

**Kolawole OGUNBOYEDE, PhD.**

Department of Political Science, Adekunle Ajasin University  
Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.

[Kolawole.ogunboyede@aaua.edu.ng](mailto:Kolawole.ogunboyede@aaua.edu.ng), [kolaogunboyede@yahoo.com](mailto:kolaogunboyede@yahoo.com)  
+2347069 052 599

### **Abstract**

Although existing studies have extensively examined electoral malpractice, political violence, vote buying, judicial intervention and party politics in Nigeria, much of the literature treats these issues as separate phenomena. Consequently, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how the interaction between electoral politics and electoral litigation collectively shapes democratic governance and electoral outcomes in Nigeria. Furthermore, while previous studies have analysed individual electoral disputes and landmark judicial decisions, there remains a paucity of comprehensive studies that systematically connect electoral litigation, party institutional weaknesses and democratic legitimacy within the broader context of Nigeria's Fourth Republic. This study addresses these gaps by providing an integrated analysis of the trends and travails of electoral politics, electoral litigation and the judicial dimensions of electoral victories in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. By examining electoral trends, democratic struggles and landmark electoral cases since 1999, the study contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating how intra party conflicts, weak party ideology, money politics and electoral malpractice place enormous burdens on the judiciary and collectively affect democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Electoral Litigation, Electoral Politics, Money Politics, Judiciary.

### **Introduction and the Problem**

Democratic regimes and representative institutions are fundamentally anchored on free and fair elections (Dahl, 1989). Within this framework, political parties occupy a central position in representative governance, particularly in nominating candidates for elective offices, forming governments when in power, and holding incumbents accountable when in opposition (IDEA, 2007). In effect, political parties serve as the primary vehicles through which democratic competition is structured and sustained.

However, contemporary Nigerian society reflects a significant departure from this democratic ideal. The political space has increasingly been characterised by party crises, electoral disputes, and a growing burden on the judiciary. Intra party conflicts, in particular, reveal the complex interaction between party politics, electoral competition, and judicial intervention in Nigeria (Omotola, 2010). These conflicts underscore the expanding role of the courts in interpreting electoral laws and adjudicating disputes emerging from party processes. Consequently, the Nigerian judiciary is inundated with party related cases, ranging from pre electoral disputes such as candidate selection to post electoral litigation.

Although many of these political crises could potentially be resolved through internal party mechanisms and amicable settlement, their persistence continues to place undue pressure on the judiciary. Political corruption, weak electoral legislation, and gaps within the legal framework remain key drivers of these political disputes (Omotola, 2010). A major dimension of these conflicts is the pervasive influence of money in politics. Electoral disputes are frequently rooted in manipulation of electoral processes, including vote buying, ballot stuffing, and electoral violence, all of which escalate tensions between political actors and often culminate in litigation (Omotola, 2010).

According to IDEA (2009), political party finance is a critical determinant of democratic quality, governance, and development. Even in systems with relatively credible electoral procedures, active civil

society participation, and competitive party structures, the influence of money continues to shape political outcomes and governance quality. Where financial transparency is weak, political finance becomes a major source of distortion in democratic processes (IDEA, 2009). In Nigeria, this reality has contributed significantly to the increasing number of electoral disputes brought before the courts.

In principle, elections are intended to be conducted through legally recognised procedures that are binding on all political actors within the system. However, in practice, deviations from these procedures have made litigation a common route for resolving electoral disputes. This paper therefore examines the dynamics of judicial cases involving political parties, with particular emphasis on those disputes that have been adjudicated by competent courts in Nigeria.

While several studies have examined money politics, electoral violence, political corruption and judicial activism separately (Ameh-Ogigo, 2025; Arowolo, 2019; Olatunji et al., 2023; Sambo, 2025), limited scholarly attention has been given to the interconnected nature of these phenomena and how they collectively contribute to the increasing burden on Nigeria's judiciary. Existing literature tends to treat these issues in isolation, thereby underemphasising the cumulative effect of intra party conflicts, money politics and electoral irregularities on judicialisation of politics.

This study addresses this gap by providing a more integrated analysis of how intra party disputes, political finance, and electoral malpractice interact to intensify electoral litigation in Nigeria. It further examines the implications of this trend for democratic legitimacy, judicial credibility, and institutional stability within Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

In Nigeria, party politics and electoral processes have become increasingly complex and contentious, placing significant strain on the legal system and democratic governance. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, electoral politics has been marked by recurring crises arising from electoral malpractice, intra party conflicts, political corruption, and judicial controversies (Omotola, 2010). These dynamics have exposed structural weaknesses in electoral administration and intensified the role of the judiciary in political contestation.

A major challenge is the persistence of electoral malpractices such as vote buying, ballot stuffing, electoral violence, and manipulation of results. These practices undermine electoral credibility and frequently trigger litigation as aggrieved political actors seek judicial redress (Joseph, 1991; Omotola, 2010). As a result, the judiciary is often overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of electoral cases, thereby straining judicial capacity and delaying timely justice delivery.

In addition, the absence of clear, consistent, and enforceable legal frameworks governing party politics and electoral disputes further complicates electoral governance. Ambiguities in electoral laws create loopholes that encourage litigation and conflicting judicial interpretations, thereby weakening public confidence in both electoral outcomes and democratic institutions (Nwabueze, 2013). This has contributed to the growing judicialisation of politics, where electoral outcomes are increasingly determined in courtrooms rather than at the ballot box.

Another critical concern is the perceived influence of political power and corruption on judicial processes. Allegations of bias and external interference undermine confidence in judicial independence and weaken the legitimacy of electoral adjudication (Diamond and Gunther, 2001). Furthermore, the effective resolution of electoral disputes requires specialised legal expertise and strong institutional capacity, both of which remain limited within parts of Nigeria's judicial system. Procedural delays, inadequate infrastructure, and resource constraints further reduce efficiency in handling electoral cases.

Political party financing remains a central factor shaping these dynamics. The excessive influence of money in politics intensifies competition, encourages electoral malpractice, and increases the incidence of post electoral litigation (IDEA, 2009). In many cases, money politics weakens ideological commitment within parties and incentivises unlawful strategies for electoral success, thereby further burdening judicial institutions.

Overall, the challenges arising from party politics and electoral processes in Nigeria are multifaceted and rooted in systemic institutional weaknesses. Addressing them requires comprehensive electoral reform, strengthened judicial independence, enhanced transparency in political finance, and more effective enforcement of electoral laws. Such reforms are essential for improving democratic consolidation, reducing electoral litigation, and restoring public confidence in Nigeria's electoral and judicial systems.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive research design to critically examine the dynamics of party politics and electoral challenges within Nigeria's judicial framework. The approach is considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth interpretive analysis of legal, political, and institutional developments without the use of primary data collection. The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data, particularly documentary and archival materials. These include relevant textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, official legal documents, judicial decisions, electoral laws, policy reports, newspapers, magazines, civil society publications, and credible internet-based academic resources. Emphasis is placed on the analysis of statutory provisions and decided court cases on electoral disputes to understand how judicial interpretations shape electoral outcomes and party politics in Nigeria.

Data collected from these sources were subjected to qualitative content analysis, involving systematic interpretation, comparison, and thematic categorization of legal and scholarly materials. This method enables the researcher to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and gaps within existing literature and judicial pronouncements. By relying solely on secondary data and legal documents, the study ensures a doctrinal and analytical focus on established facts and judicial reasoning. However, this approach limits the ability to capture real-time empirical perspectives from political actors and stakeholders. Despite this limitation, the methodology remains suitable for examining legal developments and judicial responses to electoral disputes in Nigeria's democratic context.

## **Literature Review**

### **Election and Electioneering Process**

Election remains central to competitive politics and democratic governance. In any democratic system, elections ensure political participation, legitimacy, and peaceful transition of power, which are core features of representative democracy. Elections serve as the principal mechanism through which citizens freely choose their leaders and express political preferences in a credible and institutionalized framework (Dahl, 1989).

Ujo (2002) conceptualizes elections as a procedure for aggregating preferences, where voters are given the opportunity to choose between competing alternatives. Similarly, Johari (2015) defines elections as a process of recruiting representatives through the choice of voters, either directly or indirectly via an electoral college system. Jega (2011) further describes elections as routine democratic events through which citizens select those who govern on their behalf, while Ajiboye (2015) sees elections as universally accepted mechanisms for selecting representatives in a structured political system.

Recent scholarship continues to emphasize elections as a core determinant of democratic consolidation. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2020), credible elections remain the foundation of democratic legitimacy, accountability, and governance stability. In the same vein, Norris (2021) argues that electoral integrity is central to sustaining public trust in democratic institutions, especially in emerging democracies such as Nigeria.

The electioneering process involves a series of activities such as voter registration, political campaigns, party primaries, candidate nomination, voting, collation, and declaration of results (INEC, 2023). These processes are guided by legal and institutional frameworks that regulate political competition and ensure fairness.

Electioneering also includes political mobilization and campaigning aimed at persuading voters. As observed during the 2023 Nigerian general elections, campaigns were heavily influenced by digital media, identity politics, and financial inducements, which significantly shaped voter behavior and electoral outcomes (EU Election Observation Mission, 2023).

Elections serve as instruments of legitimacy, accountability, and political participation. However, in Nigeria, electoral processes are often undermined by violence, corruption, weak institutions, and voter inducement. The 2023 general elections highlighted persistent challenges including logistical failures, disputed results, and declining public trust in electoral institutions (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Free and fair elections are essential for democratic governance. Schumpeter (as cited in Diamond, 1999) defines democracy as a system where leaders are selected through competitive elections. However, Diamond and Morlino (2005) argue that elections must not only be competitive but also free, fair, and transparent to ensure democratic legitimacy.

## **Electoral Fraud and Political Corruption in Nigeria**

Electoral fraud remains a persistent challenge in Nigeria's democratic process. It includes vote buying, ballot stuffing, intimidation, falsification of results, and manipulation of electoral officials. Studies show that electoral malpractice continues to weaken democratic consolidation in Nigeria (Jega, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2023).

The 2023 general elections further exposed systemic weaknesses such as logistical delays, technological inconsistencies in BVAS usage, and disputes over result transmission (EU Election Observation Mission, 2023). These challenges contributed to post-election litigation and public distrust in electoral outcomes.

Political corruption, defined as the abuse of public office for private gain (Rose-Ackerman, 1999), is deeply embedded in Nigeria's electoral system. It manifests through vote buying, illegal campaign financing, and misuse of state resources. According to Transparency International (2022), Nigeria continues to rank poorly in corruption perception indices, reflecting systemic governance challenges.

Recent studies by Bratton and Cho (2020) show that vote buying has become increasingly institutionalized in African elections, including Nigeria, where voters are often induced with cash or material benefits. This undermines electoral credibility and weakens ideological competition among political parties.

## **Political Parties and Party Politics**

Political parties are central to democratic governance as they aggregate interests, recruit leaders, and structure political competition (Heywood, 2021). In Nigeria, however, political parties are often characterized by weak ideology and strong personalization of power (Omotola, 2010).

Recent studies (IDEA, 2020; Cheeseman, 2021) show that many African political parties operate as electoral machines rather than ideological institutions. This is evident in Nigeria where party defections, elite domination, and patronage politics dominate political behavior. Internal party democracy remains weak, as party primaries are often influenced by "godfatherism," money politics, and elite imposition of candidates (Albert, 2005; Ojo, 2022). This contributes significantly to post-election litigation and intra-party conflicts.

## **Party Politics and Electoral Challenges in Nigeria's Judiciary**

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed an increasing judicialization of electoral politics. Courts have become central arenas for resolving electoral disputes, often determining political outcomes rather than the electorate (Nwangwu, 2021).

The burden on the judiciary has intensified due to frequent intra-party disputes, election petitions, and leadership crises within political parties. The former Chief Justice of Nigeria, Justice Ariwoola (2024), noted that the rising volume of electoral cases places significant strain on judicial efficiency and resources.

Electoral disputes in Nigeria often arise from weak internal party democracy, corruption, and manipulation of electoral processes (Jega, 2015; Omotola, 2010). Major political parties such as the APC, PDP, Labour Party, and ADC have experienced recurrent leadership and nomination crises resolved through litigation.

Recent elections, particularly the 2023 general elections, further demonstrated the central role of the judiciary in determining contested governorship and legislative outcomes. While judicial intervention ensures accountability, excessive reliance on courts raises concerns about democratic legitimacy and electoral integrity (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Analytical Case Studies

### **1. Amaechi v. INEC (2007)**

One of the most controversial electoral cases in Nigeria was *Rotimi Amaechi v. INEC*. In this case, the Supreme Court declared Rotimi Amaechi governor of Rivers State despite the fact that he did not participate directly in the gubernatorial election. The court held that votes belonged to the political party

rather than the candidate. Critics argued that although the judgment upheld the rule of law regarding unlawful substitution of candidates, it also raised constitutional and democratic questions concerning electoral legitimacy. Many scholars viewed the judgment as judicial activism that prioritized legal technicalities over voters' direct electoral choice.

## **2. Hope Uzodinma v. Emeka Ihedioha (2020)**

The Supreme Court judgment that removed Emeka Ihedioha as Governor of Imo State and declared Hope Uzodinma winner generated widespread criticism. The court relied on results from disputed polling units that were excluded earlier by INEC. Many legal analysts questioned the mathematical credibility of the judgment, arguing that the added votes exceeded accredited voters in certain areas. Critics viewed the judgment as damaging to judicial credibility and public confidence in the judiciary (Nwauche, 2020). The case highlighted concerns regarding judicial inconsistency and alleged political influence in electoral adjudication.

## **3. Peter Obi and Atiku Abubakar v. INEC (2023)**

The 2023 presidential election petitions filed by Peter Obi and Atiku Abubakar challenged the declaration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu as President. The petitions centered on issues such as electronic transmission of results, alleged electoral irregularities, and constitutional qualification requirements. The courts dismissed the petitions, holding that the petitioners failed to provide sufficient evidence. However, public reactions revealed widespread dissatisfaction, especially concerning INEC's failure to fully implement promised technological reforms. The judgments exposed the difficulty of proving electoral malpractice under Nigeria's evidentiary standards and raised concerns about whether the judiciary adequately protects electoral justice.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Election petitions in Nigeria are highly technical, time-sensitive, and resource-intensive. Courts face enormous pressure to deliver judgments within constitutional timelines. This often leads to rushed decisions and procedural technicalities overshadowing substantive justice. The burden of proof placed on petitioners is extremely high. Petitioners must provide detailed evidence from polling units across multiple jurisdictions, making electoral litigation expensive and difficult. Consequently, many legitimate grievances fail because petitioners cannot meet strict evidentiary requirements. Judicial officers handling political cases frequently face allegations of political intimidation, corruption, and external influence. The judiciary's credibility suffers whenever judgments appear politically motivated or inconsistent. Public perception of compromised justice undermines democratic legitimacy and weakens trust in state institutions. Nigerian electoral jurisprudence often prioritizes procedural compliance over substantive democratic principles. Courts sometimes dismiss cases based on technical defects rather than addressing the core issue of whether elections genuinely reflected the will of the people. This legal formalism creates the impression that electoral justice favors elite political actors with greater legal and financial resources.

Electoral litigation consumes enormous public and private resources. Political parties and candidates spend vast amounts on legal representation, while prolonged court cases create political uncertainty and governance instability. In some cases, elected officials spend significant portions of their tenure defending mandates in court rather than governing effectively.

Content analysis of political court cases in Nigeria reveals recurring themes, such as:

1. Judicialization of politics: Elections increasingly end in courts rather than at polling units.
2. Weak electoral institutions: INEC's administrative shortcomings frequently generate litigation.
3. Elite manipulation: Political elites exploit legal loopholes and judicial processes for political gain.
4. Procedural emphasis: Courts often emphasize technicalities over democratic substance.
5. Public distrust: Conflicting judgments and controversial decisions weaken confidence in the judiciary.

The language used in many judgments reflects strong adherence to constitutionalism and procedural law; however, critics argue that legal correctness does not always translate into democratic justice. Electoral justice should ideally protect the sovereignty of voters rather than merely validate technical compliance.

## Conclusion

Party politics and electoral challenges in Nigeria continue to expose deep structural weaknesses within the country's democratic system. Electoral malpractice, weak political institutions, lack of internal party democracy, and judicial controversies has combined to undermine public confidence in governance and elections. Although the judiciary remains an essential institution for resolving electoral disputes, its increasing involvement in determining political outcomes has generated questions concerning judicial independence, democratic legitimacy, and the true meaning of electoral justice. To strengthen democracy in Nigeria, there is an urgent need for electoral reforms, judicial independence, transparency in political party administration, and stronger enforcement of electoral laws. INEC must improve technological reliability and institutional credibility, while political parties must embrace internal democracy and ideological discipline. Most importantly, courts must balance legal formalism with democratic principles to ensure that justice reflects not only constitutional technicalities but also the genuine will of the electorate.

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