

ELECTORAL REFORMS: A NECESSITY FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *The research work was based on Electoral Reforms: A necessity for free and fair elections in Nigeria. A survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study was made up of 14 communities in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Using purposive sampling technique, three hundred respondents were sampled for the study. The instrument for data collection is the questionnaire which has sixteen (16) items designed to elicit information on electoral reforms; a necessity for free and fair elections in Nigeria. The instrument was validated by experts in public administration and political science. The mean statistics was used to analyze the data collected. The findings of the study showed that ethnic/tribal loyalty, political violence, politics of god-fatherism, external and internal security threats among others are the challenges militating against the conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria. The paper also discovered that electronic voting, electronic registration, administrative and financial autonomy of INEC, the use of digital security system among others are the types of electoral reforms that need to be put in place for conduct of free and fair elections. The paper concluded that electoral reforms will no doubt curb the irregularities in the conduct of elections in Nigeria. Relevant recommendations and suggestions for further studies were made.*

KEY WORDS: electoral, reforms, free, fair, election.

INTRODUCTION

Electoral Process has to deal with the entire cycle of an election which covers different phases such as delimitation of electoral boundaries, registration of voters, notice of election, nomination of candidates, election campaigns, election, collation and announcement of election results. According to Nwanolue (2004), electoral process consists of complex process, with each of the process leading to the other, he observed that electoral process in Nigeria were largely seen as human oriented and human based activities. In most cases, these human based activities are

characterized with biases, error and manipulations which hinder the enthronement of free and fair elections.

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of every democracy and the primary mechanism for exercising the principle of sovereignty of the people. Through such elections, citizens participate in the governance of their country by choosing those who govern in the quest for development. By their choices, the citizens confer legitimacy and authority on those who govern them, making it easier for them to mobilize public support and co-operation for the implementation of development programmes. Free, fair and credible elections are therefore a crucial requirement for good governance in any democracy. According to Ozekhome (2020:31), Nigeria has a corrupt, fraudulent and bloody electioneering history. As a matter of fact, successive Nigerian elections from pre-independence days have been characterized by one form of malpractice or the other. While a flawless electioneering process is almost impossible in Nigeria. Okafor (2013) posits that elections should be conducted in a peaceful atmosphere,, devoid of the usual violence that has come to characterize election in Nigeria. Elections should be conducted in a manner that reflects the wishes and choices of the electorates. For example, despite the wide spread condemnation of the conduct of the 2003 general elections in Nigeria, there was no attempt to improve the subsequent elections. As a matter of fact, the European Union described the 2007 general elections as a sham. The elections were marred by very poor organization, lack of essential transparency, wide spread and procedural irregularities, substantial evidence of fraud, wide spread voter disenfranchisement, and lack of equal conditions for political parties and candidates and numerous incidents of violence. Ifediora (1999) and Agbu (2016) observed that, the electoral process in Nigeria is characterized by massive fraud, intimidation, assassination of political opponents, vote buying, vote rigging and outright violence. These problems necessitate the urgent need for electoral reform in Nigeria.

Esan and Ayeni (2017), while arguing for the imperative of electoral reform observed that, electoral process in Nigeria amongst others are characterized by political violence particularly assassination, unbridled desperation by politicians to ensure sweeping winners take all victories, thus leading to the manipulation of the electoral process, brazen falsification of election results, intimidation of voters, electoral officials and observers, under age voting, hoarding of ballot boxes and ballot papers announcing of election results where there was no voting, diversion of ballot boxes, ballot papers, and result sheets, multiple voting across different political units etc.

Electoral Reform will no doubt curb the evil of ethnicity in Nigerian politics. Okafor (2010) lends support to this claim when he posted that “Nigerian leaders usually struggle for power at all cost-causing ethnic conflict. The arrogance of the three major ethnic groups prompts ethnic conflict in Nigerian Politics of god-fatherism, inadequate security provision, material poverty, external security threat are some of the electoral problems that call for electoral reform in Nigeria. Jega (2015), observes that material poverty disembowels democracy and corrupt the electoral process through excessive monetization of politics. The role of money in Nigeria politics is very significant. The negative impact of vote buying is widely recognized. The incidence of vote buying was more prevalent among the poor. Even electoral officers are influenced with money or other

gratifications. Apart from money, the challenge of communication and logistics leading to delays in transporting election officials and materials to the voting centers (Ake, 1996). This problem is more pronounced in coastal areas where the means of transportation is relatively more troublesome. There are disturbing cases of late arrival of electoral officials and materials to election centers, with voters waiting almost interminably resulting to weariness and frustration among voters. Therefore, an electoral reform is a necessary condition for a truly free and fair election and establishment of true democracy in Nigeria.

According to Omotola (2011:87), electoral reforms are fundamentally targeted at instituting a strong election management body with substantial administrative and financial autonomy and promoting a democratic political culture within parties and the populace. It is contended that a neutral and independent electoral management body is one of the fundamental pre-requisites for truly free and fair election and the establishment of true democracy in any nation. It is further suggested that credibility of the electoral process will be considerably enhanced if the Election Management Body (EMB) is fair and gives equal access and treatment to all participants in the electoral process. Credible democratic election implies freedom from coercion and fairness as the correlate of impartiality. The idea of an independent Electoral Management Body (EMB) that always goes cap in hand to the presidency to ask for legitimate funds to carry out its responsibilities will continue to nurture a deep-seated perception of the commission as only doing the bidding of the incumbent who nominated them, under the notion that he who pays the piper dictates the tune. Put differently, the role of the INEC is greatly impaired and compromised by the fact that it is constituted by the president, coupled with the absence of an independent source of funding and its reliance largely on the presidency for its finance (Omotola, 2011:89). There is urgent need to re-organize and reposition INEC to ensure its independence and professionalism in the conduct of election and insulate it from the control of the executive arm of government in terms of appointment of members of the commission and funding. According to Okafor (2013), there is urgent need to produce rules and procedure that enhance speedy disposal of election petition and ensure that election disputes be concluded expeditiously before swearing in of winners of elections.

Okafor (2010) says that electoral reforms such as e-voting, e-registration, administration and financial autonomy of INEC, use of e-collation, website for transmission of result, use of automated finger prints, use of digital security services, etc will substantially enrich our electoral process and make it more credible and resilient. INEC should simplify the voting process and make it an enjoyable exercise and not one that Nigerians will dread. The INEC can also learn from other countries workable strategies and innovations that make their electoral systems more credible and reliable. There should no longer be inconclusive elections, malfunctioning of the card reader's machine, voter's apathy, violence, cancellation of results in future elections.

Objectives of the study

The following are the objectives of the study:

1. To find out the challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria.
2. To find out the consequences of not conducting free and fair elections.

3. To find out the reforms that are needed to put in place for conduct of free and fair elections.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria?
2. What are the consequences of non-conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria?
3. What types of electoral reforms that needs to be put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria?

METHODOLOGY

A survey research design was adopted for the study. The population was made up of 14 communities in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State. Using purposive sampling technique, three hundred respondents were sampled for the study. The instrument for data collection is the questionnaire which has 16 items designed to elicit information on electoral reforms. A necessity for free and fair elections in Nigeria. The instrument was first validated by an expert in Public administration at Imo State University Owerri, Imo State and expert in Political Science at University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu State. The reliability of the research instrument was determined through a measure of internal consistency of the items. The Cronbach Alpha was used to establish the internal consistency of 0.80. The measurement is high enough for the instrument to be considered reliable. For data analysis, the research questions were analyzed using mean. Any mean of 2.5 and above is said to be high and effective and those below 2.5 are said to be low and ineffective.

RESULTS

The following are the results of the data analysis.

Research Question 1: What are the challenges militating against conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

Table 1: Mean rating score on the challenges militating against conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

S/N	ITEM	X	REMARKS
1	Ethnic/tribal loyalty is impediments to free and fair elections.	3.3	Agree
2	Inadequate fund and logistics	3.5	Agree
3	Politics of god-fatherism militate against free and fair elections	3.1	Agree
4	External security threat is a serious problem to free and fair elections	2.9	Agree
5	Inadequate internal security provision is a challenge to free and fair elections	3.5	Agree
	Source: Field survey, 2021		

The result presented in table one shows that items 1-5 were rated high by the respondents. This was clearly indicated from their respective mean scores of 3.3, 3.5, 3.1, 2.9 and 3.5 which are above the criterion of acceptance fixed at 2.5 and above. It means that ethnicity/tribal loyalty, inadequate fund and logistics, politics of god-fatherism, external and internal security threats are some of the challenges of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria.

Research Question 2: What are the consequences of non-conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

Table 2: Mean rating scores on the consequences of non-conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

S/N	ITEM	X	REMARKS
6	Voters apathy is a consequence of non-conduct of free and fair elections	2.9	Agree
7	Violence and instability are consequences of non-conduct of free and fair election	3.1	Agree
8	Litigations and prolonged court cases are consequences of non-conduct of free and fair elections	3.5	Agree
9	Cancellation of results could be as a result of non-conduct of free and fair elections	3.3	Agree
10	Inconclusive elections is a consequences of non-conduct of free and fair elections	2.9	Agree
	Source: Field source, 2021		

The result presented in table two shows that items 6-10 were rated high by the respondents. This was clearly indicated from their respective mean scores of 2.9, 3.1, 3.5, 3.3 and 2.9 which are above the criterion of acceptance fixed at 2.5 and above. It means that voter's apathy, violence and instability, litigation and prolonged court cases, cancellation of results and inconclusive election are the consequences of non-conduct of free and fair elections.

Research Question 3: What types of electoral reforms that needs to be put in place for conduct of free and fair elections?

Table 3: Mean rating scores on the types of electoral reforms that needs to be put in place for conduct of free and fair elections.

S/N	ITEM	X	REMARKS
11	Electronic voting will promote free and fair election	2.9	
12	Electronic registration will promote free and fair elections	3.1	
13	Administrative and financial autonomy of INEC will promote the conduct of free and fair elections.	3.5	
14	The use of digital security system will promote the conduct of free and fair elections	3.5	
15	The use of electronic collation website will promote the conduct of free and fair elections.	3.3	
16	Provision of adequate security officers	3.5	
	Source: Field Survey, 2021		

The result presented in table three shows that items 11-16 were rated high by the respondents. This was clearly indicated from their respective mean scores of 2.9, 3.5, 3.5 and 3.5 which are above the criterion of acceptance fixed at 2.5 and above. It means that electronic voting, electronic registration, administration and financial autonomy of INEC, use of digital security system and the use of electronic collation website are types of electoral reforms that need to be put in place for conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION FINDINGS

The result of the analysis of research question one shows that ethnic/tribal loyalty, inadequate fund and logistics, politics of god-fatherism, external and internal security/threats are challenges militating against the conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria. These findings are in line with Okafor (2010) who observes that Nigerian leaders usually struggle for power at all cost causing ethnic and tribal conflicts. He further says that inadequate security and material poverty are serious challenges militating against the conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.

The result of the analysis of research question two shows that voter's apathy, violence and instability, litigations and prolonged court cases, cancellation of results and inconclusive elections are some of the consequences of non-conduct of free and fair elections. These findings are in line with Okafor (2010) and Omotola (2011). These scholars observed that electoral reforms will check the consequences of non-conduct of free and fair elections such as cancellation and inconclusive elections.

The result of the analysis of research question three shows that electoral reforms such as electronic voting, electronic registration, administrative and financial autonomy of INEC, the use of digital security system and the use of electronic collation website will promote the conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria. These findings are in line with Okafor (2010) who says that electoral

reforms such as e-voting, e-registration, administrative and financial autonomy of INEC among others will substantially enrich our electoral process.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria electoral processes is characterized by fraudulent practices such as brazen falsification of electoral results, intimidation of voters and electoral officials, underage voting, hoarding of ballot boxes and ballot papers etc. Also, the negative impact of vote buying is wide spread. The incidence of vote buying was more prevalent among the poor. Even electoral officers are influenced with money or other gratifications. Electoral reforms will no doubt curb the irregularities in the conduct of elections in Nigeria. Electoral reforms such as e-voting, e-registration, administrative and financial autonomy of INEC, use of electronic collation website among others are some of the necessary electoral reforms that will re-position electoral system that will promote free and fair elections in Nigeria.

Implications of the study

1. If the findings of these research works are implemented, electoral irregularities, violence, intimidation of voters and electoral officers will be checked. Also Nigeria will experience stability in her transition from one democratic government to another.

Recommendations

Based on the issues highlighted above, the following recommendations are made:

1. INEC should be made to be administrative and financial independent of the executive arm of the government.
2. The use of digital security system will promote the conduct of free and fair elections in Nigeria.
3. The use of electronic collation website will check against manipulation of election results.
4. Security personnel such as police and civil defence officers should be given proper orientation before they are sent to election venues to maintain adequate security.
5. All electronic gadgets provided for conduct of elections should be tested before elections are conducted.
6. The INEC can learn from other countries workable strategies and innovations to make Nigeria electoral system credible and reliable.

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