

Post-Election Analysis of ECOWAS Election Observation and Electoral Security Challenges in Nigeria

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Abstract

Elections in Nigeria are evolving into a consistent democratic standard and must be upheld by all participants in the democratic process. Nonetheless, the political system faces significant problems, as national and regional initiatives via the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) aim to strengthen and solidify Nigeria's precarious democracy through participation election and observation missions. Electoral security concerns persist, necessitating collaboration between the Nigerian government and relevant institutions to allocate more financing and logistics for seamless elections and adherence to electoral norms by political parties. An analysis of this research indicates that Nigeria's elections are marred by tampering, violence, vote buying, rigging, manipulation, and the misuse of voter registration and the registration process. Adopting a qualitative research design and secondary source of data collection particularly from journal of African Elections, Global Journal of Political Science and Administration, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Democracy, as well as content analysis within a qualitative research framework, the research concentrated on the difficulties of election oversight by the sub-regional organisation and the management of election security in the context of Nigeria's elections. The paper closes by emphasising critical issues that must be resolved to prevent electoral security challenges.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Nigeria, Democracy, Politics

Introduction

In 1975, ECOWAS member states signed the Treaty of Lagos to promote economic cooperation and growth, acknowledging that superior outcomes need collaboration. Consequently, ECOWAS implemented peace and security steps to promote the development process. Since 1993, ECOWAS has intensified its emphasis on peace and security as a prerequisite for economic integration. The peace and safety roadmap, however, can be seen as having achieved significant advancement despite hurdles in both integration and regional security efforts. In response to the persistent crises and instability that precipitated the armed conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Community's highest authority enacted a framework for conflict prevention and management. The Protocol on the Mechanism for the Prevention, Management, and Resolution of Conflict, Peacekeeping, and Security was executed in Lomé on December 10, 1999, for these purposes. In accordance with ECOWAS's mandate to bolster collaboration with pertinent multilateral organizations regarding peace and stability in West Africa, ECOWAS engaged in the U.N. General Assembly and the African Union Summit, conducting meetings on the periphery of these events with relevant institutions to jointly address political crises in various Member States. A notable accomplishment by ECOWAS in promoting regional peace and security was the implementation of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy in 2001, specifically aimed at overseeing the electoral processes in Member States. Article 12 of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance mandates the ECOWAS Commission to execute measures that guarantee the efficient administration of elections in Member States, ensuring compliance with globally acknowledged norms. Consequently, the Commission dispatched observers to oversee elections in member states. The Commission also convenes an annual conference of the ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions (ECONEC) and conducts frequent workshops.

A directory of election observers has been compiled in the three official languages of ECOWAS: English, French, and Portuguese. In accordance with Article 12 of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good

Governance, Article 53 (c) of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, and the decision of the Authority of Heads of State and Government to deploy timely pre-election missions to Member States conducting elections, the Commission delivered Electoral Assistance Packages to facilitate the preparation of these elections. The series of elections scheduled for 2015 commenced favorably, featuring elections in Nigeria, Togo, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. Good Governance is an Addendum to the Framework for the Prevention, Management, and Resolution of Conflict, Peacekeeping, and Security.

The Commission implemented Pre-election Fact-finding Missions, long-term observation/Situation Room, and Election Observation Missions to ensure comprehensive Electoral Assistance Packages for these Member States, addressing all facets of the electoral process. ECOWAS, during the ECONEC Annual General Assembly meeting, evaluated electoral processes in the region and enhanced the Electoral Commission Networks to better equip them for the forthcoming tough elections in Niger, Benin, Cabo Verde, Gambia, and Ghana. The quantity of globally observed elections in West Africa has significantly risen over time. National governments, multilateral institutions, and numerous international non-governmental groups are increasingly engaged in efforts to enhance the democratic process in West Africa. The African Union (AU) spearheaded the continental drive, while regional groups like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have aided in stabilisation efforts and the promotion of democratic governance. Notwithstanding its critical significance to democratic governance and stability, elections in West Africa continued to be challenging.

In Nigeria, elections have frequently been marred by political intimidation, fraud, and an uneven playing field, resulting in the failure to establish the desired democratic governance. Furthermore, although ECOWAS institutions have taken on increased responsibility for election monitoring and other democratization efforts, they have failed to surmount numerous hurdles in the execution of election monitoring, which affects the quality of elections and democratic governance. Notwithstanding the presence of ECOWAS observers in Nigeria, egregious and systemic electoral frauds and other election-related issues have emerged, organized by political actors. These factors have prompted critiques regarding the significance of elections in democratic consolidation, as well as the relevance and credibility of election monitoring missions in Nigeria and Africa at large. Despite the criticism of election monitoring in Nigeria, the practice persists in popularity but has not produced the desired outcomes. This issue persists as the country continues to encounter setbacks despite the endeavors of many international organizations to facilitate democratic consolidation via election monitoring. What implications does the participation of groups in Nigeria's electoral process have for the nation? What measures may be implemented to augment its efficacy and potential to bolster electoral integrity, thereby fostering a culture of democratic consolidation and sustainable peace building?

Problem Statement

Despite ECOWAS's consistent involvement in Nigeria's electoral process, questions persist about the impact and limitations of its interventions. Incidents of violence, voter intimidation, logistical failures, and allegations of vote rigging often overshadow elections, undermining the legitimacy of outcomes and public trust in democratic institutions. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria, for instance, highlighted persistent flaws in electoral security and exposed the limitations of regional observers in preventing or adequately reporting electoral malpractices. This raises concerns about the capacity, neutrality, and influence of ECOWAS missions in deterring electoral violence and ensuring free and fair elections. Furthermore, the post-election period often reveals a disconnect between ECOWAS recommendations and the actual political and institutional reforms needed to enhance electoral credibility in Nigeria.

This study seeks to examine the post-election dynamics surrounding ECOWAS election observation in Nigeria, with a specific focus on electoral security challenges. It aims to analyze the effectiveness of ECOWAS's observation framework, evaluate its response to election-related violence, and explore the structural and contextual obstacles that hinder comprehensive electoral reforms. By identifying the gaps in observation and

security mechanisms, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how regional bodies can more effectively support electoral integrity and democratic consolidation in Nigeria and the broader West African region.

Literature Review

The democratic tsunami that traversed Africa in the 1990s established one of the fundamental principles of democratic culture: regular elections. Since 1999, ECOWAS's significance in election monitoring in Nigeria is undeniable. Initially, as a sub-regional institution tasked with promoting good governance and democracy among member states, its function in offering monitoring and logistical support to fulfill its mandate was a commendable idea, albeit fraught with numerous obstacles. Secondly, due to ECOWAS's concern that elections should adhere to international best practices, it was necessary for ECOWAS to be present on-site to oversee these elections and evaluate their credibility and fairness.

Amao (2022) examined the influence of international observers on the establishment of democracy in Nigeria, specifically highlighting the 2015 general elections. He initially delineated the concept of election monitoring. Referencing Bard-Andreassan, he characterised election monitoring as both action-oriented and participatory research. The main objective is to systematically gather evidence of the electoral process to evaluate its democratic nature. The study is pragmatic, aiming to impact the situation by motivating politicians to act democratically, urging public institutions to facilitate unrestricted debates, and empowering voters to understand their democratic rights. Amao asserts that the essence of election monitoring lies in the vital function of validating or disputing an election's outcome and assessing its legitimacy once certain electoral standards have been fulfilled. He determined that the fundamental role of election monitoring is to instill confidence in the democratic process. The study elucidates that international observer missions are pivotal in influencing electoral conduct in Nigeria and, consequently, in reinforcing democratic principles. ECOWAS, as a sub-regional institution, similarly undertakes the role of election monitoring. Nevertheless, the apparent difficulties in accessing larger polling places nationwide, due to insufficient labor logistics, result in election security issues that fundamentally alter the electoral narratives. This work aims to address these gaps.

Adeyemi & Akindoyin (2025) noted that the electoral administration and process enhanced the execution of prior elections in 2015, 2011, 2007, and 1999. The report emphasized that Nigeria's 2019 general elections, as observed by various missions, reflect the international community's sustained interest in and endorsement of democratic advancement. The mission offered Nigerian citizens, election and government officials, civic organizations, and other stakeholders an impartial evaluation of the electoral process along with pragmatic recommendations for effectively addressing challenges to inclusive and credible elections in Nigeria's democratic future. The 2019 elections in Nigeria provide a chance to solidify the democratic advancements achieved since the cessation of military governance in 1999. In 2015, Nigeria witnessed its inaugural peaceful transfer of power since independence in 1960, transitioning from the reigning party, the PDP, to the former opposition party, the APC. The 2015 elections demonstrated enhancements in electoral administration and openness compared to prior elections. Despite many deficiencies, the overall success of the elections emphasised to Nigerians the significance of trustworthy electoral processes. An Afrobarometer study conducted in 2017 revealed that 72 percent of Nigerians concurred that democratic elections are the optimal method for selecting the nation's leaders. Adeyemi (2025) identified several persistent difficulties in Nigeria's electoral process: defective candidate nominating procedures by political parties, insecurity and election-related violence, the influence of money in politics, and an ineffective election security management system.

Akindoyin (2024) examined two decades of African Union election observation, highlighting the evolution of African Union Election Observation Missions (AUEOMs) from diplomatic and political endeavors to autonomous and technical functions. Upon analysing these alterations, they found that the most notable transformation has been the transition from short-term to long-term election observation missions grounded in an electoral cycle

framework. His analysis prompts the AU to enhance the professionalism of the AUEOM and to ensure that reports are substantiated by evidence collected over time by trained observers and experts, while acknowledging that the AU's election observation has evolved through various phases. The stages encompass the quest for freedom, human rights, and democracy amid apartheid, occupation, and occasionally colonialism; the establishment of democratic norms; opposition to coups and unconstitutional alterations; and the framework of election observation to verify state adherence. They asserted that the present government ought to prioritize the professionalization of the AUEOM and establish it as an autonomous technical mission. The AU acknowledges its challenges in achieving the requisite technical proficiency for election observation, while simultaneously pinpointing areas for immediate short-term enhancement. A vital connection is established between the African Union (AU) as the continental entity and the Regional Electoral Commissions (RECs). Despite existing deficiencies in the implementation of AU election observation, the enduring establishment of democracy and electoral transparency in Africa necessitates an understanding of the democratic progression, recognition of the shortcomings, and acknowledgment of the imperative for enhancement.

Bakare (2021), in a working paper series on governance transfer by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), asserted that numerous democracies in West Africa are hesitant to adhere to the ECOWAS supplementary protocol on democracy and good governance regarding electoral conduct, primarily due to the legitimacy of the electoral process, which is frequently characterized by fraud, irregularities, and violence during elections in their nations. Furthermore, the reports from the ECOWAS observation team frequently failed to reflect the overall evaluations of the conduct, reliability, and electoral process. Bakare said that the elections were characterised as "fair, peaceful, and transparent." The most significant assessments characterize Nigeria's 2007 elections as "generally fair" or "sufficiently free and fair," similar to the evaluations of Senegal's 2007 election. Statements from a sub-regional institution are regarded with seriousness and reflect the challenges and transparency of the election observation mission undertaken by ECOWAS. Hartmann's stance is fundamentally grounded in ECOWAS's lack of readiness to function as an effective election monitoring and observation entity in the elections throughout the sub-region. His paper emphasizes that a considerable impediment to the ECOWAS observer mission is the particular mandate, scale, makeup, and elements of the mission. At certain times, the observation mission consisted of both civilian and military personnel. In several instances, ECOWAS executed collaborative missions with the European Union in Togo (2010) and with the African Union and the United Nations in Niger (2011). A thorough examination indicates that ECOWAS was still acquiring the techniques and practices of election observation and supervision.

Methodology

The research primarily emphasizes secondary data. It depended on articles published in academic journals, particularly the *Journal of African Elections*, *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Democracy*, and *Journal of Opinion*. Furthermore, analyses of reports from the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), together with press releases, newspapers, and other pertinent documents, were conducted. To reach the findings presented above, we meticulously analyzed the aforementioned materials, compared and contrasted the stated results, and categorized the prevalent arguments accordingly. The study exclusively examines articles and research papers that present logical, persuasive, and empirical conclusions. The study employed content analysis within a qualitative research framework, utilizing a desk review approach to examine ECOWAS election monitoring and the problems associated with election security management in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

Assessing the Difficulties of ECOWAS Electoral Monitoring in Nigeria

The execution of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance via election monitoring in Nigeria may be deemed satisfactory. To a certain degree - at minimum in confirming the presence of election observers in these elections. Overall, it signifies that ECOWAS demonstrated a committed interest and endeavoured to uphold the

principle of democracy through electoral oversight in Nigeria. Consequently, ECOWAS acknowledged that election outcomes were more readily accepted by the parties concerned in the Member States when observers were thoroughly engaged, even if the reports from election observations did not align with the actual circumstances of the polls or accurately depict the electoral dynamics (Akindoyin, 2024). Despite instances of violence in various states during the general elections, both national and international observers deemed the election reasonably peaceful. The 2003 election experienced greater violence and malfeasance compared to the 1999 general elections. The 2003 elections were marked by "low-intensity armed struggle" perpetrated by hired thugs, particularly in the Niger Delta, as reported. The intra-party and inter-party disagreements escalated into violence, particularly inside the ruling PDP during the election cycle. However, ECOWAS Observer Missions indicated that the process was conducted in a free and fair manner.

The violence during the 2007 general election was more severe than in prior elections of the Fourth Republic. The election cycle characterised by high-stakes politics was proclaimed by former President Olusegun Obasanjo, during which there was an increase in audacious electoral fraud, including ballot snatching, the manipulation of results by security personnel, and the intimidation and harassment of opponents and officials from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Thus, 2007 was characterised as a period of civil unrest, increased social and political tension, and intermittent violence, although armed conflict was not officially declared (Drammeh, 2023). The 2007 election, due to the violence, prompted a court review of certain reported polling results. The 2011 election experienced the most severe violence in the Fourth Republic, resulting in the deaths of over 800 individuals in the aftermath of the presidential election (Ozioko, 2021). Nevertheless, ECOWAS Observer Missions proclaimed it to be free and fair. ECOWAS observation missions, typically led by former heads of state or esteemed individuals, have validated the region's advancement in adhering to democratic principles.

Observer teams have frequently concentrated their conclusions on the election procedure on polling day, with no effort to assess the whole electoral process. The consistent trend has been to commend the "freeness" of polling day while neglecting to investigate the "fairness" of the pre-election period. Although ECOWAS Observer Missions in these elections found deficiencies and offered technical recommendations for enhancing future elections, they did not provide a conclusive assessment of the overall electoral process. For example, the elections of 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 were deemed credible by ECOWAS observers; nonetheless, these same elections were rejected by many quarters in Nigeria and criticised for being fundamentally flawed. The observers acknowledged that they merely supported the polling process, not the entirety of the election (Ozioko, 2021). The efficacy of ECOWAS election monitoring teams in consistently and efficiently assessing electoral processes is criticised for many reasons. Notwithstanding the backing of international collaborators, a deficiency in professionalism persists among certain observers. The difficulty partially arises from the ECOWAS Observer Missions' incapacity to completely implement the long-term observation approach into practical action. The dimensions of observers remain a topic of contention.

Monitoring thousands of polling locations across extensive distances, coupled with a constrained budget, presents a formidable task in deploying a credible mission capable of impartially assessing the nature of the voting process. Although a consensus on the optimal number of observers for an election is lacking, electoral missions typically operate with limited human resources. Insufficient finance also impacts the duration of the task's presence in the monitored country (Jacob, 2024). It is noteworthy that no consensus exists on the assessment of an election process's credibility. Various organisations have predominantly employed distinct criteria for assessing an election's "freeness" and "fairness." The ECOWAS Observer Missions were particularly hampered by a conflict of interest and the consideration of African solidarity. The duality of responsibilities these regional institutions assume, as mediators and election monitors, has frequently constrained their impartial evaluation of electoral quality.

Election Security Management Challenges

From 1999 to 2023, security services and the Commission achieved substantial progress in addressing security challenges related to the electoral process. Since 2011, the security services have achieved success in their active involvement in the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES). For the inaugural occasion in Nigeria's electoral security history, a unified platform has been established to coordinate security issues and allocate limited resources, especially personnel, in addressing common security difficulties. ICCES enabled security services to swiftly act and prevent potential situations from escalating nationwide. INEC's experience from the 2011 General Elections indicated that significant issues to election security were linked to the deployment of security personnel. Despite significant advancements in deployments in 2011 relative to prior elections, opportunities for future enhancement remained. Concerns including timely and sufficient deployments to polling units, the provision of security for election officials and sensitive materials, the prevention of violence among political party supporters, the presence and influence of thugs and militia groups in specific regions, and assaults on electoral personnel must be addressed to improve the credibility and transparency of the electoral process. Election security is not solely the responsibility of Security Agencies and Electoral Management Bodies; all stakeholders, including the media, the National Orientation Agency, Community Leaders, and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), must play a crucial role in ensuring the integrity of the electoral environment. Akindoyin and Akuche (2023) recognised many major difficulties in election security management in Nigeria.

National Proprietorship

There should be recognition that elections constitute a sovereign process. Likewise, a nation's security is a component of its sovereign process. Consequently, security and elections should be governed by the ownership and oversight of a national authority to embody national sovereignty.

Noncompliance with Security Principles

To efficiently fulfil their responsibilities during elections, security officers must adhere to their established rules of engagement. Additional essential standards encompass Equitable and Rights-Based Election Security. This necessitates that both security personnel and electoral officers treat contestants and electorates equitably. Political considerations should not dictate the conduct of security forces. They must recognise that an election enables the populace to exercise their civic and human rights. Any security that fails to recognise and address this truth is flawed.

Adaptable and Effective

The election process must be adaptable to modifications for optimal efficiency. The changes must address legal, operational, or political circumstances that emerge.

Strategic Planning

Elections are well orchestrated events. Elections are typically organised 18 to 24 months prior to polling day and are conducted as a broadly distributed endeavour necessitating extensive planning and preparatory measures. Frequently, the security forces (police and military) lack adequate people and resources to both secure an election and fulfil their routine responsibilities.

Lucid and Responsible

This guarantees that election security measures are conducted in the public interest. Transparent disclosure of operational security policies to concerned parties enhances public trust in security operations. Transparency necessitates extensive consultation regarding the electoral initiative.

Noncompliance with Electoral Principles

An election is typically a fight for lawful authority; it is a non-violent competition, vigorously waged among candidates, to obtain or maintain power. However, confrontation is unavoidable in this process. Consequently, it

is essential to acknowledge that election security must prioritise the containment and supervision of the process in accordance with electoral standards. Organising and executing credible elections necessitates compliance with the values and rights that characterise democratic elections. Consequently, elections necessitate the adherence to the following principles, which pose significant challenges to stakeholders. They are; clarity, adherence to national legislation, the right to freedom of speech and association, objectivity, inclusivity, and competitive or non-competitive.

The ongoing discourse reveals that elections in Nigeria are persistently plagued by insecurity and election-related violence, exacerbated by political figures who exhibit profound irresponsibility by refusing to accept electoral outcomes or pursue legal recourse. Furthermore, in numerous instances, internal party primaries compromise the candidate nomination process, resulting in intra-party disagreements and conflicts of interest among members vying for the same public office candidacy. Despite the prevalence of election-related violence and defective nominating processes within parties, minimal advancements have been made to curtail the influence of money in politics. Money in politics systematically destroys the valid will and character of the electorates to choose who governs or represents them.

This occurs as vote buying and selling—a tactic employed to alter the mindset of the electorate. Political parties and candidates are observed to undermine peace by disregarding the norms set forth by electoral administration organisations regarding conduct and security management on or before to election day. Citizen participation throughout the entire electoral process appears to lack significant statistical appreciation. The study revealed a complete deficiency in election security management throughout the electoral process, encompassing voter registration, voting on election day, a limited number of observer missions, inadequate security personnel at polling stations, data collation, and the final announcement of results, indicating significant shortcomings in the management of election security architecture and the overall electoral process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, elections are essential in democratic systems as they denote the conclusion and commencement of a leadership cycle. These are the mechanisms by which individuals with political aspirations can be appointed to public office to be held accountable and to implement policies that align with the collective will of the populace. Elections reflect the populace's sovereign decision, which confers legitimacy upon political leadership. Elections are not confined to Election Day; they comprise a series of events that occur before, during, and after the electoral process. This process encompasses the legal and constitutional framework governing elections; the registration of political parties; campaign activities and manifesto discussions; the veracity of the voter registry and funding; the conduct of security forces and the incumbent government; electoral commissions; the liberalisation of the political landscape; and the autonomy of adjudicative bodies regarding elections, alongside the roles of local, regional, and international observatory entities.

In this regard, ECOWAS is mandated by protocol to monitor elections in member states. The protocols face issues as numerous ECOWAS election reports, especially those concerning Nigeria, have been criticised for their lack of credibility, as they often fail to accurately reflect the facts and the perspectives of the majority of voters. Unless the election reports are reliable, electoral irregularities will persist, and an effective election management system will remain unattainable. Electoral manipulation and violence seem to be persistent issues and have evolved to include vote buying by candidates among the electorate. This detrimental practice undermines electoral ethics and engenders electoral uncertainty. This is problematic and necessitates a reevaluation of the ECOWAS protocol. This paper advocates for the ECOWAS observation mission to be transparent, accessible, equitable, and impartial in its treatment of all parties.

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