

## ELECTION ADMINISTRATION: A TOOL FOR THE SUSTENANCE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

By

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### **Abstract:**

*For the past twenty three years, Nigeria has enjoyed an uninterrupted democracy. However, this democracy has been threatened severally by misconducts like electoral violence and fraud. This paper seeks to demonstrate how democracy can be further sustained in the Nigerian polity by suggesting the use of election administration as a tool. The study is built upon the social control theory and asserts that the electoral body (INEC) which is responsible for overseeing electoral processes in the nation should be free from the influence of politicians. They should ensure that the conduct of the electoral process is free and fair. Only when these are done can there be a sustainable democracy in the nation.*

**Keywords:** Election, election administration, democracy, sustainable democracy, election management body, election administrative body.

## **1.0 Introduction**

Election in Nigeria can be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, precisely 1923, twenty-two years after the British colonised the country. This evolved as a result of the insertion of the elective rule in the 1922 Constitution introduced into the Nigerian political space by Clifford's colonial rule (Akanji, 2014). In 1923, elections began in the country for the first time since its amalgamation. Although the election occurred for only the southern part of the country, the northern part was ruled solely by the colonial governor's proclamations (Akanji, 2018). It is imperative to note that at this time, there was no regulatory body overseeing the conduct of the electoral process in the country. However, it was administered and overseen by the then colonial administration. Electoral bodies only emerged in 1959, when the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) was created to organise the elections for that year. In 1960, however, the ECN was annulled and replaced with the Federal Electoral Commission (FEC) to conduct the 1964 and 1965 federal and regional elections. This electoral body only lasted until 1966 during the military coup. These and other series of events in the Nigerian political system birthed the emergence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 1998 by the administration of General Abdulsalam Abubakar.

In the postcolonial era, election administration has been tainted with poor conduct which has led to electoral malpractice and violence. This has been the case, except for the election of June 12, 1993 where history was made, in that Nigeria for the first time experienced a very peaceful, free and fair election. However, despite it being peaceful, free and fair, the then military head of state annulled its results, which met stiff opposition by the winner of the election, Chief M.K.O. Abiola (Obiam, 2021). This opposition triggered by the winner resulted in his untimely death in that same year.

Fast forward to 1999 when there was a wilful transition of power from military rule to democratic rule, elections have become very pivotal to the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. Unufe and Justin-Ugo (2019) affirmed this by stating that credible elections are significant determinants of the health of any democracy, irrespective of its status or type. This is true because, the foundation of democracy rests upon the masses' right to decide who should rule them. And election gives them the opportunity to exercise that right.

Since the establishment of INEC in 1998, several reports have shown that the electoral body has not done its best in eradicating or reducing electoral malpractice and violence. This is corroborated in the acknowledgement of the Federal Government that issues surrounding highly rigged elections have been the major cause of political violence and instability in the country (Unufe & Justin-Ugo, 2019). This is not surprising as several reports have shown that the electoral process is fraught with even INEC officials engaging in electoral malpractice, favouritism, and so on. This implies that the electoral body has been indirectly and implicitly involved in the destruction of the electoral process for which it was set up to build. As a result, it is the aim of this paper to reveal the need for the electoral body to engage in the proper and transparent administration of the electoral process if Nigeria is to have a sustained democracy.

## **2.0 Conceptual Clarification**

### **2.1 Election**

According to the Google dictionary, election is simply "a formal and organized choice by vote of a person for a political office or other position". In the understanding of a lay man, election is seen as the simple selection of an individual for a given position. However, in the

academia, scholars have described election in a more intellectual way. Nwolise (2007) defined it as “the process of selecting the officers or representatives of an organization or group by the vote of its qualified members”. Akzin (1960) defines election from two perspectives – social and technical. From the technical perspective, election refers to the process by which a person is elected to a position or office by a voluntary act that entails the simultaneous expression of many people's ideas. While from the social perspective, election is the process by which a person is appointed to a position with the consent of those who will bear the brunt of his or her authority. It is this social perspective that gives rise to the notion of ruling a society with the consent of the ruled, which ultimately comes down to democracy and separates election from appointment (Akzin, 1960). Elections, according to Obi and Uzor (2017), are an orderly process of changing administrations that make the people determinants of who holds positions, particularly in elections. As a result, an election is a process for selecting persons who will hold governmental positions and rule in line with the law of the territory.

## **2.2 Administration**

Administration is universally applied in every human endeavour, whether it be social, cultural, religious, private, or public. Pfiffner and Presthus (1967) defined it as an activity or procedure primarily concerned with the methods for carrying out predetermined ends. As the definition shows, administration is primarily concerned with the means required to achieve certain objectives. The way by which something is done or attained is referred to as means here. When a group of people are working toward a shared objective, a division of labour is required so that everyone knows what they are supposed to do. Alternatively, an authority structure may be required to oversee and coordinate the activity of the personnel involved. Thus, splitting the labour among the members, assigning a specific function to each member of the group, and following the leader's directions are all means through which the goal is achieved. In the words of Simon (1997), administration is seen as the activities of groups working together to accomplish common goals or objectives. According to Amadi (2008), it is the systematic arrangement and coordination of human and material resources available to any organization with the primary goal of attaining the organization's stated objectives. As seen above, the element of goal achievement is key in these definitions.

## **2.3 Election Administration**

Election administration has been construed in different ways, however, they all point towards the same direction in meaning. According to Agbaje (1999), election administration is simply the management of the electoral process. In the view of Trebilcock and Chitalkar (2009), election administration is a large institutional framework in which electoral competition and voting occurs. It entails three core areas – rule formulation, rule application and rule implementation. Rule formulation is concerned with the creation of fundamental rules of the electoral process. Rule application, on the other hand has to do with using those rules to arrange the electoral process, while rule implementation deals with resolving electoral process conflicts. This demonstrates that election administration follows a pattern that resembles a chronological schedule for operations, with one activity leading to the next. In the words of Ejalonibu (2019), election administration is the process of compiling the voter list, casting and counting ballots.

According to the UNDP (2009), election administration cycle or pattern is split into three stages. These are: Pre-election stage, election stage, and post-election stage. The pre-election stage has to do with all the preparatory events like creation of legal structure, training

electoral personnel, education of voters, voter registration, political parties' campaign, etc. usually beginning from one-and-a-half years before the day of election. Election stage on the other hand, has to do with the day votes are cast. It is also referred to as polling day. While post-election stage is concerned with the aftermath of the election stage. It is where outcomes or results from the election stage are announced.

Deducing from the foregoing, election administration can therefore be defined as the effective and efficient management of all activities involved in the pre-election, election, and post-election stages. The management of these activities would be regarded as effective and efficient if it results in a peaceful and credible election that all stakeholders can attest to.

#### **2.4 Elections Management Bodies (EMBs)**

Elections management bodies also known as election administration bodies (EABs) refer to the entities in charge of overseeing the electoral process (Al-Musbeh, 2011). Likoti (2009) referred to EMBs as Independent Election Commissions (IECs) and defined them as good governance institutions bequeathed with the responsibility of facilitating the electoral process in a free and fair manner so as to achieve good governance for the prosperity of the nation. From these definitions, EMBs can also be defined as autonomous agencies or bodies set up for the conduct of a free and fair electoral process so as to achieve good governance for increased prosperity of a nation.

#### **2.5 Democracy**

Democracy is a concept that is widely embraced in the political science literature. The word originated from the fusion of two Greek words – *demos* which means “people” and *kratos* which means “rule”. This means “rule done by the people”. Also, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, it is referred to as, “a government by the people, of the people and for the people”. Diamond (2004) described democracy as a governmental system with four vital features – the use of free and fair elections to select and replace a government, people's active engagement in politics and civic life as citizens, all citizens' human rights are protected, and a system of government in which all citizens are treated equally under the law. This description given by Diamond (2004) implies that any system of government short of one of these features is not democracy. According to Nwogu (2015), democracy is a system of government permitting competitive elections that promote equality in all aspects among all eligible people, as well as ensuring that the rules of all elections are clear, predetermined, and do not favour one group or individual over another. Democracy, according to Asua and Udofia (2016), is a government that allows citizens to engage in political decision-making and elect representatives to rule them for a certain period of time. From the above, democracy can be defined as the system of government where the “will” and “say” of the citizens are highly considered in running the affairs of a country.

#### **2.6 Sustainable Democracy**

Sustainable democracy as defined by Ogbe and Ojie (2020) refers to the act of safeguarding and advancing people's voting rights, democratic culture, and principles in a society is known as sustainable democracy. It is the process of advancing all facets of democracy and creating a healthy democratic environment in the interests of current and future generations. According to Erunke (2012), sustainable democracy is the practice of allowing democratic enterprises to survive for an extended length of time without any external interference. Sustainable democracy entails considering how to address the core cause(s) of anti-

democratic behaviour by ensuring that elections are properly administered by electoral organizations.

### **3.0 Theoretical Framework**

#### **3.1 Social Control Theory**

The Social Control Theory which was developed by Walter Reckless in 1973 states that a person's inner and outside controls work together to prevent aberrant behaviour. According to Reckless (1973), the desire or goal sought to be achieved by an individual is what governs his or her behaviour. In the framework of this study, this theory is relevant because it helps explain why the electoral body (INEC) should engage in the proper administration of electoral processes; the reason being the sustenance of democracy in the Nigerian polity. This therefore means, for democracy to be sustained in Nigeria, INEC which is bequeathed with the responsibility for overseeing electoral processes should properly discharge its electoral administrative duties. In simple words, the sustenance of democracy should be the governing or guiding factor for the efficient and effective discharge of its duties.

#### **4.0 Election Administration as a Tool for the Sustenance of Democracy in Nigeria**

As seen in the conceptualisation of democracy, the will of the people is expressed through the mechanism of elections. Elections are central to democracy as they provide citizens with the opportunity to express their will as regards the people who should rule them. A nation characterised by regular conduct of elections indicates maturation of the democratic system of governance (Bratton, 2004). Jega (2015) asserted that elections are pivotal to the competitive politics of modern political age. That being said, election administration which is the overseeing and management of the entire electoral process by an election management body is critical to the continual existence of a democratic system of government in a federation.

The maladministration of the electoral process could result in political instability which may require military interregnum as seen in the cases of many developing countries (Jega, 2013). This means that countries that have experienced military takeover, the poor administration of the entire electoral process was seen to be responsible for the collapse of democracy in such countries. This is evident in African countries like Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso, etc. In Nigeria, the fall of its previous republics can be attributed to the poor administration of the electoral process by the electoral body (Unufe & Justin-Ugo, 2019). Alapiki (2004) posited that election is likened to the barometer that measures the health of democracy in a particular nation and that its presence is an absolute indicator of the presence of democracy in such nation. With this in view, it can be said that the manner at which a given state conduct its elections is an indicator of the health of democracy in such nation. A nation fraught with repeated electoral fraud, ballot box snatching, bribery of electoral officials, low voters' turnout, etc., if care is not taken, may lose its democracy into the cold hands of military takeover. This is why it is very essential for the electoral body to diligently discharge its duties without fear or favour.

It is pertinent to reiterate that the sustenance of democracy in a nation, to a very large extent, lies in the hands of the electoral body. In Nigeria for instance, INEC, by virtue of the 1999 constitution are bequeathed with the power to administrate over the electoral process in the nation. They are to oversee electoral processes without the interference of political parties and to ensure elections are conducted in a free and fair manner. The continual upholding of this sacred duty, guarantees the healthy existence of democracy in the nation. So far so good,

since democracy still survives in Nigeria, this implies that INEC has to an extent tried in administering elections; although there are many loopholes that need to be addressed for democracy to thrive in the nation.

To address some of the loopholes inhibiting the effective and efficient administration of elections in Nigeria, INEC has to consider political education. Both officials of the electoral body and the electorate have to be involved in this education. Officials have to be educated on the sacred role they play when conducting elections. They should be made to understand that rigging of elections in exchange for favour or gifts from politicians undermines the sanctity of the electoral process which could affect the health of democracy in the nation. On the side of the electorates, they have to be enlightened on the adverse consequences of vote buying and any other means through which politicians may capitalise on to manipulate them to their favour. This issue of political education is what is usually done in the first stage of election administration called pre-election stage. Other stages of election administration should be conducted without bias, in a free and fair manner where truth is upheld as regards the outcome of elections.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

For twenty-three (23) years, Nigeria has experienced an uninterrupted democratic system of governance. However, this system of governance has been plagued with several misconducts such as electoral violence and fraud that pose a threat to its continuous existence. These anti-democratic conducts shown during the nation's elections could be attributed to decades of military dictatorship, which has influenced the psychology of the majority of Nigerians. As a result, this paper concluded that there is the need for the electoral body (INEC) to engage in an effective and efficient election administration that is void of partisanship, favouritism, bribery and corruption and ensure that the electoral process is free and fair. Only this can uphold democracy in the Nigerian state and prevent military interregnum.



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