulation. These measures, which were backed by civil society, faced resistance from lawmakers fearing loss of influence.

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The 2023 general elections, won by Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress with 36% of votes, highlighted mixed outcomes. BVAS improved accreditation in some areas but suffered glitches, connectivity failures, and attacks on facilities, leading to low turnout and 327 petitions. Vote-buying persisted, driven by poverty and loopholes in party financing, with candidates exploiting economic disparities to target voters. Post-election, economic policies such as fuel subsidy removal intensified inflation and unemployment, linking electoral legitimacy to governance performance.

Barriers to reforms include elite resistance, weak institutions, and funding shortages, whereas pathways involve technology upgrades, anticorruption drives, and stakeholder consensus. Despite progress, unresolved issues, such as ambiguous laws and judicial interference, undermine trust.

This paper dissects these political economy dynamics, offering targeted strategies for sustainable reforms to bolster Nigeria's democracy.

Conceptual Discuss

Election

The election is a paramount civic activity that characterizes every liberal and competitive political system. Mugoša (2022) defined an election as the procedure through which eligible members of an organization or group select their officials or representatives. An election is an institutionalized mechanism through which a country's inhabitants pick political officeholders. In other words, it functions voters to choose representatives for diverse roles within governmental institutions. Ekundayo (2017) contended that an election constitutes the process by which most populace within any political system selects its elites. The author asserts that elections provide citizens with the opportunity to replace a government that has failed to meet expectations or has broken their confidence. Lindberg (2017) defined an election as the mechanism by which a collective selects one or a limited number of persons from a larger pool to occupy one or more authority position this selection procedure generally involves regulations and principles designed to ensure a specific degree of equity and impartiality for all stakeholders. This is the most current methodology for recruiting individuals for public roles. An election is defined as a procedure in which legally eligible individuals select officials or render legally binding decisions regarding policy. The fundamental objective of elections is to enable the electorate to select their leaders and the policies and programs they wish to enact. As a democratic procedure, an election encompasses various activities, primarily campaigning and voting. A campaign is a complex series of acts executed by politicians and parties to garner public support. The act of articulating one's opinions on the ballot is voting, which represents the conclusion of an election.

Electoral reform

Electoral reform refers to the modification of electoral systems to improve the efficacy and efficiency of election administration (Butler, 2004). Electoral reform entails a comprehensive change in election administration to enhance participation in an open, competitive, and equal environment. Electoral reform may encompass the following: increased impartiality of the electoral body and associated institutions, such as law enforcement and judiciary; inclusiveness, independence, and financial autonomy of the electoral body; transparency; expanded franchise and participation; and integrity of the electoral process.

Electoral reform encompasses three domains.

Political Domain

This necessitates the establishment of a congenial and open political environment during elections ensuring a level playing field for all candidates and allowing greater citizen participation without fear of intimidation.

Legal Domain

This may involve amending the electoral act, constitution, and other statutes that regulate electoral procedures. In Nigeria, this legal realm may involve amending the electoral statute and the 1999 constitution to modify the INEC composition, implement diaspora franchise, and enhance punitive measures to effectively address persistent electoral offenders.

Administrative Domain

This encompasses the determination of electoral conduct, including matters such as funding, ballot production, election timetable, recruiting and training of INEC and other ad hoc personnel, voter registration, technology-based voting, and logistics.

Electoral reform is essential for a robust democracy. Reforms in elections or any other sector are a constant process, as the challenges of democracy can only be addressed through increased democratic practices, which can only develop through ongoing and persistent reforms.

Necessity for Electoral Reforms

Before examining the necessity for electoral reforms in Nigeria, it is prudent to succinctly explore the key areas that advocate for such reforms. Critical areas encompass but are not restricted to the following:

Independent Candidacy

Independent candidacy is prohibited in Nigeria. Moreover, political parties, which constitute the exclusive avenue for individuals to participate in and contest elections, exhibit a deficiency in internal democracy. Influential and affluent individuals within political parties privatize the apparatus of these parties and dictate who receives nominations to participate in general elections. Section 221 of the 1999 Constitution designates political parties as the sole entities through which candidates may contest elections in Nigeria.

Structure of the INEC

The president currently appoints the INEC Chairman and other senior officials. It is necessary to examine section 154(1) of the 1999 Constitution, which grants the president the authority to nominate INEC officers, must be examined. Similarly, at the State Government level, Section 198 of the constitution authorizes State Governors to designate senior electoral officials of the State Electoral Commission.

Sanction for an Electoral Violation

Section 98(2) of the 2006 Electoral Act stipulates a penalty of 500,000 naira (approximately \$320) for any electoral violence perpetrated by persons, or a six-month incarceration sentence.

In instances of electoral violence involving a political party, the penalty for the initial infringement is 250,000 naira, while any successive violation incurs a penalty of 5,000 naira. The study contends that the punishment is lenient, to such an extent that it incentivizes political actors to engage in electoral offenses

The Political Party System

The party system is another domain that has garnered interest for potential reform. Conflicting views prevailed within the Uwais Panel over the appropriate number of political parties for Nigeria. Some contend that the current multi-party system fosters complacency among some parties, while others assert that reverting to a two-party system is optimal for Nigeria. The lack of ideological substance characterizing political parties in Nigeria during the Fourth Republic is truly awful. The factions of the First Republic drove their actions through ideology. Reform must eliminate unnecessary parties. Political leaders must establish standards for political parties, since too many parties hinder Nigeria's democratic advancement and encourage political collusion.

Media Accessibility

The media should be afforded greater opportunities for comprehensive engagement in election coverage. The 2006 Electoral Act ensures equitable media access for all media organizations. This has been well seen in Nigeria. Recently, access rights to coverage afforded to the media have been enhanced. Public and private media outlets comprehensively reported the governorship elections in Edo and Ondo States in 2011 and more recently. Authorities granted the media unrestricted access to the recent elections.

Political campaign financing

Financial resources are essential to politics. The employment of such tools becomes perilous when unregulated in the electoral process, particularly in a political context where the majority of voters are either credulous or uninformed. A significant proportion of Nigerian voters are illiterate and impoverished. They reside in rural regions with little or no formal educations. Political parties and actors indiscriminately utilize financial resources to corrupt the voting process. The 2003, 2007, and 2011 general elections were marked by overt monetary distribution. Monetary resources were liberally allocated at the electoral site. Certain voters in line altered their decisions at the moment of voting due to monetary incentives. Certain State Governors use State resources to finance their political parties, thereby establishing themselves as patriarchs of such parties. This constitutes a perilous trend in Nigerian electoral politics. If left unchecked, it can compromise the integrity of the electoral process and incapacitate democracy.

Diaspora Franchise

Intense discussion has arisen around the enfranchisement of Nigerians residing overseas in Nigerian elections. The argument focuses on the disenfranchisement of Nigerian citizens due to their geographic location. Section 77(2) of the 1999 Constitution states that Nigerian citizens have the right to vote and to be elected. There is skepticism over the viability of such a request. This is due to Nigeria's deficiency in the fundamental capability to effectively administer domestic elections.

Chronology of the Elections

Section 134(2) of the Electoral Act 2010 stipulates a timeframe of 180 days for the adjudication and resolution of all election petition cases, while Section 134(3) designates a period of 90 days for the hearing and resolution of election petitions in the appellate court, commencing from the date of the court of first instance's initial judgment (Oluyemi-Kusa, 2001). As elections serve as the method by which voters peacefully select their leaders, other selection methods may incite conflict. Consequently, free, fair, and credible elections are genuine instrument of peace. Reform is crucial as it enables citizens to engage in matters that impact their lives through voting. Reforming Nigeria's election systems will provide citizens with a sense of belonging and participation, since their votes will be meaningful and their leaders will be directly elected by them. Electoral fraud has been viewed as a significant obstacle to progress. It represents the primary threat to economic advancement and cohesion. Indeed, additional obstacles revolve around electoral fraud. It is essential to alter the electoral process to improve the quality of free and fair elections. Reform is essential to stabilize the political system. Electoral reforms will eradicate political violence, sit tight mentality, corruption, and incompetence. Reform can facilitate good governance by ensuring that the allocation of positions is dictated by meritocracy, rather than mediocrity. The intrinsic connection between politics and economics renders the reform of the electoral process essential. Political stability fosters economic stability. It is essential to implement election changes aimed at achieving political stability to cultivate a resilient economy.

Theoretical Framework

Marxist Theory

This study adopted Marxist theory as the theoretical framework. The key proponents of Marxist theory begin with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who framed history as propelled by class antagonisms between owners of production means and laborers in their 1848 Communist Manifesto. Marx's Capital further dissected the contradictions of capitalism, such as surplus value extraction leading to crises. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels expanded on state theory, portraying it as a ruling class tool to manage conflicts. Vladimir Lenin applied this concept to colonial settings in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. He viewed peripheral economies as raw material suppliers for core powers, fostering local comprador elites. In Nigeria, scholars such as Edwin Madunagu and Yusuf Bala Usman localized these ideas, with Madunagu's writings on neocolonialism and Usman's critiques of ethnic manipulation in class struggles. Adam Mayer's *Naija Marxism* documents indigenous adaptations, highlighting figures such as Tunji Otegbeye, who linked oil dependency to bourgeois dominance.

Applying Marxist theory to Nigeria's political economy of electoral reforms exposes elections as mechanisms that reproduce capitalist relations rather than enabling popular rule. The economic foundation oil rents dominate revenues, creating a bourgeois class allied with multinational firms, using state institutions like INEC to perpetuate control. Reforms from the 2010 Electoral Act to 2022's BVAS and IReV aim to curb fraud but function as ideological cover, legitimizing a system where poverty compels patrons to sell votes. Class struggle manifests in ethnic clashes during polls, diverting attention from exploitation: workers and farmers endure violence while elites amass wealth from public funds. The 2023 elections, among technical failures and low participation, illustrate false consciousness, where voters support parties that are entrenching neoliberal policies like subsidy cuts, worsening alienation. Historical patterns, from colonial-era limited suffrage to post-1999 transitions, show reforms as responses to accumulation crises, not genuine shifts, echoing Lenin's view of bourgeois democracy as a veiled dictatorship.

The Marxist lens reveals why incremental changes fail: elections reinforce inequality without dismantling the base of private ownership and imperial ties. Vote-buying and thuggery stem from surplus appropriation, not mere corruption. INEC's autonomy bids mask its role in stabilizing extraction, as seen in persistent petitions and judicial biases favoring incumbents. The relevance of this study lies in shifting the focus from technical fixes to class dynamics, explaining reform barriers such as elite resistance and funding gaps as defenses against the proletarian upsurge. It calls for analyzing how global capitalism shapes local polls, urging radical alternatives like worker-led movements for true sovereignty, vital during 2025 economic strains from inflation and debt in 2025.

Historical Overview of Nigeria's Electoral Reforms

The origins of Nigeria's electoral reforms are traceable to colonial times; elections were first held in the country in 1923 under the Clifford Constitution, which restricted the number of people who could vote to residents of Lagos and Calabar who were wealthy enough to afford the franchise. The Richards Constitution (1946) widened the franchise, and the McPherson Constitution (1951) allowed for universal, region-wide adult. By 1954, the polls were firmly in the hands of a centralized Electoral Commission, but the violence and rigging of the elections in 1959 and 1964 helped to doom the First Republic to failure by 1966. Between 1966 and 1979, and between 1983 and 1999, a military regime was in place, and the post-independence elections, like those from 1979 to the Second Republic, were marred by conflict. Another coup: extensive manipulation of the 1983 elections. While the military used transitional bodies such as the National Electoral Commission (NEC) to handle the transitions, the annulment

of the 1993 election became a trigger for further crises. Poor institutions, ethnic cleavages, and oil patronage helped spur the fraud. The independent national electoral commission (INEC) was established under the 1999 constitution, which was a return to civilian rule in 1999 (Obiorah, 2021).

Early elections (1999, 2003, and 2007) were marred by rigging, violence, and low credibility, and in 2007, 1,250 petitions targeted the polls. Under the chairmanship of Muhammed Uwais, the Electoral Reform Committee of 2007 advocated for the independent Electoral Commission, electronic voting, and Electoral Offences Commission to curb impunity. The 2002 Electoral Act of President Obasanjo was the electoral blueprint of 2003-2007, but the shortcomings remained. Reforms intensified post-2007. However, since his tenure, the 2010 Electoral Act of former President Jonathan empowered the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) to improve and streamline the voter registration process and assist in the conduct of elections in 2011, 2015, and 2019. The open-secret ballot and the declaration of results at centers helped the gains at the polls in 2011, but there were instances of underage voting and ballot. Overall the introduction of smart card readers in 2015 has decreased fraud and has been well received (Omotola, 2011). The 2023 elections have been provided for BVAS and electronic transmission via IReV that will reduce the opportunity of manipulation under the Electoral Act 2022. However, the problems with certain glitches, low turnout, and 327 petitions highlighted issues such as unclear collation rules and overvoting proofs. Among the proposals for the year 2027 are early voting, involvement of diaspora, mandatory electronic transmission of results, and removal of INEC control from parties. INEC calls for constitutional amendment on appointments to REC, special commissions (Kassem & Zingdul, 2024).

Election Reform and the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

The 2023 general election assessed Nigeria's democratic integrity. The presidential and national assembly elections occurred on February 25, 2023, while the governorship and state assembly elections occurred on March 18, 2023. A newly passed Electoral Act, established one year before the election, mandated the prompt disbursement of election funding to INEC and authorized the electoral commission to implement election technology, including the electronic transmission of results. The Act enabled the INEC to implement new technologies for the general election, including the BVAS and the INEC Election Results Viewing Portal (IReV). The implementation of enhanced voter registration technologies by INEC, particularly online pre-registration, heightened voter engagement in the election. The Commission constructed new polling units to alleviate congestion in overcrowded locations and to position polling units closer to voters for enhanced accessibility. The aforementioned favorable developments heightened popular optimism and anticipation that the 2023 general election would ensure free choice, equitable competition, and credible results (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023).

The BVAS's extensive implementation and elevated operational efficacy for voter accreditation during the February 25 and March 18 elections are notable highlights of the 2023 general election. Despite the election yielding the most politically diverse National Assembly to date, the enthusiasm and interest of individuals in voting prior to the election did not translate into attendance at the polls, resulting in the lowest voter participation in recent electoral history. Dissatisfied parties and candidates' recourse to the judiciary to express electoral issues indicates progress in Nigeria's democratic culture. Despite the confidence-building and voter mobilization activities that preceded the event, INEC and other electoral governance entities failed to fulfill popular expectations for the 2023 elections. INEC's comprehensive preparations and public messaging established a high standard for the election. Regrettably, the Commission failed to meet these expectations. The Judiciary issued rulings that compromised the stipulations of the 2022 Electoral Act and reversed improvements aimed at enhancing the nomination procedure for candidates within political parties. The elections signify a squandered

opportunity, as gradual electoral reforms intended to improve democratic integrity did not provide the anticipated results. Factors such as inadequate logistics on election day, particularly during the February 25 election; the malfunction of technology intended for transparent result management, specifically the result collation system and the INEC Results Viewing (IREV) Portal; insufficient communication from INEC at critical junctures; strategic use of violence to sway electoral results; voter suppression; vote buying; non-adherence to electoral laws and guidelines; and evident manipulation of results during collation have undermined the electoral process's credibility, leading to a deterioration of public trust in INEC and the overall election outcomes (Yiaga, 2023 and Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023).

The recent amendments to the Electoral Act of 2022 enhanced the involvement of special interest organizations in our elections. Section 54 (2) of the Electoral Act 2022 requires the INEC to implement reasonable measures to assist individuals with disabilities, special needs, and vulnerable persons at polling units by providing appropriate means of communication, including Braille, large embossed print, electronic devices, sign language interpretation, or off-site voting when applicable. INEC acquired assistive devices (Braille guides and magnifying glasses) and sustained interaction with the population with disabilities in preparation for the elections. Notwithstanding these endeavors, TAF Africa data indicate a minimal involvement of PWDs the CVR. The research indicates that the INEC insufficiently involved PWDs in the electoral process, particularly in voter education and registration activities. A significant proportion of eligible voters with disabilities did not engage in the continuous voter registration (CVR) to update their status as persons with disabilities (PWDs), while others were unable to retrieve their voter cards due to accessibility issues, resulting in the INEC register's low representation of PWDs (Yiaga, 2023).

During the presidential election on February 25th, data indicated that information and statistics regarding PWD (Form EC 40H) were present in 82% of observed polling units, PWD posters (Poster EC 30E) were displayed on walls in 85% of observed polling units, and magnifying glasses were available in 19% of polling units. Thirty percent of polling places were inaccessible due to the necessity for voters to ascend steps to reach them, representing an improvement compared to previous elections (Yiaga, 2023). In the March 18th governorship election across 28 states, PWD voter information and statistics (Form EC 40H) were present in 67% of observed polling units, PWD posters (Poster EC 30E) were displayed on walls in 63% of observed polling units, and magnifying glasses were available in 21% of polling units. Moreover, 28% of polling locations were inaccessible, requiring voters to ascend steps to reach them (Yiaga, 2023). Despite enhancements to the election legislative framework aimed at facilitating participation for all eligible voters, some individuals did not cast their votes due to various impediments. For example, the PVCs of certain voters were unavailable for collection, making it impossible for those voters to cast their ballots. Voters impacted by the transfer of polling units faced difficulties in locating the new voting sites on Election Day. Nigerians engaged in electoral tasks, including security officers, INEC staff, election observers, prisoners, and those in the diaspora, are prohibited from voting due to perceived conflicts of interest or legal constraints. Early voting, or advance polling, permits residents to vote in person at designated polling locations before an election.

Voter participation in Nigerian elections has diminished over the years, declining from 52.26% and 69.08% of registered voters in 1999 and 2003, respectively, to 43.65% in 2015, 34.75% in 2019, and 26.72% in 2023, the lowest since the restoration of democracy in 1999. The low voter turnout has been attributed to multiple factors, including the tardy arrival of INEC officials at polling stations, voter repression, and violence. Voter participation in Nigeria may have been exaggerated previously; however, technology has revealed these historical inaccuracies, indicating that votes were likely inflated in many regions of the country (Amata, 2023).

Conclusion

A Marxist political economy case study of electoral reforms in Nigeria: An analysis of the perennial struggle between capitalist interest and democratic desire Elections, combined with an oil-based economy and patronage politics, are not mechanisms designed to empower the masses but to reproduce class domination. The legacy reforms from the colonial period to the Electoral Act 2022 are typified by the introduction of new technologies such as BVAS and IReV, but they have not addressed the structural inequality integrated into the neocolonial economic foundation of Nigeria. Ethnic animosity is employed as a means of screening class antagonism. Meanwhile, vote buying, violence, and institutional weakness are all manifestations of the bourgeoisie's efforts to maintain control. Incremental reforms normalize this system, the proletariat remains alienated, and democracy is fragile. The study emphasizes a further move beyond a mere surface solution and calls for transformation action that seeks to deconstruct the structures of capitalist exploitation and mobilize the collective to demand credible elections and fair governance.

Recommendations

To curb vote-buying, the National Assembly should introduce a state-funded campaign finance model with strict caps on private donations. Allocate funds based on the size of party membership and enforce transparency through real-time expenditure reporting to the INEC, thereby reducing the influence of elites on electoral outcomes.

The National Assembly should amend the Electoral Act to require mandatory, uninterrupted electronic transmission of results via IReV, with clear penalties for non-compliance. Equip all polling units with reliable internet and backup power to prevent glitches, ensure transparency, and minimize manual manipulation.

As proposed in the Uwais Report, the Federal Government should establish an independent Electoral Offences Commission through the National Assembly with powers to prosecute vote-buying, thuggery, and judicial interference within six months of elections. This would deter impunity and strengthen accountability by addressing capitalist-driven electoral crimes.

The Federal Ministry of Labour and Employment should fund grassroots programs led by trade unions and community cooperatives to educate voters on class interests and resist ethnic manipulation. Focus on the urban and rural poor, using local languages and media to foster electoral rights awareness and collective action against patronage networks.

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