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# **INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION (INEC), CREDIBLE ELECTIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is a vital institution in Nigeria, established to promote stability and development by managing electoral processes. INEC's mission is to ensure credible, violence-free, and widely accepted elections, which are crucial for political stability and socio-economic progress. Historically, many Nigerian elections have faced criticism and rejection due to poor conduct, violence, and lack of credibility, impeding democratic consolidation and socio-economic growth. This study explores INEC's role in the electoral process and identifies challenges that undermine election credibility and peace in Nigeria. Through primary and secondary research methods, the study offers a comprehensive analysis of factors affecting electoral credibility and violence. The findings aim to aid stakeholders in electoral reforms, enhancing INEC's capacity and the effectiveness of other institutions. Ultimately, the study aspires to contribute to peaceful, free, and fair elections, bolstering political stability and fostering sustainable development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Development, Election, Society, Sustainable development.

## **Introduction**

Elections stand as the bedrock of democracy in every nation, representing a vital instrument for civic participation and governance legitimacy. The integrity and peaceful nature of electoral processes are paramount to their acceptance and effectiveness in democratic societies. Hence, the management of elections requires meticulous planning and effective oversight by specialized bodies established through constitutional provisions or legislative acts, known collectively as Election Management Bodies (EMBs). These bodies vary in nomenclature across different countries; for example, the

Federal Election Commission in the United States, the Electoral Commission in the United Kingdom, and the Electoral Commission in Ghana, among others (Council of Europe, 2022; Saka & Moruf, 2016).

In contemporary Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) serves as the nation's principal EMB, headquartered in Abuja with operational offices in all 36 states and 774 local governments. INEC is mandated to transparently manage all aspects of electoral processes, from the registration of political parties and voters to the conduct of elections, vote counting, result collation, and the declaration of winners, ensuring a smooth transition of power (Moveh, 2018). Despite substantial government funding and logistical support aimed at achieving fair, free, credible, and violence-free elections, Nigeria's electoral history has been marred by recurrent challenges. Elections dating back to pre-independence periods, such as those in 1959, 1964, 1979, 1983, 1999, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023, have been subject to legal challenges and criticisms due to electoral malpractices (Ajayi, 2008; Omilusi, 2017; Odum, 2019; Alao, 2021; Aboh & Obem, 2022; Adepega & Olorok, 2022; Soyele, 2023). These persistent issues have posed significant threats to political stability and governance across the nation.

INEC's mandate extends beyond mere oversight to actively managing electoral logistics, supported by substantial financial allocations. Despite these efforts, electoral fraud and violence continue to undermine the credibility and outcomes of elections in Nigeria. This prompts critical questions about the root causes of INEC's challenges in achieving credible and violence-free elections despite significant resources and periodic electoral reforms. What impact has INEC had on Nigeria's electoral processes as an EMB? What fundamental challenges does INEC face in conducting credible, acceptable, and violence-free elections? How can INEC be empowered to consistently deliver credible and violence-free elections in Nigeria? These questions will be rigorously explored in this research, aiming to uncover the underlying causes of INEC's electoral performance issues and propose strategic reforms to ensure credible, free, fair, and violence-free elections. The study also seeks to provide valuable insights to election management bodies, government entities, election monitoring agencies, and organizations, especially in anticipation of the 2027 general elections in Nigeria.

This research is structured into four main sections: Section One provides the introduction, encompassing the research background, problem statement, research questions, significance of the study, and its objectives. Section Two reviews relevant concepts, discusses the research methodology, and establishes the theoretical framework. Section Three examines INEC as an Election Management Body, analyzing its role and impact on electoral processes. Section Four presents and analyzes research findings, discusses their implications, and concludes with actionable recommendations aimed at informing policy makers and stakeholders on effective strategies to enhance the credibility and peaceful conduct of elections in Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- The research has four objectives to achieve. The objectives are as follows:
- i) To examine the role of INEC as Election Management Body (EMB).
  - ii) To assess the impact of INEC on the conduct of violent-free and credible elections.
  - iii) To interrogate the challenges confronting INEC in the conduct of credible and violent-free elections.
  - iv) To identify how credible and violent-free elections can be delivered by INEC.

### **Research Questions**

In view of the realisation of the afore-listed objectives, the following research questions have been generated for possible results.

- i. What is the role of INEC as Election Management Body?
- ii. Has INEC impacted positively on the conduct of violent-free and credible elections?
- iii. What are the various challenges constraining INEC in the conduct of credible and violent-free elections?

- iv. How can INEC be made to deliver credible and violent-free elections?

### **Conceptual Discussion and Theoretical Framework**

Elections serve as pivotal processes in democratic societies, as described by Ajayi (2005), who defines them as mechanisms for selecting suitable candidates for public office through voting. Ajayi distinguishes between two primary forms of elections: direct and indirect. Direct elections involve voters directly choosing candidates who will represent them in legislative or executive roles. In contrast, indirect elections utilize mechanisms such as an Electoral College, where elected representatives gather to vote on behalf of the electorate, particularly in scenarios where no candidate secures an absolute majority. This approach allows for the selection of a winner through a simple majority vote among leading candidates.

Peterson (1989) further categorizes elections into four types based on their dynamics and outcomes within political systems. The first type, maintaining elections, occurs when party loyalists remain stable, resulting in victories for candidates from the majority party. Deviating elections, on the other hand, see majority party candidates losing due to short-term influences that override traditional party loyalties. Converting elections involve fundamental changes in party membership distribution, yet the majority party candidate still emerges victorious. Lastly, re-aligning elections occur when shifts in party loyalists lead to the defeat of the usual majority party candidate, reflecting significant changes in political alignments and voter preferences over time.

These typologies underscore the dynamic nature of electoral processes and their impact on political stability and governance. They provide frameworks for understanding how electoral outcomes can shape political landscapes, influence policy directions, and affect public confidence in democratic institutions. By analyzing these different types of elections, researchers and policymakers gain insights into electoral strategies, voter behavior, and the broader implications for democratic governance and stability.

Ajayi and Peterson's classifications of elections provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of electoral processes. This conceptual framework enriches discussions on electoral dynamics, governance outcomes, and strategies for enhancing electoral integrity and democratic legitimacy in diverse political contexts.

Kolawole (2017) defines elections as a crucial mechanism for the transfer of power in a democracy, emphasizing that they are instrumental in allowing people to choose and exert some degree of control over their representatives. This process underscores the fundamental principle that the power to select leaders resides with the electorate, thereby imbuing elected officials with the responsibility to reflect and fulfill the aspirations of the people they represent. This symbiotic relationship between elections and democracy, as noted by Olaniyan (2020), highlights how elections strengthen democratic governance by facilitating the recruitment of leadership tasked with decision-making on behalf of citizens.

Similarly, Osaghae (2019) identifies elections as central to democratic governance, asserting that they not only enable inclusive participation but also confer meaning on popular sovereignty. Through the exercise of their voting power, citizens determine who governs them, thereby establishing the foundation for accountability and legitimacy in governance structures.

Lawal (2003) argues that elections have become indispensable in democracies as they facilitate the smooth transfer of political power between individuals and groups, crucial for maintaining political and social stability. He emphasizes that the legitimacy of elected leaders derives from their selection based on societal rules and regulations, which necessitates elections being conducted in a manner that is free, fair, credible, and devoid of violence. According to Lawal, free and fair elections are characterized by a peaceful and orderly environment, devoid of electoral malpractices such as rigging, manipulation of results, and violence. He underscores the importance of adherence to electoral rules

by Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to ensure the acceptability and reasonableness of election outcomes. Lawal identifies key factors essential for fair and credible elections, including the disqualification of ineligible voters, provision of adequate security against voter intimidation, maintenance of ballot secrecy, competence of electoral bodies, and comprehensive voter registration.

Lawal's analysis highlights the legal and constitutional prerequisites for achieving free and fair elections but acknowledges that these alone may not guarantee credible and violence-free elections. His insights into election challenges in Nigeria underscore the need for pragmatic solutions to enhance electoral integrity and public confidence in the electoral process.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2013) echoes concerns about election challenges in Nigeria, noting that elections often polarize rather than unite the populace. The report emphasizes that conflicts arising from electoral processes undermine the primary objective of elections, which is to peacefully aggregate preferences in selecting political leadership.

The perspectives of Kolawole, Olaniyan, Osaghae, Lawal, and UNECA collectively underscore the critical role of elections in democratic governance, emphasizing their potential to either strengthen or undermine democratic principles depending on how they are conducted and perceived by the populace. This conceptual framework provides a comprehensive basis for understanding the dynamics of electoral processes, their implications for governance, and strategies for promoting credible, free, fair, and peaceful elections in democratic societies.

Osaghae (2019) concurs with Lawal (2003) that elections are deemed free, fair, and credible when they adhere rigorously to global best practices. These practices encompass a wide array of technical considerations such as logistical arrangements, the distribution and proper utilization of electoral materials and technologies, educational and registration procedures, the effective deployment of voter cards and card reading machines, adherence to pre-election guidelines and campaign deadlines, as well as the conduct of timely and orderly voting. Furthermore, the transparency and reliability of results, along with the impartial collation of votes and the neutrality of security agencies, are critical components. Additionally, preventing thuggery and violence, ensuring the participation of all political parties on equal terms, safeguarding the independence of the electoral commission, upholding the rule of law and constitutionalism, and promoting inclusiveness are also essential criteria Osaghae highlights for assessing the integrity of elections.

Despite the emphasis on technical compliance, Osaghae observes that elections can still be marred by problems and flaws even when these key procedural measures are meticulously followed. This suggests that while legal, constitutional, and technical aspects are crucial determinants of electoral outcomes and consequences, they may not alone suffice to ensure the overall credibility and peaceful conduct of elections. Osaghae further identifies historical and socio-cultural factors such as ethnicity, religious affiliations, and regional interests that can significantly influence electoral outcomes. He points out a disparity in the attention given to addressing these socio-cultural factors compared to the emphasis placed on technical aspects like the deployment of card readers.

In the theoretical framework, this study employs structural-functionalism theory, which offers insights into the organizational structures within the Nigerian political system, specifically focusing on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Rooted in system analysis and the theory of separation of powers, structural functionalism posits that governmental structures are designed to fulfill distinct yet interdependent functions. For example, the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government serve complementary roles aimed at ensuring governance stability and effectiveness (Mahajag, 1988; Kings, 2022).

Almond's conceptualization within structural functionalism asserts that all political systems must perform essential tasks for survival and equilibrium, which he terms as the functional requirements of systems. These functions are executed through institutional structures that operationalize and sustain governmental processes (Mahajag, 1988; Izadi Mohammadi, Nkisekhian & Memar, 2020). In the context of this study, INEC as an institution constitutionally mandated to oversee electoral processes

exemplifies such a structural component within the Nigerian political system. Its responsibilities include party registration, voter registration, voter education, conducting credible and violence-free elections, announcing results, and declaring winners. The effective performance of these functions not only shapes the operational efficiency of the electoral system but also influences the quality of leadership and governance that emerges from electoral outcomes.

Structural functionalism, despite criticisms for its sometimes limited focus on individual agency and societal dynamics, offers a systematic framework for understanding how institutional structures within political systems contribute to governance outcomes. By applying this theoretical lens, this study aims to illuminate how the functions and effectiveness of INEC as an electoral management body impact electoral integrity and democratic governance in Nigeria.

While structural functionalism provides a valuable framework for analyzing the roles and functions of institutional structures within political systems, it has faced criticism for its tendency to overlook the role of individuals who are crucial in activating these functions. The approach primarily focuses on understanding how institutional structures operate and contribute to the stability and equilibrium of the system, often neglecting the agency and behaviors of the individuals occupying these structures. However, it is important to recognize that the effectiveness of these institutional roles and functions heavily relies on the actions and decisions of the individuals within them.

The behavior, competence, and integrity of individuals within institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) significantly impact how effectively electoral processes are managed. Their adherence to electoral laws, commitment to impartiality, responsiveness to challenges, and capacity to innovate in the face of evolving electoral dynamics all play critical roles in ensuring credible and violence-free elections. Therefore, while structural functionalism provides a systematic understanding of how institutional structures should ideally function, it is incomplete without considering the human factor that operationalizes these structures.

Despite this criticism, structural functionalism remains a valuable analytical tool for comprehending the responsibilities of institutional structures within political systems. It highlights the essential functions that institutions like INEC are mandated to perform, such as voter registration, education, conducting elections, and ensuring transparency in electoral processes. By emphasizing these roles, structural functionalism underscores the importance of institutional integrity and adherence to electoral rules in upholding democratic norms and electoral legitimacy.

In the context of Nigeria, applying structural functionalism helps illuminate the implications of institutional failures within INEC on the electoral system as a whole. For instance, inefficiencies in voter registration processes, inadequate security measures during elections, or challenges in ensuring the neutrality of electoral officials can undermine public trust and lead to electoral disputes. These shortcomings underscore the need for INEC to not only fulfill its structural mandates but also to empower its personnel with the necessary skills, resources, and ethical standards to execute these functions effectively.

Therefore, while recognizing its limitations in neglecting individual agency, structural functionalism provides a robust foundation for assessing how well INEC and similar electoral management bodies fulfill their roles in promoting credible, free, and fair elections. By integrating insights from this framework with considerations of individual behaviors and societal dynamics, a more comprehensive understanding emerges of the complexities involved in electoral governance and the imperative for continuous improvement in electoral practices and institutions.

### **Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria: An Overview.**

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is recognized as the primary election management body in Nigeria. While other bodies also participate in the administration and management of elections alongside INEC, the commission is exclusively empowered to oversee the first two stages of the electoral process (Ajayi, 2008). According to Ajayi (2008), these stages include

the pre-election phase, which involves constituency delimitation, voter and political party registration, and screening and verification of candidates. The second stage encompasses the actual conduct of elections, including balloting, vote counting, collation, result announcement, and winner declaration. The third stage focuses on addressing complaints and litigations arising from electoral conduct by aggrieved parties and contestants, typically handled by election tribunals or panels appointed by the government.

Established in 1998 under the military regime of General Abdulsalam Abubakar, INEC replaced the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON). It is important to note that election management bodies have been part of Nigeria's governance structure since the 1950s, albeit under varying names and leaderships. This historical evolution is aptly described by Okoye (2007), as cited in Onah (2018), highlighting a history marked by dissolutions, constitutions, and reconstitutions of electoral management bodies or commissions in Nigeria. This is also shown in Table I.

**Table I: Electoral Commissions and their Leadership in Nigeria, 1950s – 1990s**

S/N	Electoral Body and Acronyms	Years	Leadership/Chairmen
1.	Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN)	1950s	1. Kofo Abayomi
2.	Federal Electoral Commission (FEC)	1960s	1. Eyo Esua
3.	Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO)	1970S	1. Michael Ani 2. Ovie Whisky
4.	National Electoral Commission (NEC)	1980s	1. Eme Awa, 2. Humphery Nwosu 3. Okon Uya
5.	National Electoral Commission (NECON)	1990s	1. Summer Dagogo-Jack
6.	Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)	1990s	1. Ephraim Akpata, 2. Abel Gwobadia, 3. Maurice Iwu, 4. Attahiru Jega and 5. Mohammed Yahaya

*Compiled by:* The Authors.

*Source:* Onah (2018)

Every new government in Nigeria traditionally engages in renaming, reorganizing, and repositioning the electoral body to ensure free, fair, credible, and violence-free elections. This practice stems from the understanding that the acceptance and credibility of any election hinge directly on the electoral body. Therefore, it is expected that INEC, as the electoral body, should demonstrate impartiality, integrity, competence, transparency, and fairness in the discharge of its responsibilities. INEC is a legal entity established by the provisions of the 1999 Constitution. Specifically, Chapter VI, Part I, and Section 153 of the Constitution outline its creation. Section 153(1) establishes INEC, Section 153(2) details its composition, and Section 153(3) itemizes its functions. Section 154(1) provides for the tenure of the chairman and members, while Section 160 of the Constitution ensures its financial autonomy (FRN, 1999). Some of the functions of INEC as enumerated in the Constitution include but are not limited to the following: conduct of elections, registration of voters, registration of political parties, voter education, public enlightenment, screening of party candidates, oversight of electoral spending by parties and candidates, announcement of election results, and declaration of winners in elections.

### **Methods and Materials**

The research was conducted in Ondo State, using the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as a case study. INEC operates through seven departments: General Administration; Legal Services; Voters Education and Publicity; ICT; Election and Political Parties Monitoring; Store Unit; and Account Section. All these departments were purposively selected for the study as they are directly or indirectly involved in the conduct of elections.

The study employed a sample survey design to ensure adequate representation of the entire population and to achieve valid, reliable, and generalized results. The population considered for the study comprised the staff of INEC in Ondo State, including both junior and senior workers. According to INEC office in Akure (2024), the total population of INEC staff in Ondo State is 310 individuals. The study selected 10% of this population as the sample size, resulting in 31 staff members being chosen using a combination of random and purposive sampling methods. Please refer to Table 2 for the detailed outline of the sample size selection process.

**Table 2: Design Outlay for Selecting Sample Size**

S/N	DEPARTMENT	POPULATION	10% OF THE POPULATION	SAMPLE SIZE
1.	Voters Education and Publicity	46	4.6	5
2.	Legal Services	25	2.5	2
3.	ICT	35	3.5	4
4.	Election and political Parties Monitoring	44	4.4	4
5.	Store Unit	30	3	3
6.	Central Administrative Unit	102	10.2	10
7.	Account Section	28	2.8	3
	Total	310		31

Source: *Field Survey, 2024*

The study adopted both primary and secondary methods of data collection to generate information. Primary data were gathered through questionnaire forms and interviews, while secondary data were collected from various sources such as relevant journals, texts, newspapers, magazines, reports, and online sources. The mixed method approach was employed to ensure a comprehensive database and to mitigate any potential gaps that could arise from relying solely on one method, thereby enhancing the validity and accuracy of the findings.

Questionnaire forms were administered to the selected participants, and out of the 31 distributed forms, 30 were successfully retrieved and validated (refer to Table 3 for details).

**Table 3: Design Outlay for Distribution and Retrieval of Research Questionnaire Forms**

S/N	DEPARTMENT	TOTAL NO. OF QUESTIONNAIRE FORMS ADMINISTERED	TOTAL NO. OF QUESTIONNAIRE FORMS RETRIEVED	TOTAL AGGREGATE
1.	Voters Education and Publicity	5	5	5
2.	Legal Services Dept.	2	2	2
3.	ICT	4	4	4
4.	Election and political Parties Monitoring Unit	4	4	4
5.	Store Unit	3	3	3
6.	Central Administrative Unit	10	9	9
7.	Account Section	3	3	3
	Total	31	30	30

Source: *Field Survey, 2024*

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### Presentation and Analysis of Data

**Table 4: Demographic Information of the Respondents**

Characteristics	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
<b>Age</b>		
18-30	7	23
31-50	15	50
51-60	8	27
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	18	60
Female	12	40
<b>Education</b>		
Primary	4	13
Secondary	6	20
Tertiary	20	67
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	8	27
Married	22	73
<b>Length of service</b>		
1-10 years	9	30
11-20 years	15	50
21-35 years	6	20

Source: *Field Survey, 2024*

From Table 4, it is notable that respondents aged between 31-50 and 51-60 constitute 50% and 27% respectively, representing the highest and second highest percentages. This suggests that 77% of the respondents are within active and productive age brackets, indicating their potential to provide reliable and insightful information on the topic under discussion.

Furthermore, the table reveals that male respondents account for 60% while female respondents make up 40% of the total sample. This balanced representation across genders ensures that both sexes contribute adequately to the study, enriching the diversity of perspectives. In terms of educational background, 67% of the respondents possess tertiary education, while 20% have secondary education. This high proportion of respondents with formal education signifies their capacity to comprehend and respond effectively to the study's inquiries.

Moreover, the table shows that 73% of the respondents are married. This demographic detail implies that the majority of respondents are likely to possess maturity and responsibility, which enhances their ability to provide informed and authoritative responses.

Additionally, more than 70% of the respondents have served in INEC for over 11 years. This extensive tenure within the electoral commission indicates that a significant number of respondents have accumulated substantial experience and insights into electoral processes since 1999. Their prolonged service tenure positions them well to offer knowledgeable perspectives on election-related matters based on their extensive practical experience.



**Table 5: Responses, Frequencies and Percentages of the Respondents**

S/N	Questions	Frequency			Percentage		
		Yes	No	Undecided	Yes	No	Undecided
1.	Do you agree that INEC as Election Management Body is basically responsible for the conduct of credible and violent-free election in Nigeria?	30	-	-	100	-	-
2.	Do you believe that INEC has significantly contributed to conduct of credible and violent-free election in Nigeria?	14	7	9	47	23	30
3.	Would you subscribe to the notion that elections have often been violent-free and credible in Nigeria since 1999?	8	15	7	27	50	23
4.	Do you agree that INEC is severely challenged in the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections in Nigeria?	25	3	2	83	10	7
5.	Do you believe that peaceful elections can be conducted in Nigeria by INEC in nearest future?	18	6	6	60	20	20

Source: *Field Survey, 2024*

Based on the findings presented in Table 5, it is evident that all respondents, constituting 100% of the sample, unanimously agree that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) bears fundamental responsibility for ensuring the conduct of credible and violent-free elections in Nigeria. This unanimous consensus underscores the critical role attributed to INEC in the electoral process.

Regarding the perceived contribution of INEC to credible and violent-free elections, 47% of respondents believe that INEC has significantly contributed to achieving this goal. In contrast, 23% expressed skepticism about INEC's significant contribution, and 30% remained undecided. This divergence in opinions reflects varying levels of confidence in INEC's effectiveness in enhancing the credibility and peacefulness of elections.

Furthermore, when asked about the actual incidence of credible and violent-free elections in Nigeria since 1999, only 27% of respondents agreed that such elections have frequently occurred. Conversely, half of the respondents (50%) disagreed with this assessment, indicating widespread skepticism about the consistency of peaceful and credible elections in the country. An additional 23% were undecided on this matter, highlighting uncertainty among some respondents.

The study also revealed that a substantial majority (83%) of respondents believe that INEC faces significant challenges in its efforts to conduct credible and violent-free elections. This high percentage underscores the perceived obstacles and difficulties encountered by INEC in fulfilling its electoral mandate effectively.

Looking towards the future, 60% of respondents expressed optimism that INEC could still conduct peaceful elections in the near future. In contrast, 40% of respondents did not share this optimism, expressing doubts about INEC's capacity to achieve peaceful elections in upcoming electoral cycles.

In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were conducted to supplement the survey data. During these interviews, many respondents described Nigerian elections since 1999 as generally democratic

and well-conducted, highlighting a positive perspective on the overall conduct of elections during this period. According to one of the respondents who said that:

Elections in Nigeria since 1999 have ushered in democracy where all interested political parties feel secured to contest for various elective positions without intimidation and harassment of any kind. Of course, elections have been well conducted since 1999

In support of this, another respondent stated that:

The conduct of elections in Nigeria since the inception of the fourth (4th) republic can be described as better compared to previous elections in the first, second and third republics. And there is hope for better improvement in the future

The last interviewee was a bit diplomatic in his response. He never perceived the elections as credible or violent-free, but he described it as better than the previous Republics. The implication of this is that elections in Nigeria since 1999 have no clear departure from the experiences of the previous republics. A female respondent reported that:

Elections in Nigeria since 1999 have not changed in terms of characters or features. To be candid, apart from the fact that I am a staff of INEC, I also go to field during elections. I usually participate in the conduct of elections. The features that characterised elections since Independence are still much available with us. Most of those electoral offences are beyond what INEC alone can curb or resolve. There are many stakeholders in election; INEC is only one of the major stakeholders. The fact is that we are still trying to get it right

Another question was asked to actually confirm those elections that were credible and violent-free since 1999. The question states: Could you please mention elections that were generally adjudged credible and violent-free in Nigeria since 1999? Many of the respondents actually agreed that elections since 1999 have always been condemned for lack of credibility and election violence. Although, few of them claimed that 1999 and 2003 general elections were peaceful, but with insignificant pocket of offences when compared with elections conducted after 2003. This implies that conduct of elections in Nigeria has continued to deteriorate steadily since 1999 in terms of peace, credibility and fairness. In response to the question, a respondent and one of the top officials in INEC argued that:

Before Independence, there had been electoral offences; therefore, it is not new. At our own level, we will continue to work, ensuring some level of improvements. If I am to mention elections without any challenges since 1999, then I will be deceiving myself. It is not easy to conduct election without challenges such as offences, delay hitches and so on

Another respondent reported that:

1999, 2003 and 2015 General Elections were peacefully conducted and adjudged credible by Nigerians

During the interviews conducted to explore the role of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as the Election Management Body (EMB) and its impact on the conduct of peaceful and credible elections in Nigeria, all respondents unanimously agreed that INEC holds the primary responsibility for ensuring credible and violence-free elections in the country. This consensus reflects the acknowledged role of INEC as pivotal in maintaining the integrity of electoral processes.

Furthermore, a significant majority of the interviewees expressed positive views regarding INEC's impact on the conduct of peaceful and credible elections since 1999. Many attributed this to INEC's adoption of new technologies aimed at enhancing transparency, effectiveness, efficiency, credibility, and fairness in electoral operations. These technological advancements were seen as pivotal in improving the overall conduct and outcomes of elections over the years.

When queried about the challenges facing INEC in its mandate to conduct credible and violence-free elections, respondents highlighted several critical issues. These included security challenges, lack of administrative autonomy, inadequate punishment for electoral offenders, insufficient expertise and skills among staff, poor maintenance of electoral devices and machines, inadequate staffing levels, and insufficient training and retraining of INEC officials at both ad-hoc and permanent levels.

In response to how these challenges could be addressed to strengthen and enhance INEC's capacity in conducting credible and violence-free elections, respondents proposed several key measures. These included advocating for more transparent collaboration between INEC and security agencies during elections, advocating for stricter penalties for electoral offenses, advocating for regular training and retraining programs for both ad-hoc and permanent INEC staff, advocating for improved infrastructure and maintenance of existing electoral technology, advocating for enhanced technological integration, and advocating for stringent measures against bribery and corruption at all stages of the electoral process.

Overall, the interviews provided a comprehensive view of the perceived roles, impacts, challenges, and recommendations regarding INEC's efforts in conducting credible and violence-free elections in Nigeria.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The study conducted on the role of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria's electoral process revealed critical insights into the challenges and impacts related to the conduct of credible and violence-free elections.

The primary role of INEC as the Election Management Body (EMB) in Nigeria is to ensure the conduct of credible and violence-free elections. Table 5 illustrates that 100% of the respondents acknowledged INEC's fundamental responsibility in this regard. However, despite this recognized role, the study uncovered that elections conducted in Nigeria since 1999 have often fallen short of being both credible and violence-free. Respondents during interviews highlighted that earlier elections were comparatively better in terms of integrity and procedural adherence than recent ones.

The interviews further revealed a sentiment among respondents that conducting flawless elections in Nigeria remains a challenging task. While INEC has introduced various technological innovations and acquired new technologies aimed at enhancing transparency and efficiency in elections, the practical realization of credible and violence-free elections has remained elusive. This raises pertinent questions about the effectiveness and impact of these innovations given the persistent challenges encountered during electoral processes. Several critical challenges emerged from the study that hinder INEC's efforts to conduct credible and peaceful elections in Nigeria:

Respondents identified bribery and corruption among INEC officials and political parties as significant impediments to credible elections. These unethical practices undermine the integrity of electoral processes and erode public trust in the electoral system. The study highlighted a lack of genuine prosecution or accountability for election-related violence. This failure to prosecute perpetrators effectively contributes to a culture of impunity and emboldens future electoral misconduct. Many INEC officials lack sufficient training and expertise in handling the new technologies and devices procured for elections. This deficiency often results in operational inefficiencies and technical glitches during electoral processes, potentially leading to delays and disruptions that escalate tensions at polling units.

Post-election maintenance of electoral devices is another critical issue identified. Neglecting to maintain these devices adequately can lead to malfunctioning during elections, exacerbating logistical challenges and increasing the risk of electoral disputes and violence.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the critical link between electoral credibility and the prevention of electoral violence in Nigeria. Elections perceived as lacking in credibility often lead to disputes, rejection of results, and potential violence, undermining the prospects for sustainable development in a politically stable environment. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) holds a pivotal role in ensuring the conduct of credible and violence-free elections, thus it is imperative to propose recommendations aimed at enhancing its performance towards this goal and fostering sustainable development.

**Combatting Bribery and Corruption:** There is an urgent need to institute stringent measures to prevent and severely punish bribery and corruption among INEC officials involved in electoral processes. Corruption undermines the credibility of elections and diminishes public trust. By ensuring credible elections, citizens will accept the outcomes, thereby conferring legitimacy on the resulting government.

**Severe Punishment for Political Actors Fueling Violence:** Political actors who sponsor or incite violence before, during, or after elections should face severe legal consequences. This includes swift and decisive punitive actions to deter future electoral violence and promote peaceful democratic processes.

**Accountability of INEC Officials:** INEC officials found complicit in promoting or facilitating election-related violence must face severe penalties beyond mere administrative actions. Legal sanctions, including imprisonment, should be enforced to uphold electoral integrity and deter misconduct among electoral officials.

**Transparent Prosecution of Electoral Offenses:** All cases of electoral violence must be transparently prosecuted by the judiciary without bias or favoritism. Genuine accountability will serve as a deterrent and discourage impunity, thereby fostering a culture of respect for the rule of law in electoral processes.

**Continuous Training and Capacity Building:** INEC should prioritize continuous training and retraining of its staff and ad-hoc personnel on the effective use of new technologies and devices deployed for elections. The training should also encompass security management to equip personnel with skills in detecting suspicious activities and managing crowd-related tensions during elections.

**Autonomy of INEC:** As an independent electoral body, INEC should be granted substantial autonomy to execute its mandate effectively. This autonomy ensures that INEC can operate impartially and free from undue influence, thereby enhancing public confidence in the electoral process.

**Regular Maintenance of Electoral Technologies:** There must be a robust system for the regular update, maintenance, and servicing of the technological infrastructure used by INEC for elections. Additionally, qualified experts should be regularly engaged to handle and maintain these technologies to optimize their performance and longevity.

Implementing these recommendations is crucial to enhancing INEC's capacity to conduct credible and violence-free elections in Nigeria. By addressing systemic challenges and promoting accountability, transparency, and technical competence, Nigeria can move towards achieving sustainable development through peaceful and credible electoral processes. These steps are essential to building a democratic culture where elections reflect the will of the people and contribute positively to national stability and progress.

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