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ELECTORAL PROCESS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC, 1999-2023.

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Abstract
The main thrust of this paper is to interrogate the historical trajectory of the electoral process and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic between 1999 and 2023. The paper argues that despite the various general elections that had been conducted during the Fourth Republic in Nigeria has been characterized by violence, democracy has successfully consolidated in Nigeria within this period of study. The methodology of research adopted in this paper is historical and qualitative, utilizing materials from secondary sources of data collection. It explains that the conduct of successive elections during the first twenty-four years of the birth of the Fourth Republic witnessed major transformations, most especially with respect to the 2015, 2019, and 2023 General Elections, which helped to minimize the high rate of electoral violence, irregularities, fraud and malpractices in the country. This development was facilitated by the introduction of new electoral reforms as well as the adoption of technology in the electoral process by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The paper, therefore, submits that the survival and consolidation of Nigeria's growing democracy hinged on strict adherence to the ideals and principles of the electoral process by all major stakeholders (namely the electoral umpire, politicians, political parties, media, the electorate, and security agencies). This paper provides some recommendations that can be utilized to strengthen Nigeria's growing democracy to sustain and strengthen its democratic consolidation
Keywords: Democratization, Democratic Consolidation, Election, Electoral Process, Fourth Republic.

Introduction

The democratic process in countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, etc. serves as the foundation for governance in many advanced democracies worldwide. It ensures that the power to make decisions is vested in the people, either directly or through elected representatives. While each democracy may adapt its principles according to its cultural, historical, and political context, several tenets are commonly upheld across advanced democratic systems. These principles ensure the protection of individual rights, fair representation, and accountability of the government.

Thus, when political actors recognize the validity of democracy and no one attempts to operate outside of democratic institutions for both normative and self-interested motives, a democracy becomes consolidated, that is, it is anticipated to last. In other words, democracy is strengthened when it is, to borrow a familiar expression of Jessica Elgot, "the only game in

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town." This concept of consolidation, which is based on the attitudes and actions of political actors, is both logical and problematic. On the other hand, when democracy becomes institutionalized, routine, and normalized, acting against or outside of democratic standards is both unattractive and harmful for politicians and other political players.

Democracy, a political system and model of organizing society, is assessed based on the pattern of recruitment of political leadership. On the other hand, political leadership, as a dependent of democracy, is assessed on the quality of governance it produces. According to Posner and Young (2007), institutionalized rule is increasingly becoming relevant in regulating the behaviors of political actors across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Historically, Democracy is not a new form of government in Africa. It was a system of government that existed in the pre-colonial period, especially in non-centralized societies such as Iteso, Ibo, Chagga, and Masai. However, the form of democracy that was introduced into Africa by the Europeans in the colonial period was a representative democracy. With the attainment of political independence, efforts were made towards consolidating the inherited democratic form of government by the African political leaders. Rather than consolidating or deepening the inherited political form of government, the majority of African states lost it due to lack of adherence to democratic procedure, process, and principles, which has manifested in different forms such as political intolerance, ethnic jingoism, and electoral irregularities, amongst others. The result and effect of this development was the emergence of military interference in the politics of African states between the 1960s and 1980s. The majority of African states have been under successive military regimes from one time to the other like Nigeria (1966), Ghana (1966), Togo (1963), Burkina Faso (1966), Congo (1963) etc. However, by the 1990s, which was generally referred to as the third wave of democracy by S Huntington (1991), there was the gradual restoration of democratic governance in some African states such as Nigeria and Ghana. This trend continued with the birth of the new millennium in 2000.

Since the birth of the new millennium, several African states have taken pragmatic steps towards the consolidation of their growing and fragile democracy. This could be seen in the regular and periodic conduct of both legislative/parliamentary and presidential elections. Notable among the countries are Ghana, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Nigeria, Rwanda, and so on. In Ghana, for example, there has been evidence of successful and periodic general elections leading to the transition from one political party to another. In other words, the transfer of democratic government was not confined to intra-party affairs but inter-party affairs, which existed between the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). The role of the Electoral Commission of Ghana as well as the electoral process toward the consolidation of democracy in the country cannot be overemphasized.

Although there were cases of electoral disputes in some African countries such as the Gambia, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Senegal amongst others, which threatened democratic stability, the electoral commissions in some of these countries maintained their neutrality in the electoral process. It is against this background that this study interrogates the Electoral process and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria in the fourth republic between 1999 and 2023. During this period, one major electoral commission; Independent National Electoral Commission was set up by General Abdusalam Abubakar in 1998. The success and failures of the Electoral Commission and the adherence to the electoral process as regards the consolidation of democracy in the country during this period will be examined critically.

Clarification of Key Concepts

Election

This facilitates and shapes democracy. Democracy is regarded as the best form of government because its ideology promotes people's will. The people have a political right to decide who should govern them in a free and fair conduct called an 'election'. Therefore, elections constitute an essential principle in liberal democracy. Election in a democracy is very important because it is through which the expression of the people is shown via legitimacy and leadership succession. According to Dickerson, M.et al 1990) election is defined as a post-mortem that investigates the record of officeholders whose actual performance may have little to do with promises made when they were previously elected. This is a way of censuring, reposting functions in a ruler that is popularly accepted, and ejecting an unpopular leader. This method shuns mutiny and chaos in a system hence it reflects a peaceful hand-over from one administration to the other so long as the process is devoid of election rigging.

Electoral Process

The electoral process is the method through which a country's citizens choose their leaders and representatives in government. It encompasses a range of activities from voter registration to candidate nomination to campaign to casting ballots, to the counting and certification of results, and finally to court litigations. The process varies significantly between countries and even within different jurisdictions of a country. Also, Electoral process according to Elekwa (2008), relates to the entire cycle ranging from the provision of voter education to the dissolution of the National Assembly.

Democratic Consolidation

Even though there is no accepted definition or concept of democratic consolidation, it is safe to conclude that only democracies may consolidate themselves. When "a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives has become the only game in town," according to Linz and Stepan (1996), democracy is said to have undergone consolidation. Similarly, Przeworski asserts that democracy is consolidated when a specific system of institutions becomes the only option available under a given set of political and economic circumstances. In other words, when no one can imagine acting outside of democratic institution and when losers only want to try again within the same institutions under which they have just lost, democracy is solidified.

The authors of "Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation" Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996) identify three basic prerequisites for democratic consolidation. First, they note that there must be an existing state structure because neither order nor democracy has any chance of developing in the absence of a state. The second prerequisite is the conclusion of the process leading to a genuinely democratic state. A democratic transition is complete when there is sufficient agreement on political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government is directly elected by the people in a free and fair election when this government de facto has the power to create new policies, and when the executive, legislative, and judicial power created by the new democracy do not need to share power with other. The necessity for elites who are dedicated to leading democratically and constitutionally is the third requirement.

From the above perspective, in the study, democratic consolidation is seen as the ability of an electoral body to conduct free, fair, credible, and successive elections in which civilian-to-civilian transition occurred without military welcome back. Nigeria has experimented with four major republics. Among these republics, it is only in the Fourth Republic that the country witnessed successive civilian-to-civilian (both inter and intraparty) transitions which is evidence of democratic consolidation.

Literature Review

The relationship between the electoral process and democratic consolidation is a critical theme in political science, particularly in emerging democracies like Nigeria. Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which began in 1999, has been shaped by its electoral processes and the challenges inherent in its path toward democratic consolidation. This review explores existing literature on the subject, electoral practices, and the role of institutional reforms, civil society, and external influences in Nigeria's democratic journey.

For Linz and Stepan (1996), their multidimensional approach to democratic consolidation stresses the need for effective political institutions, a functioning civil society, a rule-based economy, and civilian control over the military. Scholars such as Omotola (2010) have used this model to evaluate Nigeria's progress, suggesting that although significant strides have been made, weaknesses in institutions and endemic corruption continue to challenge consolidation.

Nigeria's electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), has been pivotal in managing the electoral process since 1999. Studies like those by Suberu (2007) and Nwangwu (2015) focus on the role of INEC in election organization and the reforms undertaken over the years, including biometric voter registration and the introduction of electronic transmission of results, aimed at enhancing credibility and reducing fraud.

The works of scholars like Collier (2009) and Onapajo (2014) examine the intersection of electoral violence and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Post-election violence in 2007, 2011, and 2019 have been extensively analyzed for their destabilizing effects on Nigeria's political landscape. Onapajo's research particularly emphasizes how the threat or reality of violence undermines the legitimacy of elections and hinders democratic deepening.

Political scientists like Omilusi (2016) discuss the phenomenon of political defections as a major issue undermining the credibility of the party system. The frequent movement of politicians between parties, driven by personal ambition rather than policy or ideology, is seen as a major obstacle to the entrenchment of democratic norms.

Ebirim (2020) also notes the establishment of special electoral tribunals to handle election-related cases, which have had a mixed record. While tribunals have invalidated fraudulent elections in some cases, their slow pace and susceptibility to external influence have often frustrated the electorate's faith in the democratic process.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a crucial role in election monitoring and advocating for electoral reforms. Egwu (2016) notes that CSOs have been instrumental in voter education, election observation, and post-election audits. However, their effectiveness has sometimes been curtailed by funding challenges and political interference.

Studies by Adebayo (2020) examine the introduction of technological innovations like biometric voter accreditation and electronic result transmission (BVAS). These reforms, often supported by foreign donors, have improved the transparency of elections but have been met with resistance from political elites in some cases.

ELECTORAL PROCESS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

The electoral process is a critical pillar of democracy, serving as a mechanism through which citizens choose their representatives and leaders. In Nigeria, the Fourth Republic, which began in 1999, marked a return to democratic rule after several years of military dictatorship. Since then, Nigeria has conducted several General Elections that have shaped the nation's

political landscape. This section seeks to critically examine the electoral process and its role in democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, considering both progress and challenges.

Nigeria's journey to the Fourth Republic came after a prolonged period of military rule, political instability, and flawed democratic experiments. The transition to democracy in 1999 was significant, as it signaled the end of decades of military dominance in the country's governance. The first democratic election in the Fourth Republic saw the emergence of President Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military leader turned civilian president, under the platform of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). This transition was seen as a beacon of hope for Democratic Consolidation, but it also came with deep-rooted challenges in the electoral process like election rigging, electoral violence, imposition of candidates, etc.

- **Electoral Process in the Fourth Republic**

The electoral process in Nigeria is managed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), a body responsible for conducting free and fair elections. The key components of the electoral process in Nigeria include:

1. **Voter Registration:** Voter registration is a critical aspect of the electoral process. Since 1999, INEC has conducted periodic Continuous Voter Registration (CVR) exercises to ensure citizens of voting age are enrolled. However, issues such as disenfranchisement, voter apathy, and logistical challenges have plagued voter registration processes.
2. **Political Parties and Candidate Nomination:** Nigeria operates a multi-party system, though two major political parties, the PDP and the All Progressives Congress (APC), have dominated the political landscape. The nomination of candidates within these parties has often been fraught with internal disputes, lack of transparency, and imposition of candidates, leading to a lack of internal party democracy.
3. **Election Campaigns:** Campaign periods in Nigeria are characterized by intense political activity. However, they have also been marred by violence, ethnic and religious polarization, hate speech, and the misuse of state resources. While there are regulations aimed at ensuring peaceful campaigns, enforcement remains weak.
4. **Election Day Conduct:** Election Day activities include voting, sorting, counting, and announcement of results. Despite INEC's efforts to ensure credible elections, several issues, such as late arrival of materials, malfunctioning of voting equipment, voter intimidation, and violence, have continued to undermine the credibility of the process.

Election Dispute Resolution: The judiciary plays a significant role in resolving electoral disputes. Nigeria has seen a significant number of post-election petitions, some of which have led to the annulment of election results (inconclusive election). While the judiciary has been praised for its role in upholding the rule of law, concerns over the politicization of the courts remain.

Challenges to Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

While Nigeria has maintained a semblance of democratic governance since 1999, the electoral process has faced several challenges that threaten democratic consolidation:

1. **Electoral Violence:** Violence before, during, and after elections has remained a recurring challenge. This has created an atmosphere of fear, preventing citizens from

fully participating in the democratic process, hence leading to Political Apathy. Political thuggery, ballot snatching, and attacks on electoral officials are common.

2. **Corruption and Vote Buying:** The Nigerian electoral process is often compromised by corruption, with politicians using financial inducements to sway voters. Vote buying has become an entrenched practice, weakening the integrity of elections and undermining the will of the people leading to misrepresentation sometimes. Vote buying can be seen evidently in the Governorship elections in Ekiti in 2018, and 2022, the Governorship election in Osun in 2022.
3. **Ethnic and Religious Divisions:** Nigeria's political landscape is deeply fragmented along ethnic and religious lines, with political elites often exploiting these divisions for electoral gain. This has contributed to the politicization of identity and a lack of national cohesion. This scenario was so evident in the just concluded 2023 General Elections, especially the presidential election. In the 2023 presidential elections, the three leading candidates from the three major political parties were propelled the ethnic sentiments; the All Progressive Congress was more of a Westerner agenda, the People's Democratic Party was more of the Northern agenda while the Labor Party supported the Easterners agenda.
4. **INEC's Operational Challenges:** INEC has faced numerous challenges, ranging from logistical issues, lack of funding, inadequate personnel training, breakdown of servers, malfunction of BVAS in some Polling Units, and interference by political actors. These challenges have led to the disenfranchisement of voters and questions about the credibility of elections in some polling units.
5. **Judiciary and Electoral Integrity:** While the judiciary plays a role in electoral dispute resolution, concerns have been raised over judicial independence and impartiality. Political interference in the judicial process, particularly in cases involving high-profile political figures, has eroded public confidence in the institution.
6. **Low Voter Turnout and Apathy:** A significant challenge in Nigeria's electoral process is voter apathy. Over time, the electorate has grown disillusioned with the process, largely due to a lack of trust in political actors and the electoral management body. Voter turnout has declined in subsequent elections, raising concerns about the health of democracy.

- **<u>Progress and Prospects for Democratic Consolidation</u>**

Despite the challenges, there have been notable strides toward maintaining and sustaining democratic consolidation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic:

1. **Electoral Reforms:** Successive governments have introduced reforms aimed at improving the electoral process. The Electoral Act (amended several times) with the latest amendment in 2022 has strengthened the legal framework for elections, particularly in areas such as campaign financing, the use of technology, and the autonomy of INEC.
2. **Introduction of Technology:** The use of technology, such as the INEC Voter Enrolment Device (IVED) during voter registration and the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) against the forthcoming 2023 General Election in Nigeria, has helped mitigate some challenges in the electoral process. While challenges remain, technology has been crucial in reducing fraud and enhancing transparency.
3. **Emergence of Opposition Parties:** Nigeria's Fourth Republic has witnessed the rise of opposition parties, with the APC unseating the PDP in the 2015 presidential election.

Notably, in 2015 General Elections marked the first time an incumbent president was defeated, signaling a milestone in Nigeria's democratic development and the importance of competitive elections. Also, The Labor Party became the surprise package in the 2023 General Election.

4. **Civil Society and Electoral Observation:** Civil society organizations have played a pivotal role in electoral observation, advocacy, and voter education. Their efforts have contributed to increased transparency and accountability in the electoral process.

Conclusion

The electoral process in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has been instrumental in the country's democratic consolidation. While significant progress has been made, persistent challenges such as electoral violence, corruption, and logistical issues continue to undermine the credibility of elections. Sustained efforts towards electoral reforms, strengthening democratic institutions, and promoting political participation are essential for the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. The journey towards a fully consolidated democracy is ongoing, requiring the collective efforts of the government, civil society, citizens, relevant stakeholders, and the international community

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