

# POLITICAL INTERFERENCE IN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION AND ELECTORAL IRREGULARITIES IN NIGERIA

Uchenna C. Obiagu,<sup>a</sup> Peter O. Mbah,<sup>b</sup> Chikodiri Nwangwu,<sup>c</sup>  
Ikenna Martins Ibekwe,<sup>d</sup> Clarence O. Odey<sup>e</sup> and Felix Onen Eteng<sup>f</sup>

**Abstract:** The extant literature is replete with fine-grained explanations of problems of electoral irregularities in Nigeria. However, how political interference in election administration contributes to these problems has largely remained unacknowledged. The Nigerian Constitution establishes the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as a relatively autonomous electoral body and, also, empowers the president to appoint its principal officers subject to Senate confirmation. These provisions that allow interested parties to determine INEC membership composition delink INEC's institutional design from its operational independence and, therefore, incapacitate it from asserting its independence in order to guarantee credible elections in Nigeria. The present study relies on a triangulation of qualitative research techniques such as documentary sources, key informant interviews, and personal observations. Premised on descriptive statistics and content analyses, this study reveals that political interference in INEC membership composition and financing considerably accounts for recurring lethal electoral irregularities; shows that whoever controls the human and financial elements of INEC is in firm control of its operations for favourable electoral outcomes; and suggests the need for voter-determined reforms for a workable electoral system in the context and content of Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *political interference, election administration, electoral irregularities, illiberal democracy, Nigeria*

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a University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria, e-mail: ucobiagu@gmail.com

b Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria, e-mail: ombah2006@yahoo.com

c Centre for Africa-China Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa and Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria, e-mail: cnwangwu@uj.ac.za

d Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom, e-mail: ikennaibekweplc@gmail.com

e Department of Economics and Political Science Education, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria, e-mail: odeyclare@unical.edu.ng

f Department of Public Administration, University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria, e-mail: felixoneten@gmail.com

## Introduction

Nigeria has successfully held seven quadrennial general elections since it transitioned to civil rule in 1999. Beginning with the fall of a one-party state in Benin Republic in the early 1990s, Nigeria joined the league of African countries that embraced electoral democracy for state organisation during the so-called “third wave of democratisation.” The prevailing scholarship held the optimism that multiparty politics would empower voters to choose their leaders from available contestants and hold them to account. Ultimately, this would promote democracy and development (Diamond 2002; Huntington 1991). The optimism triggered the desire to replace authoritarian systems with democratic ones in many African countries such as Nigeria.

Extant pro-democracy literature has assumed that elections guarantee peaceful power transfers and provide a viable (non-violent) alternative to using force for power acquisition (Lindberg 2006; Diamond 2002; Huntington 1991). Lindberg (2006: 148) further highlights that the positive impacts of repeatedly holding elections “are not restricted to free and fair polls, at least not in the early stages of building democracy.” Going by this pro-democracy model, the nearly three-decade electoral feat in Nigeria since 1999 suggests that Nigerian elections would be peaceful and the country should, by now, master the craft of electoral democracy, gain experience in quality leadership, and institutionalise primary agencies of election administration such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, and the judiciary. However, these claims do not truly reflect what many scholars know about the link between elections, democracy, and development, especially in Nigeria and other post-military democracies in Africa.

To begin with, Omotola (2009) provided insight into the dynamics of Nigeria’s election politics by analysing the 2007 general elections within the context of “garrison” democracy, which highlights how electoral processes can become militarised and, if unchecked, can possibly lead to democratic instability. Later, Omotola (2010) found that election administration in Nigeria between 1999 and 2007 was characterised by the ineffectiveness of the electoral governance system. The identified ineffectiveness emanates from the weak institutionalisation of the primary agencies of election administration, occasioned by the composition and funding of the INEC, which tends to undermine its institutional and administrative autonomy and makes it unable to guarantee transparent and democratic elections in the country. Like other elections held in Nigeria since 1999, Mbah et al. (2019) highlighted that, despite the relative improvement in the electoral

process in 2015, the 2015 presidential election was contentious because of the existing politics of exclusion, exacerbated by the selective dispensation of the spoils of office along ethno-religious cleavages. This worsened the political environment and heightened tensions each election season amid the notion that Nigeria is largely built on a culture of electoral fraud. This brand of politics endangers the efforts towards national cohesion and makes the quest for national development a Herculean task.

Further, Onapajo (2020) queries the institutional design of INEC, which makes it subservient to the whims of political elite and competing groups, and punctures its ability to guarantee quality elections in Nigeria. Today, election season in Nigeria is marked by a militarisation of the electoral process, contentious political communication, undemocratic attitudes towards elections by both political actors and election administrators, and cases of deadly electoral violence (Ezeibe 2021; Mbah et al. 2020; Onuoha et al. 2020; Mbah et al. 2019; Ashindorbe 2018). This situation is also exacerbated by the helplessness of security agencies to effectively provide safety of election assets (Okorie 2025) and lucrative benefits attached to the occupation of public offices in the country (Abada et al. 2023). These scholars have advanced convincing arguments and offer plausible explanations about the state of elections and violence in Nigeria's democracy. However, their arguments have not sufficiently explained why irregularities are consistently witnessed in all elections organised by INEC. They pay little attention to how political interference in election administration is linked to recurring incidents of flawed elections in Nigeria since 1999. Even when they refer to the issue under investigation, their studies rarely reflect political interference in election administration. Thus, sparse knowledge still exists about how political actors relate with INEC and how their relationship affects how INEC discharges its statutory electoral functions in Nigeria.

The present study contributes to this unending debate by querying how political interference in election administration finds expression in the perennial cases of irregularities that have marred every election in Nigeria. It contends that this interference is a contributing factor to the recurring incidents of electoral irregularities in the country. The interference also affects the human and financial elements of the INEC and, in administrative practice, it is widely believed that whoever controls human and financial elements of any organisation like INEC invariably controls its operations (input) and determines its outcomes (output). Impliedly, the control of INEC by its highly interested employers has a conditioning effect on INEC operations in the electoral process in Nigeria.

Political interference is the interplay of efforts emanating from the quest to win elections by all means. These efforts signify forms of irregularities that are deviations from the legal electoral stipulations and inhibit INEC from administering elections based on the stipulations. Many Nigerian politicians, together with their political parties and followers, behave alike and exhibit an illiberal disposition towards credible elections. They hardly allow free contests based on the laws because they operate in a lax institutional environment amid huge personal privileges associated with the occupation of public offices. They rarely consider or prioritise the consequences of their actions on the broader goal of democratisation and development. Hence, they can do or offer anything just to grab power, which in turn exacerbates the already high costs of election politics in the country. It is noteworthy that the quest for power for personal gains vitiates the general notion of politics embedded in rendering public services. This study, therefore, deviates from an existing scholarship and adds to the body of knowledge on election administration in Nigeria by interrogating the role of political interference in election administration in unending cases of irregularities during elections since 1999. It uses political interference in INEC membership composition to assess the latitude of INEC principal officers in discharging their electoral duties, and how political interference in INEC financing encourages dependence on budgets that are outside INEC's control in Nigeria.

The current effort is a qualitative one-country study and, as such, leverages the context-rich, detailed and in-depth insights to bear witness to the recurring electoral challenges bedevilling Nigeria between 1999 and 2023. It employs a triangulated qualitative research design to generate and analyse detailed data/information to buttress the foregoing arguments. The strategies include rich available literature, personal experience as active participant in Nigerian elections, and key informants across the country for data generation; while descriptive statistics and content analysis are used for data analysis. These data sources provide the flexibility and convenience required for an in-depth investigation in a diverse large country as Nigeria. The present study entails six major sections. After this introduction are sections on conceptual understanding, theoretical understanding, the study's methods, and the results and discussion. It ends with a section that depicts its findings, recommendations, and the need for further studies.

## **Conceptual Understanding of Major Themes**

Efforts are made to explore what we know about election administration, political interference, and electoral irregularities, and what is sparse in the existing literature about these themes. The following three subsections address these issues.

### ***Election Administration in Nigeria***

Election administration is undertaken by electoral management bodies (EMBs) and involves three distinct but related categories of activities before, during and after elections. Before elections, the EMB carries out constituency delimitation, voter registration and education, and monitors campaigns and party nominations. During elections, the EMB oversees voter accreditation, voting, sorting/counting/recording of votes, and collation and declaration of results. Post-election activities of the EMB involve the management of election litigation and review of the exercise for improvement. Thus, election administration is the preparation (design) and management (implementation) of these activities by the EMBs in compliance with rules guiding the activities. Election design plays a crucial role during the election implementation stage given that poorly designed election procedures can create confusion among poll workers, pose comprehension difficulties to voters, lead to loss of crucial votes, and impede voter confidence in the electoral process (Norden and Iyer 2011).

Although other agencies such as political parties, the judiciary, and civil society organisations (CSOs) play important roles in elections, the EMBs occupy a central position in election administration. The extent to which they carry out the electoral assignments depends on the existing legal framework that underpins their structure. For instance, the system may be structured to either be centralised, decentralised, or a combination of the two. In a centralised electoral system, the EMBs oversee other agencies, supervise voter registration, and manage elections. In a decentralised setting, however, there are shared EMBs and the bulk of election administration functions are divided among two or more EMBs. Voter management is handled by a body different from the one undertaking party supervision or conducting elections. In between is a combined system that embodies the features of centralised and decentralised arrangements (Kelly 2007; Pastor 2006).

The INEC is a perfect example of a centralised EMB in policy making with “signs of decentralisation” in policy implementation in Nigeria. It was originally established in 1998 vide Part I, Section (1) of Decree № 17

of 5 August 1998 to allow legible Nigerian voters to choose their leaders, legitimise leadership, and serve as a decision-making platform on election matters. It conducted the 1998-9 transition (founding) elections: comprising subnational (council, State House of Assembly [SHA], and governorship) and national (National Assembly [NASS] and presidential) elections. The adoption of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN), 1999 (as amended) gives the INEC the legal force as a corporate entity with perpetual succession (Section 153 of the CFRN, 1999). Today, INEC organises, undertakes, and supervises elections into the offices of president/vice president of the Federation and governor/deputy governor of a state. It also oversees the elections for members of the NASS (the Senate and the House of Representatives), SHAs, and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) councils (Item F, sub-Item 15, Part I of the Third Schedule to the CFRN, 1999).

In Section 197(1) (b), the CFRN also provides for the establishment of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) for Nigeria's 36 federating states. The SIECs are statutorily charged to manage council elections in their respective states. However, despite their existence, we maintain that the INEC remains the central electoral body in Nigeria for many reasons. First, the overall management of general elections is the exclusive preserve of the INEC. Second, the SIECs depend on the INEC for relevant voter information for the conduct of council elections in their states. Finally, the SIECs are not empowered to undertake party registration and, thus, rely on the ones registered by the INEC.

In multiparty competitive elections into executive posts at all levels (local, state, and federal), candidates are voted for in single-member electoral constituencies (Sections 132(4) and 178(4) of the CFRN, 1999). The INEC-created political wards constitute the constituencies for the post of a local government chairman, while local government areas (LGAs) and states/FCT Abuja serve the constituency purposes for governorship and presidential posts respectively. To be duly elected, the candidates must secure a majority of the valid votes and 25 per cent of the votes in at least two-thirds of the constituencies (Sections 133-134 and 179). There is also a constitutional provision for a second round of elections (run-off system) in case the constitutional requirements are not met in the first round. In this case, the candidate with the highest number of votes wins the run-off election (Sections 134(3) and 179(3) of the CFRN, 1999). On the other hand, elections into legislative seats at all levels are governed by a first-past-the-post system.

### ***Political Interference in Election Administration in Nigeria***

Political interference in election administration is the interplay of efforts by the government in power, institutions, and competing groups to influence elections and favourably determine their outcomes, usually against the expectation to engage in electoral contests by following the electoral rules. The essence of this interference is to outdo the other in order to widen one's odds of victory. These efforts include partial implementation of electoral rules, result alterations, intimidation of poll workers, and manipulation of the collation process. In some extreme cases, they include violent disruption and the use of threats/intimidation by political actors against their opponents, voters, and poll workers, or attack on property with substantial connection with elections. They are deviations from legal stipulations and signify forms of irregularities occasioned by interference that inhibits INEC from administering elections based on the stipulations.

Generally, the government in power is usually accused of using subtle means to increase its window of political opportunities or manoeuvre its way to remain in power (van Baalen 2023; Onapajo 2014). This is because so many things are going in for the government or its head – the president. The president has immense control over state power and resources, with influence over the security agencies and appointment of INEC officers (Owen and Usman 2015). However, how the government wields these assets and relates with INEC are usually dependent on the leadership disposition of the person at the helm of its affairs – the president. For illustration, the government of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) under President Olusegun Obasanjo largely interfered in INEC affairs, but President Goodluck Jonathan of the same PDP refrained from such interference. This partly explained why the 2015 elections threw up some electoral surprises: the first time in which an incumbent Nigerian president was defeated by an opposition candidate and the first time a loser accepted the outcome before the final declaration of the result, with an overture for peaceful transition amid glaring cases of fraud in some parts of the country.

Further, the interference under the purview of this study is not entirely synonymous with the government in power. Opposition groups can also take advantage of government weakness or ineffectiveness and influence public opinion in their favour as a better alternative to the latter – the government – and successfully coalesce the advantage into an electoral victory. The Nigerian experience with the All Progressives Congress (APC) is a case in point. The APC members took advantage the new elite alliances had offered



them amid the fragmentation within the ruling PDP to unseat its incumbent president in 2015 (Owen and Usman 2015). The APC deployed divergent campaign strategies to drive home their message of progressive change founded on inclusivity and convinced most voters to emerge successful at national and subnational levels during the 2015 elections. On assumption of office, President Muhammadu Buhari chose to run a sectional government (Mbah et al. 2019; Udeh et al. 2023), in a manner that could be best described as using deceitful means to grab power without commensurate efforts to deliver on their promises. Sometimes, other competing groups and institutions can take advantage offered by government ineffectiveness and the opposition's poor outing to undermine the electoral process or make critical election stakeholders to compromise on their electoral duties. The professionalism of those in charge of INEC is another factor that can bear on whether INEC can be compromised or not. Professor Maurice Iwu, unlike Professor Attahiru Jega, was accused of lacking the professionalism required of an electoral umpire (Omotola 2010).

Nigerian political leaders have the proclivity to interfere in the activities of government institutions instead of allowing them to function based on their establishment laws. During his military administration, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida used his position as a military Head of State and removed two electoral commission chairmen – Professors Eme Awa and Humphrey Nwosu – over unjustifiable reasons. Professor Awa was removed because he refused to compromise his electoral duties, while Professor Nwosu was sacked due to his Commission's position on the presidential election of 12 June, 1993, against a government decision to annul the election (Nwosu as cited in Omotola 2010). Before the 2019 elections, and given the strategic role the judiciary plays in election adjudication, President Buhari interfered in the judicial process and summarily removed Nigeria's Chief Law Officer (CLO), Justice Walter Onnoghen, over his stance on the rule of law, despite a court order that prohibited the president from sacking the CLO. Nigeria Civil Society (NCS) Situation Room (2019: 4) observes that the sack a few weeks before the 2019 elections gave “a major jolt to the polity and cast a shade on the electoral process, with the suspicion that there were other unspoken, ulterior motives behind it.”

There is a problem with INEC's institutional design that creates room for interference. The problem emanates from the 1999 CFRN, which subjects INEC's administrative autonomy to presidential control. The CFRN does not only empower the president to directly appoint all principal officers of the Commission, but also allow federal executive bodies like the presidency



to scrutinise INEC statutory activities. Secondly and more importantly, INEC funding is still domiciled in the Nigerian presidency and subjected to presidential supervision through the Budget Monitoring and Price Unit (BMPU), the Office of the Accountant General of the Federation (OAGF), and the Federal Ministry of Finance (FMoF) (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2002, 2006, 2010). The role of the president in constituting INEC membership and releasing its funds amounts to presidential oversight against the global practice that allows legislative oversight over such statutory functions. Like the judiciary, the appointment of INEC officers by the president should be on recommendation by a neutral body not peopled by politicians, if electing them by the people seems Herculean. After their appointments and given the position of EMBS in electoral democracy and the role of finance in organisational life, these officers should be empowered to draw INEC funds directly from the Federation Accounts based on its budgets approved by the NASS, with legislative powers to ensure compliance and accountability. Although the touted Electoral Act of 2022 provides for the early (not later than one year) release of election funds to INEC, the president still retains the power to release INEC funds. Also, the control of INEC officers renders INEC impotent to deliver on its core mandates and places a question mark on the pursuit of credible elections in Nigeria.

Noteworthy, INEC has made relative efforts to improve the electoral process and these have led to various interventions. These interventions have facilitated the adoption of manual and electronic methods or their combination at various election seasons (Aiyede 2012; Iwuoha 2018). But the efforts have suffered the fate of previous measures when it comes to implementation owing to political interference. For instance, the use of new technologies, a journey that began with the biometric voter registration devices in 2011 and became the prototype for similar technologies like automated fingerprint identification system (AFIS) and smart card readers (SCRs) (Ladipo and Onyemaechi 2022; Jega 2016), suffocates because INEC needlessly depended hand-in-cap on the government for requisite support.

Interestingly, the biometric voter registration, which was a fallout of the irregularities that grossly marred the elections held between 1999 and 2007, laid the foundation for the production of permanent voter's cards and the adoption of more reliable biometric devices in subsequent elections in Nigeria. Again, these devices, which are chip-embedded digital gadgets that contain the bio-data of all eligible Nigerian voters, have become a mandatory requirement to participate in Nigerian elections since 2015 (INEC 2015a; NCS Situation Room 2015a; Nwangwu et al. 2018). Nevertheless, political

interference still shapes how INEC implements biometric policy on election administration because INEC officers are not free electoral agents and do not have control over their staff and budgets. The immediate consequence is poor policy execution. This manifests in the restriction of AFIS to biometric voter registration during the 2011 election and the selective utilisation of SCRs during the 2015 and 2019 elections amid their debatable legality.

Further, the challenges that heralded the use of SCRs for the 2015 elections forced INEC to jettison its biometric guidelines and adopt the use of fraud-promoting Incidence Forms (IFs). The IFs represented a manual method of voter accreditation and were introduced to remedy the problems of device failures. Regrettably, their use removed their electronic safeguard meant to secure the electoral process and exposed the process to possible manipulations like ghost voting beyond the actual number of accredited voters (NCS Situation Room, 2015b). This also paved the way for politicians to inflate accreditation figures to allow for double/multiple thumb printing. Curiously, the INEC decision (in consultation with political parties) to use IFs for voter accreditation violated Clause 8(b) of INEC guidelines for the conduct of the 2015 elections. The guidelines provides for SCRs as the only basis for voter accreditation during the 2015 elections (INEC 2015b).

In its 2019 guidelines, INEC makes the use of SCRs mandatory for electronic accreditation with a provision to use IFs where a voter card is read but fingerprint authentication or card displays wrong details with correct details in the voter register (Clauses 10(a) and 11(b) and (c) of the 2019 INEC Regulations and Guidelines). These provisions allow voters to manually thumbprint on the voter register and require them to provide their phone numbers and, for that reason, permit manual accreditation method, which creates a room for other forms of electoral manipulation amid controlled INEC officers (INEC 2019; Onapajo 2020). Iwuoha (2018) reported that INEC used IFs and cleared voters by hand, thereby undermining the very purpose for which biometric technology was adopted.

Although the SCRs were replaced with a more secure bimodal voter accreditation system (BVAS) with legal recognition vide the 2022 Electoral Law, the latter has had its fair share of selective adoption, alternating between manual and automated methods during the 2023 elections. The 2022 Electoral Act eliminates the use of IFs and any form of manual accreditation and recognizes BVAS as the only tool for voter accreditation. Despite these measures, Nigeria's electoral system is presently governed by biometric voter registration and accreditation, manual voting, and a combination of manual

and electronic systems for result management. With this in mind, elections in Nigeria still bear the imprints of interference and electoral irregularities, which distort the democratic value of elections.

### ***Understanding Electoral Irregularities***

Electoral irregularities have always been a thorn in the flesh of credible management of elections. As a concept, they represent subtle deviations from established electoral procedures and can manifest in various forms intended to increase one's political mileage. They can begin with flawed voter registration (Ladipo and Onyemaechi 2022). This suggests that an election with integrity begins with a voter register with integrity. Electoral irregularities can degenerate into electoral malpractice and progress into lethal thuggery and violence. In short, they run at variance with the global standards on credible elections captured in Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government (The United Nations 1948).

Electoral irregularities depict a dangerous trend in the democratic process with many consequences on democratisation. They can undermine free choice and confidence in the elected authorities, endanger the quality of democracy, and, occasionally, lead to regime change. At the extreme level, they can renew and exacerbate conflict situations, destroy years of democratic progress, and trigger protests, with an unanticipated casualty rate (Mahmood 2020; Norris 2014). The irregularities that characterised the 2007 presidential poll in Kenya led to a renewal of communal clashes between the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Luo ethnic groups that claimed an estimated 1,133 lives, with more than 600,000 displaced persons, 900 cases of rape, and other forms of sexual harassment and destruction of livelihood (Human Rights Watch 2016). The violence associated with the 2010 elections in Côte d'Ivoire on account of irregularities led to over 1,000 deaths, one million internally displaced people, and an estimated 100,000 refugees in neighbouring countries (Birch et al. 2020). A similar ugly trend has been witnessed in Nigeria during recent elections.

Electoral irregularities can enthrone minority (instead of majority) electoral democracy and can deflate voter participation, which is inextricably linked to voter turnout (Solijonov 2016). In reverse, irregularity-free elections reflect a high degree of integrity, which requires an atmosphere free of interference, fear, intimidation, or manipulation at any stage of the electoral

process. A secure and peaceful election environment facilitates free, fair, and credible elections. Tranquil conditions in and around the voting sites lessen the problems that could compromise the integrity of records, turnout, or election results. Voters must be able to vote without fear, monitors must be able to observe without intimidation, and candidates must be able to campaign without the fear that their supporters will be harmed or even killed (GCEDS 2012).

### **Theoretical Understanding of Illiberal Democracy**

The present study adopts illiberal democracy as a framework of analysis to explain how political interference in election administration undermines the democratic process within the context of Nigeria. Before the early 1990s, the use of illiberal democracy by political scientists to describe a system that has features of democracy like elections, freedoms, and checks and balances but does not behave like democracy in operations was not in the political science lexicon. The illiberal democracy thesis is traceable to Bell et al.'s (1995) book: *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*. The authors used the thesis to challenge Francis Fukuyama's 1992 end-of-history thesis, which contended that political history was culminating in the global rule of liberal democracy embedded in capitalism. They queried Fukuyama's thesis for not representing the situation in Pacific Asia where illiberal democratic features have defined the practice of democracy in the region, a situation electoral reforms and the rev for biometric devices as anti-rigging tools have not remedied. The theory was further developed by liberal scholars such as Zakaria (1997), Christie (1998), and Sajó (2021).

An illiberal democracy is a government system that hides its non-democratic credentials behind formal democratic institutions (Bonet and Zamorano 2021). While some scholars query the existence of illiberal democracy, others who believe in its reality do not have a common ground on how to describe it (Self 2022; Mounk 2018; Plattner 2019). Further, there is a contention as to whether illiberal democracy has anything in common with democracy. Some scholars argue that illiberal democracy should be counted as a type of democracy because it is democratic in a plebiscitarian sense and more true to democracy's roots (Sajó 2021). In reverse, other critical scholars contend that it should be acknowledged by its authoritarian operations and, for that, should be associated with authoritarianism (Christie 1998; DeVotta 2010). They further argue that classifying illiberal democracy as democratic is overly mild to illiberal regimes. They suggest such descriptions as electoral authoritarianism, competitive

authoritarianism, and soft authoritarianism as being adequate for illiberal democracy. This debate has become unending because the style of operations and factors that define illiberal democracy are not only complex, but also vary among democratic settings. While some illiberal democrats may focus on stifling individual freedoms and mass media, others may ignore constitutional term limits to jeopardise democratic growth in their countries (Mounk 2018).

In Africa, some countries grapple with unpopular sit-tight imperial presidents who have indulged in term-limit extensions beyond the usual constitutional two-term limits to remain in power for decades (Africa Center for Strategic Studies [ACSS], 2024). Again, disputed elections have become a common reality in Africa and “smart” African politicians have learned to outsmart modern digital technologies to manipulate the process and outcome of elections. The continent has recently witnessed a breakdown of democratic systems emanating from “constitutional” coups in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, and Burkina Faso, as well as coup attempts reported in Gambia, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, and the island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe (ACSS 2024; Mahmoud and Taifouri 2023; Sany 2022). It has also had to contend with calculated suppression of dissent and the criminalisation of popular opposition candidates in “make-belief” multiparty competitive elections (Cheeseman 2021), the changing value of violence as a lucrative strategy for leadership recruitment (Obiagu et al. 2022; Obiagu et al. 2021), and the unending large-scale insurgency that arose from unfulfilled election promises (Anku 2022).

Unlike liberal democracy which, at least in theory, protects individual freedoms and limits government operations, illiberal democracy hampers democratic values like fundamental human rights (Plattner 2019). Elections in illiberal democratic settings rarely provide the opportunities for voters to choose their leaders through the assessment of their policies encapsulated in their manifestos. In such contexts, electoral contests merely serve the purpose of “legitimising” (recognising or accepting) the government in the comity of nations and consolidating the incumbent. Undoubtedly, manipulated elections endanger the operation and pseudonymisation of democracy, and democratic institutions become adopted patterns of authoritarianism (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2020).

Since 1999, Nigeria has regularly held multiparty competitive elections and successfully transited from one government to another, with verifiable democratic structures in place. Other fundamental features of a democratic system such as a written constitution and the existence of arms of

government and institutions like INEC are not in doubt and have become the underlining forces of democratic process in Nigeria. Regrettably, the expectation that institutions will form the basis for Nigerian democracy against individual whims is still a pipe dream. The illiberal disposition of most Nigerian leaders has led to the appointment of unprofessional electoral officers who do not have a positive disposition towards democracy or, better still, officers with questionable democratic credentials to head the INEC (cf. Omotola 2010). The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) recognises INEC as an independent electoral body but, at the same time, contains crisis-ridden provisions that empower the federal executive authorities to determine its fate. The government in Nigeria is in firm control of INEC membership composition and financing and, therefore, influences its functions. Today, election, which is one of the strategic first steps towards democratisation, is yet to fully materialise in liberalisation where institutions are allowed to drive the democratic process.

## Methodology

The study adopted triangulated qualitative research techniques for data collection and analysis. These techniques are meant to generate detailed information to provide insights into how political interference in election management is connected to electoral irregularities. It should be noted that causal analysis is predicated on an accurate and systematic description of realities, which can be observed by applying non-experimental qualitative strategies for data collection and analysis (Jackson and Cox 2013). As such, this study relied on key informant interviews (KIIs), relevant documents, and personal experience as active participants in Nigerian elections since 1999.

The KII is a qualitative in-depth strategy deployed to generate descriptive data/information from individuals with professional knowledge about specific issues (Kibuacha 2024; Donnelly et al. 2023). This study selected KII because it focused on the knowledge of professionals for an in-depth description of irregularities during elections in Nigeria. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 36 participants because the number would be convenient to execute and easy to manage. The decision to interview 36 KII participants received the approval of the Postgraduate Committee of the Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria, vide letter no. UN/PS/P.13 of 21 March 2023. Of the 36 participants, three were drawn from each of the 12 Nigerian states, which is within the acceptable 30 per cent statistical sampling ratio of 36 states/FCT Abuja. There was a 50% benchmark for an acceptable KII response rate. The participants

were defined as stakeholders above 18 years who were knowledgeable about their electoral community and they include community leaders, party agents/candidates, election administrators, security personnel, and election observers. The interviews were conducted between March and October 2023 and contained a general theme on political interference in election administration and electoral irregularities in Nigeria, with four specific open-ended questions on how the government relates with INEC in terms of its membership composition and financing, the opposition groups showing a better alternative, and the ability of INEC to assert its authority (Appendix 1). The relevant documents provided detailed qualitative information embellished with personal experience on how elections are managed in Nigeria. The data generated were analysed with the use of descriptive statistics (such as charts and simple percentage method) and content analysis.

The methodology is adopted because it has the propensity to adhere to scientific rigours and research procedures, which involved the systematic collection, organisation, description, and interpretation of textual content. Again, the methodology was suitable for this study because it covers an expanse geographical area, which may be difficult using direct methods (Johnson et al. 2016). Nigeria is a federation with northern and southern blocs, further divided into six geopolitical zones with 36 states and an FCT Abuja. The existence of 774 LGAs (768 in 36 states, 6 in FCT Abuja) highlights Nigeria's three tiers (federal, state, and local) of government. There are 176,846 polling units (PUs) spread across 8,809 INEC-created registration areas/wards for election management in the country. With this in mind, direct strategy will be a Herculean task for researchers.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents statistical data (results) for analysis and discussion in support of the claim that political interference in election administration is largely at the back of the deplorable state of democracy, emanating from electoral irregularities that have consistently defined elections held in Nigeria between 1998-9 and 2023.

The study further argues that many Nigerian politicians manifest illiberal dispositions towards institutional operations and usually influence how institutions manage their affairs. Primary agencies responsible for election administration are supposed to reflect a sense of impartiality, impersonality, and neutrality in their day-to-day operations. But in reality, especially in



the context of Nigeria, these institutions have mostly tilted towards political direction and the role of some INEC officers has largely served the interests of those who facilitate their appointments. The opposition groups that are meant to represent a better alternative to the existing government are not doing well on their part. The conduct of some primary agencies for elections like INEC and the judiciary over the years has largely shown that they are not free agents, as they have not been allowed by political actors to function as independent entities deserving of their assignments on critical electoral issues.<sup>1</sup>

Within the fold, INEC has consistently struggled to extricate itself from the perennial accusation of manifesting illiberal attitudes towards free contests. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) identify systemic corruption as one of the institutional challenges that prevent INEC from guaranteeing credible elections. Odinkalu (2023a) observes that INEC is the most corrupt federal agency and the corruption in INEC is so pervasive that its officials collect big money from power-desperate politicians every four years to favour their electoral contests. The judiciary, believed to be populated by “learned people,” dashes the hope of using its “learned knowledge” and institutional authority to remedy the deplorable democratic situation in Nigeria. Apart from interference, some principal judicial officers are yet to clear the allegations that they deliver election-related judgements to the highest bidders and retire from service to evade sanctions from their regulatory agency. Many judicial officers are involved in power relations and promote “judicial mercenarism” by contumeliously delivering partisan judgements that undermine electoral justice and allow its fair balance to suffer (Jega 2021; Odinkalu 2023b). It should be stated that the liberal demands allow legal stipulations to inform and shape the actions (and inactions) of political actors and institutions, and any human efforts to influence these actions run at variance with these liberal demands.

This study uses the essential ingredients of political interference to further explore this argument in the following subsections. But before we delve into this properly, the next subsection summarises the KIIs.

### **Summary of Key Informant Interviews**

The study succeeded with 21 KII participants, which represented a 58% response rate. The unsuccessful 15 participants did not respond to our calls, messages, and emails. The KIIs recorded the lowest response rate from the northeast geo-political zone with 50% (which is satisfactory based on our

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1 Interview with party and community leaders in Imo, Benue and Niger states.

50% benchmark), while the southeast recorded the highest response rate. It used a combination of face-to-face and phone interviews together with interview schedules, conveniently interfaced with research assistants and the use of relevant social media platforms (Table 1).

S/№	G-p Zone	State	Medium	№ of SI	ZT (№)	ZRR (%)
1.	North-central	Benue	ISTRA/PC	3		
2.	North-central	Niger	ISTRA/WhatsApp	1	4	66.7
3.	North-east	Adamawa	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	1		
4.	North-east	Taraba	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	3	50.0
5.	North-west	Kaduna	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2		
6.	North-west	Kano	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	4	66.7
7.	South-east	Enugu	FTF/PC/WhatsApp	2		
8.	South-east	Imo	FTF/PC/WhatsApp	3	5	83.3
9.	South-south	C/River	ISTRA/PC/Gmail	2		
10.	South-south	Rivers	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2	4	66.7
11.	South-west	Lagos	ISTRA/PC/WhatsApp	2		
12.	South-west	Oyo	ISTRA/PC/Gmail	2	4	66.7
Total				24	24	

*Table 1. Interviews and Interview Schedule Administration and Collection*

*Note: G-p means geo-political, SI means successful interview, ZT means zonal total, ZRR means zonal response rate, ISTRA means interview schedule through research assistant, and PC means phone call. Computation for ZRR is based on 3 interviews from two selected states in each geo-political zone.*

Of the 21 valid (successful) participants, the majority are in firm agreement that political interference in election administration has gross implications on how INEC organises elections in Nigeria. Specifically, 14 participants representing 66.67% of the total are of the view that the appointment of INEC principal officers by the president accounts for the president's control of these officers, against 7 (33.33%) that negate the view. The majority response suggests that the president should not appoint INEC key officers, while the minority view suggests that the problem is not about who appoints. The minority are comfortable with the constitutional provisions that allow the president to appoint INEC officers

and the Senate to confirm their appointments. However, they are worried that areas that should strengthen INEC to ensure credible elections are under the control of the appointing authorities instead of the INEC. They express the view that wrongdoing should have a commensurate consequence to deter its future occurrence. Secondly, 19 participants (90.5%) of the total justify the statement that political interference in INEC financing is responsible for Commission's dependence on government budgets for election management purposes in Nigeria. In reverse, only 2 participants (9.5%) disagree with the statement. Thirdly, 4 (19.05%) participants express the opinion that the opposition groups are showing a better alternative in Nigeria, while 17 (80.95%) do not express the same opinion. This suggests that most of the participants believe that a thin line exists between those in government and opposition as nearly all Nigerian politicians have similar political mindsets, evidenced by the spate of party defections in the country. Finally, 12 (57.14%) participants do not hold the view that INEC can redeem itself and assert its independence because of the process that brought them on board, lack of financial control, and fear of being sacked. Conversely, 9 (42.86%) respondents argue that, with people of character and integrity, INEC can assert its independence amid the existing institutional framework that underpins its design.

### ***Political Interference in INEC Membership Composition and INEC Principal Officers***

The INEC membership composition comprises a Chairman and 12 National Electoral Commissioners (NECs) at the national level and 37 Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs) for each of the 36 states and FCT, Abuja. The chairman is INEC's chief electoral commissioner, while the RECs serve the same purpose at the state level. The chairman is also the chief returning officer for presidential elections and appoints returning officers for other elections. These officers are supported by permanent management staff headed by an executive secretary at the national level and 36 administrative secretaries for the states. These secretaries are chief accounting officers and heads of administration at their various levels. There are also 774 Electoral Officers (EOs) representing INEC at the LGA level. These EOs work with other permanent staff posted from the national headquarters to implement election administration policies (Figure 1; Akinduro 2011).

Given their appointments by federal authorities, the chairman, NECs, and RECs constitute INEC principal officers. The president exercises the executive powers of the Nigerian Federation as guaranteed in Section 5 of the CFRN to appoint INEC principal officers in consultation with the Council

of State and subject to confirmation by the Senate. They are appointed for five-year tenure and renewable once and their appointments are governed by Nigeria's federal character principle, which is a quota system/formula that promotes national unity and equitable representation of Nigerian entities based on LGA or state of origin (see Sections 14(3) and Section 171(5) of the CFRN, 1999). The chairman can be picked from anywhere the president desires, but the 12 NECs are drawn two each from Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, and the RECs are selected from their respective states. In Section 14, Part 1 of the Third Schedule, the CFRN further provides that these officers shall be persons of unquestionable integrity.

It should be stated that the appointment of these officers plays a catalytic role in the policy direction of INEC in terms of how and what strategies to adopt for election management. The officers recruit other permanent staff by exercising delegated presidential powers (Akinduro 2011). As of 2019, there are about 16,000 permanent INEC staff to manage elections in 119,974 PUs. This figure, which represents a fraction of one permanent INEC staff to 7.5 PUs and falls short of the expected balance, is complemented with ad-hoc staff. These ad-hoc staff are temporarily engaged and quickly trained on the spot to make up for the shortfall in INEC permanent staff for election duties. As part of its 2021 reform, INEC increased the PUs by 47.40% from 119,974 to 176,846 and engaged about 1,265,227 ad-hoc staff for the 2023 elections (see Figure 1 and Table 2 for these statistics).



*Figure 1. The Organizational Chart/Hierarchy of INEC Principal Officers and Staff (Source: Authors' compilation with data from CFRN (1999), Akinwale (2023))*

<b>Election year</b>	<b>Nº of ad-hoc staff</b>	<b>Nº of polling units</b>
2011	300,000	119,974
2015	750,000	119,974
2019	814,453	119,974
2023	1,265,227	176,846

*Table 2. Summary of INEC ad-hoc staff and polling units in Nigeria, 2011–2023 (Source: Authors' compilation with data from online sources such as PLAC (2021), Akinwale (2023))*

In exercising the presidential delegated powers, INEC is expected to meet the demands for merit system under Nigeria's public service governance and, also, reflect the constitutional federal character. In reality, like recruitments in other government institutions in Nigeria, ethno-religious favouritism, patronage, and submission of lists of preferred candidates by politicians have always overshadowed the demand for merit.<sup>2</sup> INEC has always blamed its poor election conduct on the activities of the ad-hoc staff (Iwu, as cited in Omotola 2010), but is reluctant to devise implementable alternatives to address the challenges posed by the ad-hoc staff.

The majority of the participants identify factors like political and party considerations (other than the expected merit) as preoccupying the minds of the appointing federal authorities in the appointment of INEC officers and permanent and ad-hoc staff. There is a general view that if any officer should be prosecuted for electoral malfeasance in line with constitutional stipulations, the prosecution will serve as a deterrent to future violators of electoral laws.<sup>3</sup> They further express the view that such violators seem to be untouchable or celebrated and this partly explains the recurring incidents of irregularities that have characterised every election cycle in Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

Again, most Nigerian politicians are not ready to undertake comprehensive reforms that can enthrone a system because they know that such a refined system will get them out of power. In 2007, President Umar Yar'Adua publicly acknowledged that the election that brought him to office was marred by irredeemable irregularities (Adeniyi 2011). He set up a 22-man Electoral Reform Committee to improve the electoral system, which submitted its report in 2008. The report was processed into a Government Whitepaper – the

2 Interview with APC leader in Adamawa state.

3 Interviews with party agent in Taraba state, APC candidate in Rivers state, and party chieftain in Kano state.

4 Interviews with party agent in Taraba state and PDP candidate in Imo state.

government's final position on the issue contained in the report. The president accepted all the minor recommendations, but rejected the most critical items that bordered on INEC restructuring (unbundling) and firmly retained the power to appoint all INEC officers (CLEEN Foundation 2019; Aiyede 2012). INEC also faces the problem of centralising its activities. On the surface, INEC policy implementation has a tint of decentralisation, with offices at Nigeria's subnational levels. The decision to decentralise policy implementation is driven by the notion that subnational governments can promote Nigerian diversity. Unfortunately, this brand of decentralisation is restricted to establishing offices at the subnational levels, with policy formation is presently highly centralised (Electoral Reform Committee 2008). Thus, INEC activities at these levels strictly follow the directives from the central office under the firm control of those that facilitate the appointment of its officers (Akinduro 2011).

In Section 158, the CFRN recognises INEC as an autonomous body by providing that it "shall not be subject to any other authority or person" in discharging its duties as provided by law. Truly, the appointment and supervision of INEC officers by federal authorities make them a likely tool for election rigging in the hands of those who appoint them. These officers have mostly represented one political interest or the other.<sup>5</sup> In 1998, Gen. Abdusalami Abubakar appointed Ephraim Akpata to "humbly" midwife the 1998-1999 military-supervised transition elections. In 2000 and 2005, President Obasanjo tested the management prowess of his two loyalists – Dr Abel Guobadia and Prof. Iwu, with the latter organising the 2007 general elections widely adjudged to be the worst in Nigeria's recent electoral history. The relief INEC enjoyed during the Jonathan presidency was truncated with his defeat in 2015 and INEC returned to the usual trajectory. President Buhari, in 2015, appointed his niece, Amina Zakari, as acting INEC Chairman when such a position was unknown to the CFRN and the laid-down procedure for the appointment was not followed (*The Guardian* 2015). The same Zakari, who was accused of helping the ruling APC to rig elections in Nigeria, including the 2018 Ekiti governorship election, was controversially appointed by INEC to head its Presidential Election Collation Committee in 2019 (Ugwueze 2019; Ugbede 2019). In 2020, President Buhari appointed a card-carrying member of his party and also his aide, Lauretta Onochie, as one of the two INEC's NECs for the South South (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre 2021).

The primary reason for this interference is because the president who is the appointing authority is also an active participant and interested party in the electoral process. Because of the challenging economic situations occasioned by government ineffectiveness, many Nigerians accept these

5 Interview with PDP leader in Imo state.

offers that expose them to tow a less dignified path. Today, the Commission, operationalised by many of its officers, has become the subject of criticism over corruption, poor election management, and impartiality that have frequently defined Nigerian elections (Momah 2016).

### ***Political Interference in INEC Financing and Financial Dependence on the Government***

Apart from the human element in any organisation, financing is another important organisational element. It is regarded as the organisational life wire (Ogunna 1999; Ezeani 2006). Bertrand Russell advanced the argument that, in everything, power lies with those who control finance, not with those who know the matter upon which the money is to be spent. The president does not only appoint relevant INEC officers, but also determines their remunerations and, in so doing, influences how they discharge their statutory election functions. The recruitment, remuneration, training, and motivation of election staff for effective performance, as well as procurement and deployment of relevant election materials, require a huge amount of money. Thus, financing occupies a central position in the day-to-day activities of the INEC. Despite this crucial role of finances in goal attainments, INEC has repeatedly faced difficult tasks accessing funds for its assignments. The Commission captures the situation by stating that its annual budget is still tailored on an “Envelop System” template through bureaucratic budget call circulars. The template sometimes delays appropriation process and affects its readiness to fund some key activities on demand (INEC 2024).

The Commission is structured to depend on government budgets and this has made its control possible by the Nigeria presidency. Thus, it has received a total sum of ₦931.5 billion between 1999 and 2023 as election expenditures from Nigeria’s Federal Government (see Table 3 for specific details). Despite these huge financial releases, INEC still bears the imprint of poor performance. To this effect, YIAGA Africa (2020a) accuses INEC of financial recklessness for wasting billions of Naira on producing many unused ballots in each election season. It observes that the cost of conducting elections in Nigeria was very exorbitant compared to an average of 35% turnout in the 2011, 2015, and 2019 general elections. YIAGA Africa (2020a) further states that INEC printed over 427.5 million ballot papers of currency quality for 80 million registered voters for the 2019 elections, but used less than 30 million for the whole elections. This suggests that INEC’s lack of financial prudence and dearth of accountability



to the public and relevant authorities is due to the prebendal neo-patrimonial relations between the government and the Commission.

Election year	Election budget (in billion ₦)	Cost per voter (₦)
1999	1.5	26
2003	120*	995
2007	60.5	983
2011	139	1,893
2015	116.3	1,691
2019	189.2	2,249
2023	305	3,263
Total	931.5	11,100

Table 3. INEC Budgets for Election Management in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023 (Source: Authors' computation with data from online sources such as YIAGA Africa (2020a) and Okocha (2022))

Note: \*₦120b was proposed, but the amount government released is not in the public domain. Balogun stated that INEC received ₦450 from Federal Government between 1999 and 2018.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 2. Government Delay in Releasing Election Funds to INEC (Source: YIAGA Africa (2020b))

6 The figure is derived from Adetutu Balogun's Twitter handle: <https://twitter.com/Tutsy22/status/1100635830534717443>.

INEC is also faced with challenges arising from government delay or piecemeal release of its election funds, which has affected election preparation in the country. Before 2015, election administration was governed by the 2002, 2006, and 2010 Electoral Acts. These legal instruments empowered the federal executive authorities such as the BMPU, OAGF, and FMOF to supervise how INEC funds were disbursed and managed. The BMPU within the Office of the President is responsible for the disbursement of INEC funding, the OAGF for financial auditing of INEC funding, and the FMOF for INEC's submission of financial year estimate of expenditure and income. These authorities are regarded as regulators of the regulator by their disbursement, auditing, and budgeting functions over INEC funds. Ideally, this supervisory role is important to ensure compliance with financial regulations and proper financial management. In practice, the supervision has constituted bureaucratic inertia, largely serving the purpose of interest protection and undermining INEC's preparation for elections.<sup>7</sup>

For instance, voter registration was delayed in 2003 and 2007 due to a delay in fund disbursement (Akinduro 2011). In October 2006, several INEC cheques were not honoured because they did not receive BMPU clearance for payments and this affected the procurement of critical election materials needed for the 2007 elections (National Democratic Institute 2007). Similarly, INEC budgeted ₦189,007,272,393 for the 2019 elections. Regrettably, on 22 November 2018, 86 days before the elections, the Federal Government partly released ₦143,512,529,455 (76%) of the total sum. On 21 December 2018, 57 days before the elections, the outstanding balance was released (see Figure 2 for the government's pattern of piecemeal disbursement of election funds to INEC for the 2019 elections). Although the 2022 Electoral Act provides for the early release of INEC funds, the power to release these funds still resides with the president (FRN 2023).

One of the accepted aspects of an institutionalised EMB is control of its budget with legislative (not executive) oversight (Wall et al. 2006). The current practice in which INEC financing is controlled by federal executive authorities has given the authorities an edge to influence how INEC manages elections. The financial waste witnessed in the country over the years without adequate mechanisms for financial accountability has become worrisome to many Nigerians. The delay in releasing INEC funds by the federal government has serious strategic implications for election governance and is akin to the saying: *he who pays the piper, dictates the tune*. A situation where

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7 Interview with election observer in Imo state.

the government delays or engages in a piecemeal release of funds to INEC vitiates the very essence of INEC autonomy, makes it susceptible to political influence, and undermines its ability to guarantee acceptable elections.<sup>8</sup>

### *Synthesized Summary of Discussion*

In modern administrative practice, personnel and finance are two crucial organisational elements, and whoever controls them invariably is in a firm control of the “soul” of the organisation. This explains the predicaments of INEC even though some of them are intrinsic. Many politicians in Nigeria display illiberal disposition towards electoral contests and rarely believe in the dual nature of the contests: every election inevitably produces winners and losers. To these politicians, elections have become a must-win contest. Since election administration falls within the administrative governance under INEC, they view INEC as an institution that must be captured in order to increase their odds of victory.

Again, INEC is not programmed to run by robots. Rather, it is embodied by its officers (and other staff) and, as such, represents what the officers and the appointing authorities make of it. Because of the way INEC is structured, these officers daily grapple with the fear of being sacked by their appointing authorities.<sup>9</sup> This cripples INEC’s institutional autonomy and make its officers malleable to political whims. The contentious appointment process has placed INEC in a leadership recruitment dilemma, with recurring cases of poor election preparation and postponement in Nigeria. According to SBM Intelligence (2023), the financial costs of election postponement both for INEC and the Nigerian economy are quite significant. Postponing any aspect of elections until a later time places a question mark on the credibility of the process. It also results in staggering losses arising from the suspension of economic activities and restrictions imposed on the movement of people. The estimated primary and secondary cost of postponing the 2019 elections is \$2.23 billion and this figure represents 2% of Nigeria’s \$420 billion Gross Domestic Product (SBM Intelligence 2023).

Electoral irregularities are a reflection of collective criminality that requires collaboration of politicians, election officers, and party agents. Accordingly, Madueke and Enyiazu’s (2025) findings reveal that before the automated

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8 Interviews with community leaders in Oyo and Kaduna states, and a politician in Cross River state.

9 Interview at Otobi, Otukpo LGA, Benue state.

election process in Nigeria between 1999 and 2011, politicians and their supporters voted many times and electoral officers helped them to justify their bloated figures by ticking random names in the voter registers. On one of these occasions, a voter who came to exercise his civic responsibility discovered that someone had voted on his behalf based on INEC record. The authors conclude that INEC has not truly demonstrated its independence in providing a level playing ground for Nigerians seeking to gain power through competitive peaceful elections due to political interference.

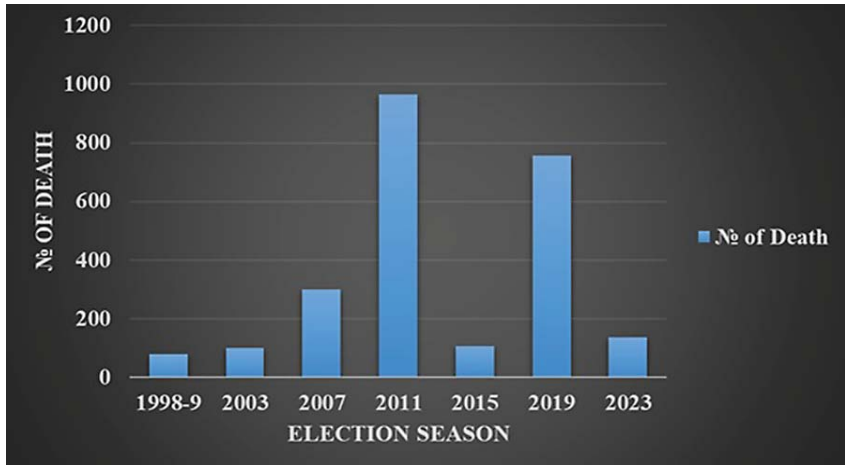


Figure 3. Trend in Bloody Nigerian Elections: 1998-99 and 2023 (Source: Authors' compilation with data from Mac-Leva (2022), Bekoe (2011), Human Rights Watch (2007, 2011), SBM Intelligence (2019))

Today, Nigerian elections are undermined by incidents of violent irregularities. Cases of vote suppression, double or multiple voting, vote buying, and intimidating statements are the common visible defining features of Nigerian elections amid various government-determined reform measures to improve INEC performance. All elections conducted by INEC have reportedly claimed 2,444 lives: 80 in the 1998-99 election season, 100 in 2003, 300 in 2007, 965 in 2011, 106 in 2015, 756 in 2019, and 137 in 2023 (Figure 3).

From these statistics, even the widely acclaimed credible 2015 elections recorded cases of irregularities with bloodshed and loss of lives. Elections held in this situation cannot wear the hallowed toga of credibility. This study,

therefore, maintains that something is intrinsically wrong when Nigerian elections, which are supposed to be peaceful contests, end up taking human lives and depriving legitimate winners of their victories due to irregularities. Hence, INEC activities or operations will rarely be different from its already susceptible human and financial composites.

## **Conclusion**

This study makes an insightful empirical contribution to the debate on political interference in election management in Nigeria. It focuses on how this interference cripples INEC's independence in terms of its membership composition and finances. By its nomenclature and constitutional recognition as a statutory federal body, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conveys the notion of independence and is expected to exercise it in determining functional strategies to improve the quality of Nigerian elections. But the reality is that INEC independence exists in the attachment of "independent" to its name, at least for now.

Since INEC is not in firm control of its key officers and financing, its operations become a shadow of what politicians desire them to be. This explains why many Nigerians have serious misgivings about the constitutional provision that empowers federal authorities to appoint and supervise INEC principal officers, control its financing, and subtly determine its operations. This constitutional INEC design delinks the institutional INEC independence from the operational INEC independence, which existence is determined by the government. With this design, elections in Nigeria have always had charges of irregularities on their management.

These findings underscore the need for voter-determined electoral reforms since government-determined ones have not addressed the fundamental problems with the electoral system in Nigeria. Instructively, this study does not claim to offer a one-swoop explanation of the myriad of electoral problems facing democratic operations in developing countries like Nigeria by exposing the enduring systemic interference in election management. It leaves other plausible explanations in the domain of further studies, which can explore the possibility of getting INEC's principal officers on board through a credible process by the electorate (not by executive selectorate) to truly reflect their statutory mandates as recruiters of elected political leaders via credible elections.

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## **Appendix 1. Key Informant Interview Schedule**

**General theme: political interference in election administration and electoral irregularities in Nigeria.**

1. What is your view on the claim that political interference in INEC membership composition accounts for the control of INEC's principal officers like the chairman and resident electoral commissioners in Nigeria?
2. How do you justify the statement that political interference in INEC financing is responsible for INEC's dependence on government budgets for election management purposes in Nigeria?
3. What is your opinion on the argument that the opposition groups are showing a better alternative in Nigeria?
4. Is it possible for INEC to assert its independence amid the present institutional framework that establishes it?