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International Observer Missions and Election Quality: A Review of the 2023 General Election in Nigeria

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Abstract
International observer missions are often regarded as guardians of democracy and have been widely acknowledged for improving electoral processes globally. This study examined the impact of international observer missions on the quality of Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The research was grounded in Democratic Theory and the Theory of International Relations, while a case study design utilised secondary data, sourced from web-based official reports of observer missions, democratic institutions, and media platforms, and analysed using content analysis methods. Findings identified major observer groups, including ECOWAS, the African Union, the Commonwealth, the United Nations, the European Union, the US Department of State, IFES, NDI, and IRI, as key actors in monitoring the 2023 general elections. Findings revealed that there was a consensus among international observers' reports that significant logistical, technological, and communications failures marred the electoral process. The findings further indicated that the Independent National Electoral Commission addressed these issues fairly in most polling units but also failed in many, which disenfranchised many potential voters. The study concluded that the presence of international observer missions in Nigeria's 2023 general elections had a significant impact in terms of transparency in the voting process, but did not guarantee flawless election outcomes and quality.

Keywords: Democracy, election, election quality, international observer mission

Introduction

Nigeria's democratic dreams became manifest after thirty-three years of military dictatorship; though attempts were made at independence on 1st October, 1960, and at some point later after independence to put in place a civilian democratic government, this was met with unpredictable military coups and counter-coups. However, on 29th May, 1999, the dream was finally realised. While it is important to celebrate the democratic milestones achieved thus far as opposed to military rule, it is imperative and even worrisome to notice that Nigeria's democracy has not progressed without serious and several serious challenges that are, in fact, antithetical to the very values and benefits of a democracy. For instance, Nwokike et al (2023) observed that the electoral democracy of the 4th republic had seen elections conducted in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and most recently, 2023. While each of these election cycles has played a

significant role in shaping Nigeria's democratic journey and determining the country's political landscape, each election cycle is faced with persistent issues such as electoral malpractice, violence, vote buying and voter intimidation, and allegations of fraud in several instances. These issues continue to be areas of concern for the country as it strives for more transparent and credible elections.

On February 25th, 2023, citizens of Nigeria went to the polls to elect a new President and members of the National Assembly. This was followed by sub-national elections on March 18th, 2023, to elect Governors and State House of Assembly members in Nigeria's 36 States. Having served two terms in office, Ex-President Muhammadu Buhari appeared intent on respecting constitutional term limits and handing over power to a successor. This points to the fact that respect for two terms maximum imposed by law has been increasingly institutionalised

since Nigeria's return to democracy, and on several occasions, President Buhari has repeatedly promised to leave credible elections as his legacy before exiting the scene. The 2023 polls also marked the seventh in an unbroken sequence of general elections held since the country's transition from military rule in 1999. This represents the continuation of the longest period during which Nigerians have maintained the right to elect a civilian president.

The involvement of international observer missions in Nigeria's elections has been a significant feature in the country's democratic process, and dates back to the 1999 General Elections. According to Muritala et al. (2019), Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 marked the beginning of international observer missions' involvement in the country's elections. These elections were observed by various international organisations, including the United Nations, the European Union, and the Commonwealth, among others. Their presence aimed to ensure a smooth transition from military rule to civilian democracy and to monitor the conduct of the elections. The major intergovernmental organizations and international institutions that send observer missions to monitor the 2023 general elections in Nigeria included: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); African Union (AU); Common Wealth Nations (CWN); The United Nations (UN); European Union (EU); The US Department of States; International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES); The US National Democratic Institute (NDI); and International Republic Institute (IRI).

Throughout the years, the involvement of international observer missions in Nigeria's elections has had a significant impact on the country's democratic development. Their presence has helped promote transparency, highlight areas for improvement, deter electoral fraud, and build public confidence in the electoral process. The reports and recommendations provided by these missions have contributed to electoral reforms and efforts to strengthen Nigeria's democratic institutions. Notwithstanding, the impact of international observer missions on the quality of elections in Nigeria and especially the 2023 general election, which has produced the most controversial outcomes amidst various claims of electoral fraud and questionable technology failure, is attracting serious research interests.

Conceptual/Literature Review

The term 'election' is one of the most frequently used concepts in the lexicon of the Social Sciences. Consequently, extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to its definition and significance (Gerenge, 2023; Diamond, 2022; Alemanno, 2020). Broadly, an election can be understood as either the formal mechanism for selecting individuals to occupy public office or the process of endorsing or rejecting political proposals through voting. For this paper, the former definition, which sees election as the formal process of selecting individuals for public office, is adopted. It is important to recognise, however, that not all elections are genuinely competitive. As noted by James et al. (2023), while most countries conduct elections in some formal sense, many of these are either non-competitive or fundamentally compromised by the prevailing political context.

Thus, election observation has become a vital component of modern representative democracy, particularly in the Global South. It is conducted by both domestic and international stakeholders. For this paper, election observation is defined as the systematic process of gathering, organising, and analysing election-related data by impartial state and non-state actors to produce objective reports that assess the overall electoral cycle. This definition emphasises several key elements. First, election observation encompasses the entire electoral cycle; pre-election, election day, and post-election activities, rather than being limited to polling days (Omotayo & Adekunle, 2020). Second, the inclusion of both local and international observers ensures a more balanced and comparative assessment (Salawu et al., 2025). Third, observers are non-partisan and operate independently of state control, thereby

ensuring a high degree of neutrality and impartiality (Adigun, 2019). Fourth, observation reports serve as credible and dependable tools for evaluating electoral integrity (Omotayo and Adekunle, 2020). These key aspects underscore the importance and utility of election observation in democratic governance.

Salawu et al. (2025) emphasise the distinction between election observation and election monitoring, despite their close association. According to Olaniyan and Awoyemi (2019), election monitoring entails not only the authority to observe but also the capacity to intervene in electoral processes when legal or procedural violations occur. In contrast, election observation focuses primarily on evaluating the conduct of an election to endorse its legitimacy where warranted (Adigun, 2019). Although both practices aim to assess the electoral process in its entirety, from the pre-election period through to the post-election phase, Omotayo and Adekunle (2020) argue that election monitoring offers a broader and more comprehensive mandate than observation.

Similar to an election, democracy is a frequently used concept in the Social Sciences, often treated as self-evident. Its popular appeal is partly attributed to Abraham Lincoln's enduring definition: "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." While this articulation is inspirational, it invites deeper inquiry into the meaning of "the people". Does it refer to an elite minority, a marginalised majority, or the entirety of the population within a given political territory? Alemanno (2020) offers a more participatory view, defining democracy as individual participation in the decisions that affect one's life. When aggregated, such individual participation forms the basis of majority rule. Accordingly, for this paper, democracy is conceptualised as a normative doctrine that privileges the collective participation of the numerical majority in political decision-making, particularly in decisions concerning the selection of leadership within a defined geographical or political entity.

Election observation has emerged as a critical democratic process, especially among emerging democratic states, generating various research interests in recent times. For instance, Lappin (2009) presented a compelling argument for the centrality of election observation in sustaining peace in post-conflict societies. Drawing on case studies and peacebuilding theory, the scholar contended that credible elections, validated through international observation, serve not only to legitimise emergent democratic institutions but also to de-escalate political tensions and reduce the risk of relapse into conflict. Lappin (2009) critiques earlier models that viewed election observation as merely symbolic, instead framing it as a peace-enforcing mechanism in transitional democracies. His work is significant in linking the procedural integrity of elections to broader peace outcomes. Notwithstanding, Tapoko (2017) observed that it could benefit from more empirical testing across varied conflict zones.

Hyde (2011) explains why autocratic or semi-authoritarian regimes permit international election observation. The author argues that such regimes seek the legitimacy that comes with hosting observers, even while they manipulate electoral processes. Using both qualitative case studies and statistical analyses, Hyde (2011) shows that the increasing norm of election observation globally has forced even non-democratic governments to adopt the appearance of electoral integrity. The scholar's theoretical model, the "pseudo-democrats' dilemma", explains how international pressure creates a cost-benefit paradox for electoral autocracies. The work is crucial for understanding the performative nature of observation in non-consolidated democracies, though it is sometimes criticised for insufficiently addressing domestic observer dynamics.

Luo and Rozenas (2018) explore a counterintuitive phenomenon where international election observation may inadvertently lower domestic perceptions of electoral legitimacy. Using experimental survey data, they show that negative observer reports can delegitimise not only fraudulent regimes but also the electoral process itself, particularly in contexts with

already fragile political trust. The "curse" lies in the unintended consequences of transparency: by exposing fraud, observers may unintentionally erode public confidence in electoral institutions. Their findings highlight a normative tension between promoting transparency and sustaining regime legitimacy in transitional democracies. While methodologically rigorous, the study is limited by its focus on perception rather than actual behavioural change among voters.

Benstead et al. (2020) examine how the tone and framing of international observer reports influence public perception of election legitimacy. Using data from the Middle East and North Africa, the study finds that positive statements from observers can enhance perceptions of legitimacy, while critical or ambiguous assessments often create confusion or scepticism among citizens. The authors emphasise the power of narrative and communication in observer influence, suggesting that observer missions must consider not just what they report, but how they report it. This study innovatively moves the conversation beyond observer presence to observer discourse. However, Nwankwo and Dode (2024) contend that the study would benefit from comparative studies in sub-Saharan Africa or Asia to test generalisability.

Recently, in Nigeria, an assessment of how observer missions interpreted and responded to Nigeria's electoral process has been presented by Nwankwo and Dode (2024). Using qualitative interviews and content analysis of official observer statements, the researchers noted critical concerns raised by observers, including logistical failures, vote-buying, and digital transmission issues that undermined the credibility of the 2023 elections. The authors emphasise the gap between observer recommendations and electoral reforms, and argue that repeated shortcomings signal a need for more assertive engagement by observer missions. The study contributes to the African context by drawing lessons for future electoral cycles. Though it could be strengthened with greater attention to domestic observer perspectives and voter experiences.

These studies provide an understanding of the evolving role of international election observation in legitimising electoral processes, especially in transitional and post-conflict democracies. They reveal how observer missions can enhance electoral credibility (Lappin, 2009), the strategic motivations behind accepting observers (Hyde, 2011), and the unintended consequences, such as diminished public trust when fraud is exposed (Luo and Rozenas, 2018). Moreover, existing studies emphasise the importance of how observer messages are framed (Benstead et al., 2020) and provide region-specific insights, such as Nigeria's persistent electoral challenges despite repeated international oversight (Nwankwo and Dode, 2024). However, a notable research gap persists in understanding the domestic impact of election observation on democratic consolidation and electoral reform implementation. In addition, the perspective of local observers, civil society actors, and voters in Africa has also not been sufficiently reported.

Theoretical Framework

The Democratic Theory provides a foundational framework for analysing the role of international observer missions in enhancing electoral integrity and promoting democratic consolidation. Rooted in the principles of political participation, accountability, and legitimacy, democratic theory argues that free, fair, and transparent elections are vital mechanisms through which the will of the people is expressed and government authority is legitimised (Dahl, 1989). In the context of Nigeria's 2023 general elections, applying democratic theory allows the study to assess how international observer missions contribute to ensuring electoral processes reflect democratic norms. For instance, observer reports that identify irregularities and recommend reforms serve to reinforce procedural democracy by encouraging institutional accountability and transparency (Beetham, 2004). The theory also enables critical examination of whether the

presence of observers meaningfully improves public trust in the electoral process or merely provides symbolic validation without substantial democratic improvement.

The constructivist and liberal institutionalist perspectives provide insight into why international observer missions participate in national elections and how their involvement influences domestic and international legitimacy. From a liberal institutionalist view, international observation promotes cooperation among states and international organisations in upholding democratic standards, based on the belief that democratic governance contributes to international peace and stability (Keohane and Nye, 2001). Constructivism, on the other hand, emphasises the role of norms, identity, and discourse in shaping state behaviour; thus, the widespread acceptance of election observation as a normative practice reflects the global expectation that democratic legitimacy must be externally validated (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). The application of these theories to Nigeria's 2023 election allows the study to critically explore how international observers shape domestic perceptions of legitimacy, exert diplomatic pressure on electoral institutions, and contribute to Nigeria's image in the international community.

Problem Statement

Since the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999, credible elections have faced several challenges and problems. While progress has been made in some areas, there are still persistent issues that need to be addressed, including electoral violence, voter suppression and intimidation, voter apathy and disillusionment, electoral fraud and irregularities, inadequate electoral infrastructure, and weak electoral institutions. According to Sule (2019), one of the major challenges in Nigeria's elections over the years is the prevalence of electoral violence. This includes incidents of voter intimidation, harassment, physical assaults, and even loss of lives. Political rivalries, ethnic tensions, and the power struggle contribute to this issue. Electoral violence not only undermines the integrity of the process but also poses a threat to the safety and participation of voters. Another challenge is the suppression and intimidation of voters. This can take various forms, such as voter disenfranchisement, voter suppression tactics, and the manipulation of voter registration processes. Political actors often exploit these tactics to manipulate election outcomes, target specific demographics, or marginalise opposition strongholds.

Electoral fraud and irregularities have also persisted as significant challenges in Nigeria's elections. This includes ballot box stuffing, multiple voting, manipulation of results, voter impersonation, tampering with voter registers, and the collusion of electoral officials. These actions have undermined the credibility and fairness of the electoral process, eroded public trust, and can lead to disputed election outcomes (YIAGA, 2023; 2019). The challenges of credibility rocking the conduct of elections in Nigeria and many countries of the world necessitate International Election Observer Missions. These challenges not only hampered free and fair elections but also put doubt in the minds of the electorate. The International Election Observers bid to promote democratic values and strengthen the electoral processes, observing elections with the major aims to support the democratic process of the country, to deter fraud and expose the electoral irregularities, enhance public confidence and determine the level of implementation of the rule of law.

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to assess the impact of International Observer missions on the quality of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the various organisations that deployed various international observer missions to monitor the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

2. Analyse the reports of various international observer missions that monitored the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.
3. Assess the impact of the presence of international observer missions on the quality of the 2023 general elections.

Research Questions

1. Which intergovernmental organisations deployed international observer missions to monitor the 2023 general elections in Nigeria?
2. Based on official reports, what were the common observations among international observer missions on the quality of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria?
3. What was the impact of the presence of international observer missions on the quality of the 2023 general elections?

Methods and Materials

This research adopts the case study design to assess the impact of international observer missions on the quality of elections. The 2023 general election in Nigeria is the case study. Using a qualitative method, the data for this study were obtained from secondary sources, including reports of various intergovernmental and international development organisations, media reports, and relevant textbooks, using a web-based internet search. A purposive sampling method was utilised to gather secondary data from selected government and non-governmental organisations' reports, journals, and media publications on international election observer missions. Desktop research involving online search of relevant government and non-governmental organisations' websites, journals, and media publications, and related literature on international election observer missions was carried out to gather relevant data for this study. Data quality in terms of reliability and validity of information was ensured through detailed online profiling and verification of the sources of data and triangulation of sources. The data gathered was content analysed.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question One: Which intergovernmental organisations deployed international observer missions to monitor the 2023 general elections in Nigeria?

Findings show that the international organizations and institutions listed below send various observer missions to monitor and assess the 2023 general elections in Nigeria: Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); African Union (AU); Commonwealth Nations (CWN); The United Nations (UN); European Union (EU); US Department of States; International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES); The US National Democratic Institute (NDI); and International Republic Institute (IRI) These international organizations send various observer missions to monitor and assess the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, and have published various reports on their official websites, which have been accessed and analyzed in this study. Most of these intergovernmental organisations and international institutions have been sending various observer missions to monitor elections in Nigeria since the return of democracy in 1999.

Research Question 2: Based on official reports, what was the common perception of international observer missions on the quality of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria?
Excerpts of reports across observer missions are presented below:
For instance, excerpts of the African Union (AU) report revealed that:

- *83% of the polling units visited opened late. The average delay was over an hour; in some cases, they opened as late as 11:00 am. This was largely due to the late arrival of polling officials and materials, as well as the slow setup of the polling units.*
- *The Mission noted that voting proceeded uninterrupted throughout the day in most polling units observed, except in a few cases in Abuja, Kano and Lagos.*
- *Most polling units observed did not close on time (2:30 pm). The mission noted that voters in the queue at the closing time were allowed to cast their vote.*
- *Counting took place in an open and transparent environment.*

The AU's 2023 observer missions' report generally concentrated on the logistics, mobilisation and voting processes during the 2023 general elections. There was a paucity ofdocumentation about the result process and election outcome in the AU's 2023 report.

Excerpts from the European Union-Election Observer Mission's report of the 2023 general election, providing an answer to research question one, noted that:

- *There was a late opening in almost all polling units observed, mainly due to the delayed arrival of sensitive materials and polling staff. Observers reported that polling units opened late in 44 out of the 50 observed polling units, and poll workers were missing in 18 of the polling units observed. Most opened within two hours of the designated time.*
- *In several locations, particularly in the South-South and South-East, voting started as late as five hours after the scheduled opening or not at all, which suppressed voter participation.*
- *Voting went smoothly in most locations observed, though voters who were reassigned to a new polling unit had difficulties in identifying their correct polling unit.*
- *In 100 of 240 observed polling units, the layout did not sufficiently protect the secrecy of the vote; BVAS was not functioning properly in 25 of 240 polling units observed; In 32 of 240 observed polling units, the voter register was not always ticked to reflect that a person had voted. Observers reported underage voting in Sokoto and Kano.*
- *EU EOM observers noted that voters queuing after 2:30 pm were allowed to vote, while counting was undertaken in full public view. However, 11 out of 37 polling units observed unauthorised persons were unduly interfering in the work of polling officials.*
- *In 24 out of 37 units, the results were not posted publicly, and in 22 of 37 units, the form was not uploaded using BVAS, contrary to procedures.*

Lastly, excerpts from the 2023 general elections joint report of the election observer missions of the US National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, noted that:

- "Significant logistical, technological, and communications failures by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) marred the electoral process and disenfranchised voters, negatively impacting key aspects of the election process".
- "The elections also saw the lowest turnout for national contests in Nigeria's modern democratic history with only 27 per cent of registered voters participating".
- "Observers reported that in 31 out of 42 observed collation centres there were discrepancies in the result forms; a lack of transparency continued throughout the collation process and during the declaration of results on 1 March, with INEC failing to communicate key information of public interest".

Results of analysis across various reports of international observer missions confirmed that there is an urgent need for improvement in election logistics and administration to improve the quality of elections in Nigeria.

Research Question 3: What was the impact of international observer missions' presence on the quality of the 2023 general elections?

Excerpts of findings from analysis of relevant reports show that:

- *International observer missions play a crucial role in promoting transparency during the electoral process. Their presence helps to deter electoral fraud and malpractices, as the knowledge that impartial international observers are monitoring the process can act as a deterrent to those seeking to manipulate the election.*
- *The presence of international observers lends credibility and legitimacy to the electoral process. Their impartial assessments and subsequent reports can help validate the election's outcome and enhance public trust in the electoral system.*
- *Observer missions often monitor the respect for human rights during elections. Their presence can help ensure that the rights of voters, candidates, and other stakeholders are respected throughout the electoral process.*
- *By providing an independent assessment of the election, observer missions contribute to the promotion of democratic values. Their recommendations and feedback can be used to identify areas for improvement and strengthen democratic institutions in Nigeria.*
- *International observers can play a crucial role in preventing electoral-related conflicts. By closely monitoring the election and promptly reporting any irregularities or tensions, they can help prevent the escalation of disputes and promote peaceful resolution.*
- *Observer missions often engage with local electoral authorities and stakeholders, providing an opportunity for capacity building and knowledge exchange. This engagement can lead to improvements in electoral administration and practices for future elections.*
- *The presence of international observers raises public awareness about the importance of credible and transparent elections. Citizens are more likely to actively participate in the electoral process when they see external bodies taking an interest in the election's conduct.*

The presence of international observer missions has a significant impact on the quality of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. However, despite these positive impacts, it is important to note that the presence of international observer missions for the 2023 general elections in Nigeria did not guarantee a flawless election. Their effectiveness depended on various factors, including the scope of their mandate, access to all phases of the electoral process, and the political will of the host country to address issues raised in the observer reports.

Conclusion

The role of an international observer mission is crucial in ensuring the quality and credibility of general elections in Nigeria or any other democratic country. These observer missions are typically composed of individuals or groups from different countries who are tasked with monitoring and assessing the electoral process to ensure it is free, fair, transparent, and follows international standards and the country's laws. Ultimately, while international observer missions can contribute significantly to improving the quality of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, sustainable change requires ongoing efforts by both domestic and international stakeholders to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure electoral integrity, and uphold the rule of law. However, despite these positive impacts, the presence of international observer missions to monitor and assess the 2023 general elections in Nigeria also has some weaknesses and cannot guarantee a flawless election.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Observer missions from international organisations and institutions identified in this study should be deployed well in advance of Election Day to assess pre-election activities and the overall electoral environment. Efforts should be made to ensure that they monitor both urban and rural areas to provide a more accurate representation of the election's conduct.
2. Observer missions should be granted a robust mandate by allowing them to assess various aspects of the electoral process, including voter registration, campaigning, media coverage, and post-election activities, to enrich their reports. Moreover, they should produce comprehensive and timely reports that are transparent and balanced in their assessment of the electoral process. Reports should be made publicly available and shared with relevant stakeholders promptly.
3. The Observers' reports should include actionable recommendations to address identified issues. These recommendations should be followed up with relevant authorities, and progress should be monitored over time. To maintain impartiality, observer missions should receive independent funding, not solely from interested parties or host countries, but through transparent channels, such as contributions from multiple stakeholders or international organisations.
4. To foster sustainable change, observer missions should engage in long-term capacity-building and technical assistance efforts, working with local partners to strengthen electoral institutions and processes over time. Observer missions should undergo rigorous training on standardised methodologies to ensure consistent and reliable data collection and analysis. In cases where technology is used in the electoral process, observer missions should include experts with a focus on monitoring the security and integrity of election technology.

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