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Election, International Election Monitoring Groups and Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Appraisal

Godwin Ihemeje¹

ABSTRACT

A representative democracy can be achieved through a free and fair electoral environment. It is at the instance of ensuring free and fair election that observation has emerged as a fundamental principle in restoring people's confidence, trust and appraising electoral integrity for democratic development. The participation and involvement of international election observers in electoral matters aim to ensure that elections are conducted in accordance with conventional democratic ethical standards across the globe. Premised on this background, this paper seeks to examine the role of international election observers in major elections conducted in Nigeria's fourth republic. Six international election observation bodies were sampled: National Democratic Institute (NDI), The Commonwealth Secretariat (CS), European Commission (EC), International Republican Institute (IRI), Human Right Watch (HRW) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The study unravels the essential roles of international election observers in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections in Nigeria. The paper therefore avers that international election observers have performed more than expectation in correcting previous electoral malfeasances through their dynamic reports and recommendations. Their monumental roles discerned the 2011 general election from the preceding 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections which were marred by miscellaneous electoral flaws in Nigeria. Thus, the paper recommends ultimate cooperation of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society, security agency and the electorate with International Electoral Observers for the realization of sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Election, Election Observers, Fourth Republic, INEC, Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

The pragmatism of democratic edifice is worthwhile exonerated on the general evenhandedness, freeness and fairness of an election. Therefore, observing and monitoring election becomes indispensable cognate of democratic development in every political orb. Election observation has been

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a mechanism designed by advanced democracies through the establishment of international election monitoring organizations to legitimize democracy all over the world. It is important to note here that the major elections conducted shortly after Nigerian independence were marred by rigging, violence, impropriety and all sorts of electoral criminalities scolded by both local and international election observers. Consequently, the interventions of international election monitoring bodies necessitate safeguarding democracy from electoral immodesty in sustaining ethical standards for democratic advancement in Nigeria. Observing election transcends the conduct of an election; it involves pre-election assessment, the election itself and the post-election activities. The international election observers therefore play a dominant role as a watchdog in homogenizing, standardizing, and appraising electoral integrity across the globe.

Elections and democracy are inextricably linked in a state that operates on the basis of liberal democratic tenets. Elections are seen as the way to attain political power in democracies, this is because of the fact that democracy anchors on the articulation and aggregation of interests of the people. This logically implies that the survival of democracy depends much on functional and virile elections conducted by the state as at when due (Awopeju, 2012).

In some advanced democracies, elections are such a routine matter whereby the credibility and validity of each electoral process and cycle is assessed on the quality and performance of new technologies and innovations and how well such creative enterprises bolster the performance of the electoral management body and enhance voter confidences (Okoye, 2007). Thus, election observation and monitoring have become a common trend among development agencies and donor countries. These groups send a contingent of individuals to monitor elections in the developing world to ensure that electoral process has succeeded accordingly to a standard of “free and fair election” (Ezekwe & Eme, 2010).

The question of inviting international election observers to monitor an election is one of the most controversial issues in Africa. Most of the time, the presence of international election monitors in emerging democracies is important to measure whether or not an election is conducted in a free and fair manner (Wondwosen, 2008). Election observation is one of the methods by which the transparency of an election can be ensured. Neutral, independent and conscientious observation of the electoral process can also help ensure the credibility and impartiality of all elections (NEC, 2009). Election observation is not just concerned with any particular election result but is concerned with electoral outcomes only to the degree that they are reported honestly and accurately in a transparent and timely manner. In addition to providing credible information on an electoral process, the presence of election observers builds voter confidence in the integrity of the process as well as the integrity of an electoral management body. Election observation also helps to deter or expose violence or intimidation, as well as cheating or manipulation of the vote or election results (NEC, 2009). Election observation took shape in the Post-Cold War years, as a number of regions, in particular Africa and post-communist Eastern Europe, held multiparty elections for the first time. Today, the most active international election monitors come from the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), but more than a dozen organizations (including the Carter Center, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and the Organization of American States) send observers to five or more elections each year (Hyde & Kelly, 2011).

Election observation by the international community is generally accepted as a means of contributing to voter confidence and assessing the relative legitimacy of an electoral process and its outcome. International election observation and reporting have become important mechanisms to help ensure neutrality, integrity, accountability and transparency of the electoral process. They are part of the system that protects the viability and honesty of election administration and the participation by political parties, candidates and interest groups. Election observation encourages compliance with the legal framework and acts as a deterrent to those thinking about undertaking dubious activities (Central Election Commission Palestine, 2006) International election observation is perceived to increase domestic confidence in the electoral process and reduce fraud (Beaulieu & Hyde, 2007). International observers play a significant role in promoting international election standards, principles and practices. Their presence often helps ensure free, fair and credible elections that can serve as examples of human rights in practice (Griffith, 2013). Essentially, election observation and monitoring agencies are set up to ensure elections are freer and fairer, therefore, guaranteed archetypal democracy. In the same vein, DFID

(2010) observes that without extensive monitoring by local and international observers, the 2007 elections might have triggered even greater violence than occurred in Nigeria.

Electoral administrators, politicians and national observers can learn to better understand international standards for free and fair elections by engaging in liaison with international observers and studying their reports. International observer missions also provide electoral administrators the opportunity for comparative exchange of professional knowledge with other experts, particularly on integrity mechanisms. As such, the presence of international observers monitoring the election process might help deter attempts to disrupt or tamper with the process. There is a public perception in most countries that international observers will be able to uncover fraud on Election Day (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2013).

In a similar direction, election observation can strengthen democratic institutions, build public confidence in electoral processes and help deter fraud, intimidation and violence (European Commission, 2008). Notably, the roles of international election monitoring bodies are well discerned in the major elections conducted in the fourth republic. For instance, the 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections have been globally reported by international election monitoring bodies, while these reports showcased multifarious levels of quaintness's vis-à-vis improvements in Nigerian electoral system. Disgustingly, the 2007 general election was reported by international election observers as the worst election ever conducted in Nigerian political history; simultaneously, emphasizing the major progress in the 2011 election. Therefore, international election observers serve as a watchdog to ensure ideal democratic practice in Nigeria.

The structural framework of this paper include: introduction, as earlier documented in the preceding lines; methodological and design consideration; conception clarification: election and election observation; revisiting electoral administration in the fourth republic; assessments of international election observers in Nigeria's Fourth Republic; general discussion; exploring the role of international election observers in Nigeria's fourth republic; and concluding remarks.

2. Methodological and design consideration

The study of international election monitoring groups in Nigeria's fourth republic comprises both primary and secondary research such as archival/library, internet searches, and survey (that is, the authors' compilation). Accordingly, various types of documents and publications are utilized, not excluding observation of non-verbal clues. Extant literature provided the historical context for this study, as well as the analysis of INEC documents, interactions with INEC officials and direct involvement during the 2011 general election. This study covered essentially general elections of 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011. The content analytical approach was employed to evaluate the activities and contributions of six identified international election observers.

3. Conceptual clarification: Elections and elections observation

Elections have been a vital part of democratic transitions, decolonization, and the implementation of peace agreements around the globe (United Nations, 2014). Elections provide the means for the people's will to be freely expressed in choosing their government. For governing institutions to have democratic legitimacy they should have been granted the authority to govern in the name of the people, and be accountable to the people for the exercise of that authority, through genuine and periodic elections. A genuine and democratic election process can contribute to ensuring sustainable peace and stability. Elections provide groups with an opportunity to express their political voice in competition with their opponents without resort to violence and enable the peaceful transfer of political power (European Commission, 2008). It is noted that election is not only a tool of democratic participation but also a fierce contest for positions of leadership, power and access to resources (Kuhne, 2010). One of the strong appeals of democracy is the central position whereby it allocates and accommodates citizen participation. Unlike other forms of government, democracy gives citizens wide elbowroom which ideally allows them to select their leaders, hold such leaders accountable, and determine the length of leaders' stay in power. This provision is rooted in the fundamental quest of women and men to be in control of their lives (Kornberg and Clarke, 1994 cit in UNDP, 2010).

A political system is democratic 'to the extent that its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes, and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote' (Huntington, 1991:661 cite in Bamgbose, 2012). Therefore, Elections involve a set of activities leading to the selection of one or more persons out of many to serve in positions of authority in a society (Orji & Uzodi, 2012). An accurate and complete assessment of any election must take into account all aspects of the process, and no election should be viewed in isolation from the political context in which it takes place. Factors to consider include: the legal framework for the elections as laid out in the constitution and electoral laws of the country; the ability of citizens to seek and receive accurate information upon which to make political choices; the ability of political competitors to organize freely and to reach out to citizens in order to win their support; the conduct of the mass media in covering parties, candidates and issues; the freedom that citizens and political competitors have to engage in the political and electoral process without fear of intimidation, violence or retribution for their choices; the conduct of the voter registration process and integrity of the voter register; the conduct of the voting, counting, results tabulation, transmission and announcement processes; the handling of election complaints; and the installation in office of those duly elected (NDI Report, 2008).

Election observation is the process whereby elections in a particular country or locality are observed against set standards by an independent and impartial body of Observers with the aim of identifying whether the elections conform to accepted guarantees of democratic participation, identifying flaws and challenges, and also making recommendations on how the process can be improved in the future. Election observation, especially by domestic groups, further reinforces the rights of citizens and their organizations to participate and ensure Greater transparency in the manner their leaders are chosen (INEC, 2014).

Today, the international monitoring of elections has become so common that refusing to invite foreign observers is seen as a signal that a regime has something to hide. Among the media and in policy circles, the importance of election monitoring is almost universally accepted (Hyde & Kelly, 2011). As noted in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, international election observation is a widely accepted means of providing accurate and impartial assessments about the nature of electoral processes. Accurate and impartial international election observation calls for credible and reliable methodologies and cooperation with national authorities, the national political competitors (political parties, candidates and supporters of positions on referenda), domestic election monitoring organizations and other credible international election observer organizations (Griffith, 2013).

Observing the electoral process is an important integrity-safeguard mechanism. It is one of the checks-and-balances that protect the viability and honesty of election administration, as well as the participation of political parties, candidates and interest groups. In addition, observation promotes compliance with the legal framework and deters questionable activities and potential conflict. Public reporting by observers increases transparency and helps ensure election officers' accountability (IFES, 2011). An observer has an obligation to know exactly what to observe. Election observation is not about seeking for fault but an objective assessment of the election process. At the minimum, it requires adequate appreciation of the electoral laws, rules, procedures and processes of the electoral system that is to be observed. It is important for a prospective Observer to study the field manuals for election officials and also have an idea of the enabling laws and a baseline understanding of the political system that is being observed (INEC, 2014). Observers can verify that governments are indeed playing by the rules, which can be important in quelling "sore loser" protests, increasing voter confidence, assisting the international community in assessing the legitimacy of the elections, and in theory, promoting democratization. And when governments do not play by the rules, observers can reduce fraud that would otherwise occur and condemn governments for election manipulation, sometimes validating domestic protest, as happened in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 (Hyde & Kelly, 2011).

In a simplified manner, election observation includes observation of processes and activities organized before, during and after elections; Collation of facts and observations that have been noted; interpretation of the facts gathered against the background of the laws governing elections; and detailing the findings so collated and the interpretations arising from the reports (INEC, 2014). In this regard, election is an election when the votes of the peoples count; the general acceptability of any election largely relies on the legal framework and mode of conducting it i.e. whether it is "free and fair".

The functionality of international election observers therefore becomes necessary in determining electoral integrity of any country of the world. They provide general baseline to measure its credibility, fairness and transparency. Thus, acknowledging its indispensable role in ensuring sustainable democracy across the world.

4. Revisiting electoral administration in Nigeria's fourth republic

Shortly after the military reassurance to hand-over power to civilian regime in 1999 under the authoritarian political leadership of General Abdulsalami Abubakar, elections were conducted which restored former military dictator, Olusegun Obasanjo as elected president in Nigeria, therefore, symbolizes another political expedition to Nigerian fourth republic that was inaugurated in 29 of May 1999. The journey through the fourth republic was marked by another historic epoch in sustaining democratic politics in Nigeria. According to International Crisis Group report (2012) democratic government has been uninterrupted for more than a decade, but the quality of elections since the return to civilian rule in 1999, of which these are the fourth, has declined continually. The 1999 polls that swept General Olusegun Obasanjo and the PDP party to power were flawed but generally accepted by Nigerians glad to see the back of a repressive military dictatorship. In the subsequent years, Obasanjo and the ruling party – an alliance of oligarchs with close links to the military – consolidated their grip on power. In 2003 his mandate was renewed in a vote that was decried by observers as heavily rigged.

Following the same trend, prior the aborted third term agenda of Olusegun Obasanjo, another election was conducted in 2007 which overlaid the emergence of People's Democratic Party (PDP) presidential candidates, U'maru Musa Y'Ardua as winner. The election was conducted by Professor Maurice Iwu, who serves as the Chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria. Therefore, the election was slammed by both local and international election observers as the worst in the history of electoral conducts in Nigeria. Despite the atrocious reports by local and international election observers, the country forged ahead in sustaining democratic system of government. Equally, the then incumbent president publicly declared that the election that brought him to the mantle of leadership was characterized as rigged. However, Yaradua administration set up electoral committee headed by Muhammed Uwais saddled with the responsibility to examine the gray areas in Nigerian electoral system and provide recommendations. The committee was inaugurated to curb electoral rigging and violence in Nigeria. The Uwais electoral reports emphasis independent candidature, establishment of Electoral Offenses Commission (EOC), Political Parties registration and regulatory commission (PPRRC), Constituency Delimitation Commission (CDC) among others which were put forward to the National Assembly for proper implementation, however, the reports were not succeeded total implementation. Suddenly, after the demise of President Yar'adua, the vice president, good luck Jonathan was restored, as acting president of federal republic of Nigeria which generates a stormy ethnic politics in Nigeria. Against all odds, Nigerian electoral system sails through the ocean of electoral misconducts in the subsequent 2011 election.

The 2011 general election, the fourth in the series of National Elections conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) since Nigerian's return to electoral democracy in 1999, marked a watershed in the history of the conduct of elections in the country, being the first election that was appraised by both local and international observers as being credible and transparent. Unlike the previous elections that were portrayed with high level of malpractices and rigging of highest order, the 2011 election to some extent showcased the wishes of the electorates (Alabi & Sekariyau, 2013). Despite generally positive preliminary statements on the conduct of the April 2011 legislative and presidential elections, election-related violence surrounding the polls was higher than in previous years, highlighting lingering communal tensions. Rioting that broke out in the north in protest of President Jonathan's win reflected grievances that many in that region feel had been left unaddressed by the ruling party (Ploch, 2012). Having examined electoral administration during the fourth republic, the 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections were depicted as fraudulent; conversely, the 2011 election defies the existing deceptive electoral hubbub that has overwhelmed Nigerian political system by making the will of the general citizenry to prevail through free and fair electoral processes.

5. Assessment of elections in Nigeria's fourth republic by the international observers

This section delves into the general elections conducted in Nigeria's fourth republic and provides systematic presentation in tabular forms. The sample framework includes six international election observers while their reports were analyzed using content approach.

Table 1.

International election observers in 1999 general election in Nigeria

S/N	Election Observers	Headquarters	Election	Assessment
1	European Union	Brussels, Europe	1999	Flaw
2	National Democratic Institute	Washington, USA	1999	Flaw
3	Human Rights Watch	New York City USA	1999	Flaw
4	Economic Community of West African States	Abuja, Nigeria	1999	Flaw
5	International Republican Institute	Washington, USA	1999	Flaw
6	The Commonwealth Secretariat	London, UK	1999	Flaw

Source: Authors' compilation

Table 2.

International election observers in 2003 general election in Nigeria

S/N	Election Observers	Headquarters	Election	Assessment
1	European Union	Brussels, Europe	2003	Flaw
2	National Democratic Institute	Washington, USA	2003	Flaw
3	Human Rights Watch	New York City USA	2003	Flaw
4	Economic Community of West African States	Abuja, Nigeria	2003	Flaw
5	International Republican Institute	Washington, USA	2003	Flaw
6	The Commonwealth Secretariat	London, UK	2003	Flaw

Source: Authors' compilation

Table 3.

International election observers in 2007 general election in Nigeria

S/N	Election Observers	Headquarters	Election	Assessment
1	European Union	Brussels, Europe	2007	Flaw
2	National Democratic Institute	Washington, USA	2007	Flaw
3	Human Rights Watch	New York City, USA	2007	Flaw
4	Economic Community of West African States	Abuja, Nigeria	2007	Flaw
5	International Republican Institute	Washington, USA	2007	Flaw
6	The Commonwealth Secretariat	London, UK	2007	Flaw

Source: Authors' compilation

Table 4.

International election observers in 2011 general election in Nigeria

S/N	Election Observers	Headquarters	Election	Assessment
1	European Union	Brussels, Europe	2011	Free and fair but characterized with post-election violence

2	National Democratic Institute	Washington, USA	2011	Free and fair but characterized with post-election violence
3	Human Rights Watch	New York City USA	2011	Free and fair but characterized with post-election violence
4	Economic Community of West African States	Abuja, Nigeria	2011	Free and fair but characterized with post-election violence
5	International Republican Institute	Washington, USA	2011	Free and fair but characterized with post-election violence
6	The Commonwealth Secretariat	London, UK	2011	Free and fair but characterized with post-election violence

Source: Authors' Compilation

6. General discussion

It is evident from the above tables that the major elections conducted in the fourth republic were marred by electoral misdeeds, symbolizes the bane of Nigerian democracy. The 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections were appraised by international election observers as flawed. However, the 2011 election showcased a mammoth departure from the existing electoral traditions in Nigeria. The conduct of 2011 general election epitomized high level of freeness, fairness and justness in the total electoral administration, therefore serves as a paradigm shift in Nigerian electioneering history. Shockingly, despite the huge successes recorded in the general administration of the election, the 2011 election was characterized with post-election violence in the Northern Nigeria which claimed myriad of lives as well as destruction of properties. Correspondingly, the International Republican Institute claims that in 1999 after nearly four decades of brutal and debilitating military regimes, and while the 2003 and 2007 elections ranked among the most violent and least credible, citizen and international observers found the April 2011 national elections the most credible in the nation's nascent democratic history.

6.1 Exploring the role of international observers in Nigeria's fourth republic

The role of observers is to offer an independent assessment of the electoral process within a broader program of democracy promotion. Professionalized observer groups themselves are interested in providing accurate election reports, as their reputations dictate future invitations to elections as well as their own credibility (Beaulieu & Hyde, 2007). Election observation and monitoring has become a common trend among development agencies and donor countries. These groups send contingents of individuals to monitor elections in the developing world to ensure that electoral process has succeeded accordingly to a standard of "free and fair election" (Ezekwe & Eme, 2010). The wholesome of the general appraisal of election necessitates pre-election environment, the conduct of an election and the post-election activities. The international election observers assess the pre-election environment on the basis of legal framework, preparedness, logistic, materials put in place and the political atmosphere of the state, while the election activities provide the general insight into the level of freeness and fairness of an election, while the post-election itself combine the overall computation of an election which may incorporate justifiability of the election results with the total number of people registered vis-à-vis the number of electorates voted during an election as well as the acceptability of the election results by the electorates, civil societies and the contending political parties.

Evidently, having considered the pre-election, election and post-election atmospheric platforms in 1999, 2003 and 2007 by international election observers, it could be concluded that the elections were poorly organized, coordinated and conducted as it was apparent in snatching of ballot boxes, violence, monetization, falsification of election results, intimidation by political thugs and all sort of electoral insolence. Conversely, the 2011 elections were appraised as free and fair based on the reports of various international electoral observers in Nigeria. In this regards, the role of international election observers cannot be quantified in sustaining ideal democratic order across the globe. The case of Nigerian fourth republic reflects how these various international election monitoring bodies ensured that the electoral pursuits were coordinated according to democratic guidelines, validated through their various assessments and recommendations in the previous elections that were marred with riggings and other unconventional electoral practices in the country. The 2011 election was globally appraised as conducted according to democratic standard in Nigeria. Noticeably, the previous reports by international election observers in Nigeria provide a congenial ground for remodeling of the sordid areas in Nigerian electoral processes.

7. Concluding remarks

The preceding exposition elucidated panoramic view of the role of international election observers in Nigerian fourth republic. The sustenance of democratic decorum depends largely on the freeness and fairness of an election, pictured with global electoral norm. The international election observers serve as intermediary between the political contestants and the electorates to build trust and credible electoral processes through the standardized global methodological benchmarks for the conduct of an election. They play major role in evaluating pre-election, election and post-election activities through a standard electoral techniques to guarantee stringent democratic compliance all over the world. Nigeria's failure to conduct credible election from independent has attracts international election observers to assess the level of electoral irregularities and proffer recommendations on how best these incongruities could be tamed. The 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections witnessed immeasurable electoral riggings while 2011 election chose the path to democratic sanctity deemed to have reflected the sacrosanct will of the electorate in Nigeria, therefore, in achieving credible election, the role of international election observers could not be misconstrued in ensuring free and fair election in Nigerian fourth republic.

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