

NIGERIA'S 2023 GENERAL ELECTION AND ASSOCIATED NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF COUNSELING FOR ENHANCED SAFETY AND SECURITY

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Abstract

This paper examined the conduct of elections in Nigeria and its associated national security challenges with special attention to the recently concluded 2023 general elections. The study was guided by three objectives which included: to find out issues that gave rise to security concerns during Nigeria's 2023 general election season; to ascertain nature and results of opinion polls on Nigeria's 2023 elections; to find out roles that counseling could play to entrench national safety and security during elections. The Behavioral Leadership Theory proposed by Dr Rensis Likert in 1950 was adopted as the theoretical framework. Opinion polls constituted the primary source of data while secondary materials (in the form of election reportage by newspapers and election monitoring groups) were also accessed. Content analysis method was used to analyze secondary materials, whereas primary data were descriptively analyzed and presented. The study found that wrong electoral orientation of the populace, inter and intra party crisis, election rigging and vote buying among other issues constituted serious threats to national safety and security during election seasons in Nigeria. The adoption and implementation of the European Union 2023 Election Observer Mission Report, among other measures was strongly recommended.

Keywords: counseling, general elections, safety, national security, Nigeria

Introduction

Election is almost synonymous with governance. It is a feature of democracy and should serve as a viable tool for change. Election situates choice of majority, structure of a country's political process and its dynamics. Election guarantees representative government. It is a tool for ensuring the responsiveness of democratic governments to the will of the people. Election is almost synonymous with governance as one that elects a leader invariably dictates the pattern and nature of government and leadership. It is held in human organizations' settings that range from political, organizational, and corporate bodies by the action of people casting votes to choose their leaders (Wikipedia, 2003). Thus vote is an instrument of political power possessed by the people. The selection and nomination of candidates, a vital first stage of the electoral process, generally lies in the hands of political parties. The general election serves only as the final process in the recruitment to political office.

Election involves free competition among politicians or stakeholders of organizations and the exercise is borne out of the need to control leaders, by requiring them to submit to regular and periodic elections for censorship and control. Election also helps to solve the problem of succession in leadership and thus contributes to the continuation of democracy and organized leadership. It curbs scramble, struggle and fight for positions that culminate in disarray and destructions of nations, states or organization's goals, objectives and ideals. The votes of individuals translate into collective decisions. Nigeria is a great entity in the global space and the history of election in Nigeria dates back to 1959. It is a pluralistic society and with its population of over 200 million people it is the largest democracy in Africa (Green, 2023). The country has a vibrant political system that has witnessed series of elections since its return to democratic rule in 1999. Being a Federal Republic, comprising thirty-six States and the Federal Capital Territory, with her numerous ethnic nationalities Nigerian landscape is punctuated with a myriad of social problems, which constitute security challenges. These range from poverty, corruption, armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, herders- farmers clashes, cultism, militancy, Boko Haram terrorists, inequality between wealthy and the poor, high rate of unemployment, divisions among tribes, etc. Election is an opportunity for Nigerian citizens to choose leaders through exercise of their civic rights, to address these problems and shape the future of their country, and uphold the principles of peace, order, and democracy.

The recently concluded 2023 general elections were the main focus of this paper. Three key objectives drove the research as follows

1. To find out issues that give rise to security concerns during Nigeria's 2023 general election season
2. To examine nature and results of opinion polls on Nigeria's 2023 elections and national security
3. Ascertain roles that counseling could play to entrench national safety and security during elections

Review of Relevant Literature

Concept of Election The concept of election could be defined as the process people follow to elect or choose their representatives...sees election as a formal and organised choice by vote of a person for a political office or other position (Dictionary.com). Eya (2003) however, sees election as the selection of a person or persons for office as by ballot and making choice as between alternatives. According to Ozor (2009) election is the procedure through which qualified adult voters elect their politically preferred representative to parliament legislature of a county (or any other public positions) for the purpose of farming and running the government of the country. Obakhedo, (2011) aptly defined election thus: Election is a major instrument for the recruitment of political leadership in democratic societies; the key to participation in a democracy; and the way of giving consent to government; and allowing the governed to choose and pass judgment on office holders who theoretically represent the governed (Obakhedo,2011).

In summary these definitions point to the fact that election is a formal group decision making process by which a population chooses an individual or multiple individuals to hold public offices. It is the political right enjoyed by the citizenry to decide who should govern them and it consists of voting which gives people an opportunity to have their say, exercise their right and, through expressing partisanship, to satisfy their need to feel a sense of belonging.

National Security According to Anderson Rogers and Crawford (2018), the concept of security refers to the protection of individuals from harm. According to Ammerdown Group (2016) national and international security may be understood as 'shared freedom from fear and want, and the freedom to live in dignity. It implies social and ecological health rather than the absence of risk... (and is) a common right.' Paul, (2014), and Gazizolu (2016) also delineate security to pertain to individual citizens. Hence they argue that (human) security has ceased to be the vague, amorphous add-on to harder areas of security such as military or state to mean a shift in the discourse on security away from its traditional state-centered orientation to the protection and advancement of individuals within societies." Hence the security under discussion is that of the individual, state and Nigerian nation.

Security is the state of being or feeling secure, freedom from fear, anxiety, danger, doubt, etc, state or sense of safety or certainty. It entails protection of an individual, building and organization or country against threats such as crime or attacks etc (Rogers & Crawford, 2018, Hornby, 2010). Prabhakaran (2008), sees national security as the "measurable state of the capability of a nation to overcome the multidimensional threats to the apparent well-being of its people and its survival as a nation-state at any given time, by balancing all instruments of state policy through governance... and is extendable to global security by variables external to it.

In the words of Paul (2014), and Gazizolu (2016), human security has ceased to be the vague, amorphous add-on to harder areas of security such as military or state to mean a in the discourse on security away from its traditional state-centered orientation to the protection and advancement of individuals within societies." This discourse hinges on individual, state and national security.

Theoretical Frameworks

The Behavioral Leadership Theory proposed by Dr Rensis Likert in 1950 provides a framework for this study. It focuses on how leaders behave and suggests that traits can be learned by observing and copying other leaders. No leader is born successful but learns attributes of effective leadership. The theory further highlights various styles of leadership which includes:

- People-oriented leaders that encourage innovation, empower employees, reward success
- Task-oriented leaders that initiate projects, clarify instructions, organize processes
- Participative leaders that facilitate communication, take suggestions, foster collaboration

- Status quo leaders that distribute tasks evenly, enforce company policies, remain neutral

The key idea of this theory is that, in the end, the actions and actual behaviors of a leader determine success (Gibbins,, Eulau,, Webb, 2008).

The relevance of this theory to Nigerian politics is that political leadership that employs these leadership behavioural styles will meet leadership demands and achieve the expected goals. There is high expectation by voters that elections will produce politicians that will carry the will of the masses and provide the required leadership dividends. For example in governance the task-oriented manager/leader will "begin with workflow processes, looking to solve issues with system management. The people-oriented leader, however, will start with their team, searching for a solution by talking through issues with their employees/ the led. They believe that prioritizing a back-and-forth dialogue will generate the optimal solution," relying on strong structure, setting goals and empowering employees/citizens and so on. Behavioral leadership theory claims that these skills can be learned and strengthened with a bit of work and observation." Nigerian politicians should learn and adopt democracies of developed world and conduct elections that are free from irregularities.

Materials and Methods

The focus of this paper is on Nigeria, a nation with an aggregation of several communities, nationalities, ethnic groups and tribes. Nigeria is a pluralistic society both in terms of culture, religion and composition. It has about 300 different ethnic groups (Green, 2023). According to National Population Commission (2006) statistics, Nigeria has a population of 140 million people with a growth rate of 6.3% per annum. An estimated 37.7% of the populations are urban dwellers while 62.3% are rural based. The life expectancy rate is 52 years, literacy rate is 45% and fertility rate is 5.7% while infant and mortality rate remains high (National Population Commission, 2006). The 1996 state creation and political distortion of states' structures resulted in the present ethnic grouping being reorganized into six geo-political zones made of 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

The recently concluded 2023 general elections in Nigeria are the main focus of this paper. The study relied on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were generated via opinion polls conducted without any consideration of demographic characteristics other than nationality. The opinion polls sought Nigerians' assessment of the election exercise. On the other hand, secondary sources involved review of election reportage by newspapers and election monitoring groups. Content analysis method was used to analyze secondary materials, whereas primary data were descriptively analyzed and presented.

Research Findings/Results

Objective 1: Issues that give Rise to Security Concerns during Nigeria's General Election Seasons

The Individual versus the Political Party in the Electoral Process By the provisions of the 1999 Constitution, the 2022 Electoral Act, and the 2022 INEC Regulations and Guidelines for the Conduct of the Elections, it is the political parties that produce candidates for election. In other words, the candidates can emerge only through political parties. The individual candidate cannot emerge independent of the political party. The reasoning behind this arrangement is that political parties are not only necessary, but also desirable for "democratic consolidation" (Political Bureau, 1986).

The party structures and party discipline often constitute strong impediments to the emergence of candidates with proven integrity, character and competence. Also competition to fly a party's flag in election often results in breach of peace and insecurity.

Money Politics/Vote Buying The amount of money required for obtaining forms for party primaries from which the candidates for election are expected to emerge leaves much to be desired. Only the super rich stand a chance of raising the huge sums and being considered for election. This narrows the chances of women and other vulnerable but suitable candidates. Among the 15,309 candidates for the 2023 general election, only 8.3% were women. This exposes the citizens to economic exploitation and political domination by the few rich men in society. This invariably not only makes nonsense of the election process, but also exposes the nation to economic insecurity as those elected into office try to recover the huge sum they spent in obtaining the forms and in electioneering campaigns.

Wrong Electoral Orientation ("Deliver Your Polling Unit/Constituency" Dictum) Political parties expect their candidates to "win" in their respective polling units/constituencies, whether they are people's choice or not. In the process they employ thuggery, vote buying, ballot snatching, voter intimidation, and all forms of vices including maiming and killing, causing general insecurity. There lies the paradox: election that should enhance national security turns round to fuel national insecurity.

The Zoning System Politics in Nigeria has followed a zoning system whereby electoral positions are assigned to specific geopolitical zones. This adversely affects the quality of candidates for election and governance generally, and by implication, national security.

Political Office Remuneration The lucrative nature of governance in Nigeria has buried the essence of election. The monetary remuneration attached to government leadership positions poses untold security challenges. Corroborating this the NTI 2000, Uwa 2006 and Adeoye 2006 revealed that the politicians that emerged ...in Nigeria became enmeshed in tribalism and religious affiliations; lawmakers who were expected to make laws for the betterment of the nation failed to identify their priorities and work towards attaining these, rather they focused on individual acquisition of wealth and properties....

Inter and intra Party Crises, Conflicts The issue of crises, conflicts and ethno-religious parochial lines is a fact in Nigerian politics. The inter and intra-party squabbles, absence of credibility, transparency and efficiency of stakeholders that manage, regulate and secure the electoral process are the problems of today's Nigerian politics. It is a fact that conflict is present in nearly every aspect of life. However experience in Nigerian politics shows that the conflict that thrive in political process is endemic. There's usually a clash between politicians arising out of a difference in thought process, attitudes, understanding, interests, requirements and even sometimes perceptions. In fact Nigerian party politics is therefore an exercise mutilated and done to fulfill all righteousness.

Election Rigging It has terrible effect on democracy in that it deprives elections of their essential purpose. In the first place, a government which by electoral malpractices keeps itself (politicians) in office against the votes of the majority of the electorate lacks the legitimacy of the moral authority that popular mandate bestows."

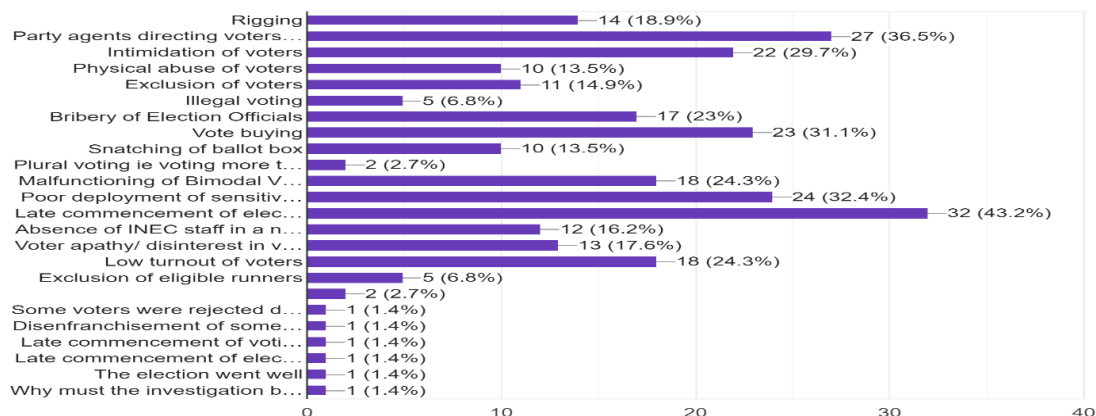
Objective 2: Opinion Polls on Nigeria's 2023 Elections and National Security

The Opinion Polls On 2023 Presidential, National Assembly, Gubernatorial and House of Assembly Elections included questions on; the election malpractices/problems observed in the 2023 Presidential /National Assembly Elections in your polling unit; the kind of security agents present at the polling units; the role played by the security agent(s); and the assessment of Presidential and National Assembly elections exercise. There were 75 respondents randomly selected, and of varying demographic features.

Election Malpractices For question 2 which was on election malpractices observed at the polling units, 43% of the respondents stated that there was late commencement of election proceeding/ voting as a result of late arrival of INEC officials. 37% stated that there were party agents directing voters to vote for particular candidates. 32% of the respondents had poor deployment of sensitive materials and over 30% of the respondents had intimidation of voters at their polling units. About 14% and 15% of respondents had physical abuse and exclusion of voters respectively. 13.5% of respondents had their ballot boxes snatched at their polling units. For these respondents, most of them ticked multiple kinds of malpractices they observed at their polling units, which reiterates that the 2023 presidential/National Assembly elections was grossly flawed.

2. Tick the election malpractices/problems observed in the 2023 Presidential /National Assembly Elections in your polling unit.

74 responses

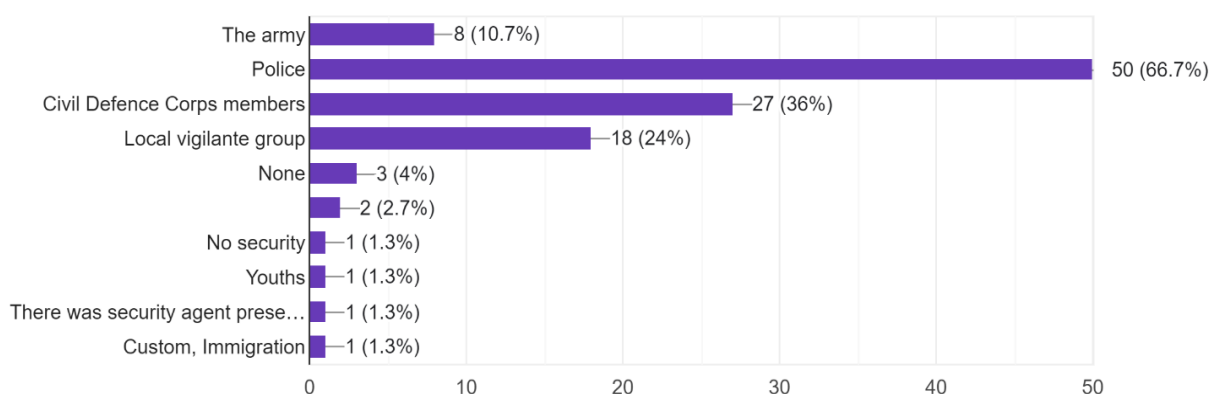


Data Source: Google Forms Summary

Security Agents According to the findings from the opinion polls, 66% of the respondents had police officers at their polling unit, 36% had the civil defence corps at their polling unit, 24% had the local vigilante group at their polling unit and 10% had the army at their polling unit. About 4% of the respondents stated they had no security agent at their polling unit. Based on these findings, one can argue that there was a significant level of effort made in providing security agents to maintain a free and fair election at different polling units. However, it was not completely inclusive as some areas lacked security officers.

3. Security Agents. Tick the agents that are present in your polling unit

75 responses



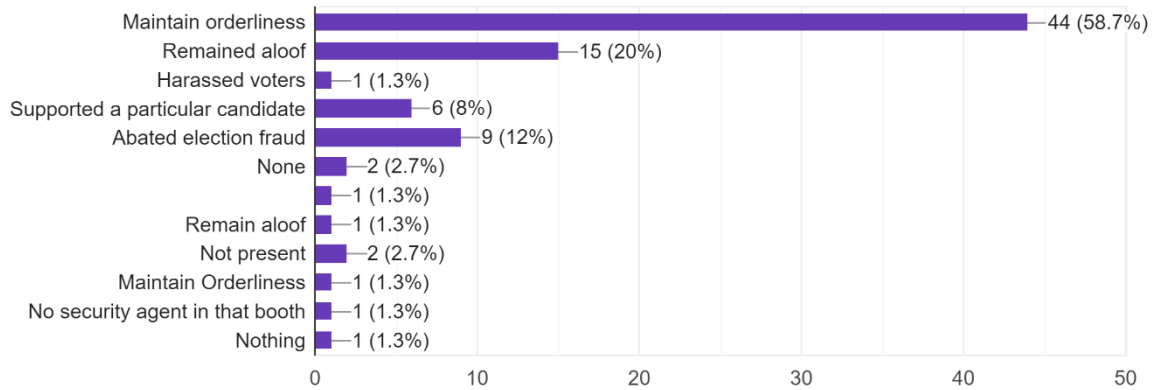
Data Source: Google Forms Summary

Role Played by Security While the normative expectation of having security officers present is to maintain orderliness, it is important to determine if that was really the case during the election exercise. According to the findings, 58.7% of the respondents indicated that their security agents had maintained orderliness. 20% pointed out that the agents remained aloof throughout the exercise. 12% of the respondents stated

that the agents at their polling unit abated election fraud. The findings suggest that while most electorates experienced effectual behaviour in maintaining orderliness from the security agents, a good number of other electorates did not. The summary of the findings are illustrated below:

4. Security Agents Role/s?

75 responses



Data source: Google Forms summary.

Assessment of Presidential and National Assembly Elections Exercise:

The respondents were asked to select what option best describes their assessment of the presidential and national assembly elections exercise and these are the findings: 12% said it was excellent; 30.7% said it was fair; 13.3% said it was good; and 36% said it was bad. The popular opinion indicated that the election exercise at the polling units was bad.

5. Assessment of Presidential and National Assembly Elections exercise

75 responses



Data Source: Google forms summary

Objective 3: Roles that Counseling could play to entrench National Safety and Security during Elections

In this section we addressed the question of where does counseling come in vis-a-vis the whole discourse on election and national security. Succinctly put, the question is what is the concern of counseling in evolving a reliable electoral process that will produce quality leadership and enhance national security?

According to Section 14(2) a of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, "Sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom Government through this constitution derives all its powers and authority".

The counseling implications of the above constitutional provision are obvious, and cannot be overemphasized. Counseling, basically, is a human relations profession, primarily concerned with assisting individuals and groups to understand themselves better, make and carry out decisions and plans that hold potentials for the achievement of satisfactory life goals in society. Corollary to this concern is the fact that national security consists essentially of individuals' freedom from challenging life issues, be they social, economic, political, psychological, etc.

It is against this backdrop that we draw attention to the following critical electoral issues, using the 2023 general election as a case study. Guiding our discussion is the question of the individual citizens versus the electoral process. How do the candidates standing for elections emerge? How open and transparent is the process? Whose interest do they represent: personal, party, or national interest? How are the citizens' rights to vote and to be voted for protected and enhanced in the electoral process? What are the factors that make for political inclusiveness and/or political exclusiveness in the electoral process?

Conclusion

There is a very close relationship between election and national security. The relationship is that of effectiveness rather than effect: election, properly managed and executed ensures national security, and vice versa. Free and fair election is the benchmark of democracy. Election should enhance national security and there should be a balance between rulership and responsibility on the one hand, power and accountability on the other hand. Election provides a conducive environment and forum for actualizing this. Election in Nigeria does not give sufficient reality to the people's participation in government. This calls for professional counseling input to forge the much needed effect and effectiveness in the relationship between elections and national security. The counseling challenge is how to evolve a reliable and dependable electoral process that will produce quality leadership and enhance national security.

Recommendations

- 1. Need for Sociometric Counseling Technique:** This should be adopted to elicit public rating of prospective candidates before they are cleared to stand for election. General elections should be based on the people's assessment of the candidates' integrity, character, capacity and competence. Leaders that possess

these qualities, no doubt, will deliver good governance and ensure national security.

2. Independent Candidacy: There should be provision for independent candidature to free competent candidates from the entangling and limiting conditions embedded in party structures and modus operandi. The process by which candidates emerge as prospective political leaders is crucial. The stringency of the requirements for party membership and participation is an issue to contend with. There's need to deemphasize party membership. It should not be a sine quo non for candidates to stand election or be voted for.

3. Adoption and Implementation of European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) Report: To enhance transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability, the researcher endorses the key recommendations of the European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) Report to wit:

a. Protect the interest of voters through certainty of law for all stages and aspects of electoral processes by eliminating from electoral laws and regulations errors and ambiguities to avoid potential for conflicting interpretations, and ensuring the revision processes are inclusive"

b. Establish a robust operational framework for the independence, integrity, and efficiency of electoral administration through an inclusive and publicly accountable mechanism for selecting candidates to the posts of INEC commissioners and RECs based on clear criteria of evaluation of merits, qualifications, and verified non-partisanship.

c. Reform of political parties with a restructured electoral process and the institutionalization of a political culture which places high premium on accountability and political virtue is needed.

d. This paper also recommends a downward review of government political officers' emoluments which have been the clarion call of Nigerian masses as that will forestall the security problems that bedevil the election process in Nigeria.

e. Election policies should incorporate the age at which Nigerians should be legible to participate in governance. Nigerian country should "tap the early maturity of today's Nigerians" by providing opportunity for young people, say from age 30 to run for elected public offices. The same policy should also set a limit at which every Nigerian should exit leadership position and give room for the youths.

f. Election outcomes should be reported without bias and clearly documented without any fear of molestation of the media by the power that be.

g. Bribery of electoral offices embodies manipulation of election results and fight against bribery should start from the classroom with the inculcation of ethical values.

h. In all, this paper recommends the active involvement of counselors to orient potential political leaders on the essence of patriotism as Nigerians and the need to help solve national problems which invariably are citizens' problems. People should be counseled to the point that they see election as a medium through which they serve Nigeria and should mature to the level of self-exclusion from election if need be, after self examination and assessment. National safety and security is possible in Nigeria.

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