



**INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION (INEC) AND  
ELECTION POSTPONEMENTS: TRENDS, SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS AND  
THE FUTURE OF NIGERIA'S ELECTORAL PROCESS**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Election postponement has gradually crept into the political lexicon and is fast becoming a tradition in Nigeria's electoral process that has sequentially marred the conduct of elections in the country as evident in 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections among others. This has raised serious concerns as to the integrity of the electoral process and the preparedness of INEC to conduct free, fair and credible elections in the country. The essence of this paper was to assess the trends and socio-economic effects of election postponements and its impacts on Nigeria's electoral process. The paper is historical and descriptive in nature and utilized relevant data obtained wholly from documentary sources which were analysed within the context of structural functional theory. From the analysis, it was gleaned that the electoral umpire has not learned from its previous sloppy preparations and mistakes, despite significant condemnation from Nigerians across political divides. Moreover, the paper established that security challenges, logistics inadequacies and court verdicts contributed to the postponement of elections, which resulted in severe socio-economic losses for the voting public, electoral commission, political parties, security agencies, election observers, and media outlets. Accordingly, the paper recommended, among others, that the government and other stakeholders in Nigeria's electoral process should work to ensure that adequate pre-emptive measures are put in place in advance of future elections. Again, the Electoral Act 2022 should be amended to provide for electronic registration and voting, to accommodate Nigerians in diaspora.*

**KEYWORDS:** Democratisation, election postponement, electoral process, logistical failures, socio-economic losses.



## INTRODUCTION

Election is a formal and well-organised choice by which the electorates vote to choose leaders for political offices or other positions of authority, yet it represents a core component of the problems of democratic transition and consolidation in Nigeria. Obviously, to ensure a successful conduct of elections there is need for the establishment of a well-defined, competent, relatively independent and non-partisan electoral management body (Ita & Atai, 2018). In Nigeria, this body is the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Despite the existence of this body in Nigeria, the country is still grappling with the challenges of conducting credible, free, fair and acceptable elections. In addition to being marred with irregularities and violence, the electoral process in Nigeria has several pitfalls that hinder its fairness and participative nature. Moreover, general elections in Nigeria are often trailed by some abnormalities in spite of the huge budgetary allocation dedicated to the process (Ita, 2022).

For the first time in its post-independence democratic history, Nigeria has been able to organise seven consecutive elections at regular intervals under the nascent Fourth Republic (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023). Nevertheless, there have been several postponements of these elections; the most recent being the 2023 general elections. INEC postponed the general elections in 2011, 2015, and 2019 on the grounds that it could not control logistics and security. In contrast, the 2023 elections were postponed because of a court ruling that allowed INEC to reconfigure the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) machines in advance of the polls. Thus, issue of security, logistics and court ruling has become snags in the wheel of success for INEC's desire to conduct credible and transparent elections in the country without postponements (Dode & Ita, 2020).

Observably, the shocking announcement by Professor Mahmood Yakubu, Chairman of INEC, of postponing the dates of the much awaited presidential election from February 16 to February 23, 2019, as well as the elections for the National Assembly, the Gubernatorial, States Houses of Assemblies, and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Area Councils from February 23 to March 9, 2019, was prompted by the need for the Commission to reconfigure its Card Readers for use in the elections, though it sparked a fierce national debate among the populace. In a manner akin to this, INEC postponed the holding of the elections for the Governorship and States Houses of Assemblies from March 11 to 18, 2023. This was done to give the commission ample time to modify the BVAS machines in advance of the elections, as per the Court of Appeal's ruling, which, in the commission's opinion, came far too late.

Regardless of the rationales behind the postponements, the acts have not only cost the residents socio-economic damages but have also raised questions about the commission's political impartiality, independence, legitimacy, and transparency. Some citizens claim that INEC is only a vehicle for achieving baser goals and that it is a puppet of the politicians who control it. Others have suggested that INEC may be a victim of its circumstances and have urged for a reformation of the commission. Therefore, it is abhorrent and unfortunate that INEC fell short in fulfilling its expected responsibilities and responsibility in carrying out its duties.

With the aforementioned context in mind, this article aimed to examine the socio-economic effects of election postponements on voters and other stakeholders, as well as the implications for Nigeria's electoral system. Consequently, the target of this paper has been to: (i) evaluate the socio-economic effects of election postponements and its impacts on Nigeria's electoral



process; (ii) establish the connection between logistical challenges, inadequate security, court decisions, and election postponements in Nigeria; and (iii) recommend some necessary steps to prevent the phenomenon and, more importantly, enhance the electoral process in Nigeria's future elections.

The succeeding sections of the paper will address the conceptual and theoretical issues, historical trends, and the consequences of election postponements drawn from recent elections and the impacts these has generated in Nigeria's political landscape.

## **Conceptual Explication**

### ***Election***

There is consensus among scholars and Political Scientists that election is an important instrument for enthroning democratic system of government, or as the heartbeat of democratic governance. As conceived by Iyayi (2005), election is a process of selecting the officers or representatives of an organisation or group by the vote of its qualified members. Beyond organisational setting, the author conceptualised election to mean a process of elite selection by mass of the population in any given political system. This implies that election provides the medium by which the different interest groups within a country can express and resolve their claims to power through peaceful means. Ita (2018a) expressed the thought that election is a vital component of a democratic society. A political system is democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote. Simply put, election is the rightful way of ensuring that responsible leaders take over the mantle of power in any polity.

Ikpe (2008) and Ita (2018b) contended that election, as a democratic process, encompasses a myriad of activities of which the most prominent are campaign and voting. The authors argued that election is the only avenue through which the ordinary citizens hold the rulers to account. More specifically, for Ikpe (2008, pp. 7-8), election is the most important legitimizer of democratic regimes, because as he put it:

More technically conceived, elections are primarily a mechanism for selecting certain governmental leaders, as well as removing them from office, and preventing others from gaining office. It constitutes governments and a medium for holding public officials accountable to their actions, and keeping them responsive to the people's needs and interests in democracies. Even from the simplistic definition of democracy as people's rule, elections provide the link between citizens (people) and parties interested in holding political power use elections to compete for the people's vote.

In the opinion of Gambo (2006) and Dickson & Ita (2022), election is an important exercise in the sense that if carefully, freely and fairly undertaken, it produces outcome that is almost mutually agreeable to all competing social groups which are politically active within a given polity. Thus, any political leadership which emerges from a free and fair electoral process enjoys consistent and considerable support of the citizenry and is scarcely questioned in terms of legitimacy. From this point of view, election is an important element of modern representative government. It is so closely tied to the growth and development of democratic



political order as the single most important indicator of the presence or absence of democratic government.

Ekundayo (2015, p. 49) avowed that election is at the heart of democracy and democratisation process. The author posited that elections are the litmus test for a democratic political system. What underscores the centrality of elections to democratisation is the fact that there can be elections without democracy, whereas there can never be democracy without elections, even as the author stressed that:

Election is the life wire of any democracy. Elections in a democracy are very important because they are the means through which the political expressions of the people are shown via legitimacy and leadership succession. In a free and fair conduct called election, the people do have the political will and right to decide who should govern them. However, free, fair and credible elections have been observed to be farfetched in developing countries. It is therefore no wonder that the democratic process in Africa and third world countries particularly Nigeria continued to derail and collapse at the altar of bungled elections and electoral process. This is because of the centrality of elections to the whole essence of democratic process and inability of these countries and their electoral bodies to conduct free, fair and credible elections.

Summarily, election simply denotes the process through which citizens follow to elect or choose their representatives in federal, state and local government.

### ***Election Postponement***

According to Time (2010), postponement of an event is the act of delaying its happening or arranging for it to take place at a later time than originally planned. Flowing from this simple understanding, election postponement refers to the delay of the conduct of elections or rearrangement of elections to be conducted on a later day rather than the original day it was scheduled to hold. Put differently, election postponement is a delay in conducting elections because the electoral commission plans or decides that it should take place at a later day, time and venue.

Odo (2015) postulated that election postponements in Nigeria has become a nightmare, a serious quagmire to the consolidation of Nigeria's democratic process. He added that several factors, but mostly, logistical issues and security challenges, are blamed as causing postponements of elections in Nigeria. In consonance with Odo's viewpoint, Isah (2019) observed that election postponement on logistical ground could be as a result of bad weather, late arrival of election materials such as the results sheets, delayed voters' registration and distribution of the Permanent Voters Card (PVC). Sabotage, as in the case of the burning of INEC offices in certain areas, can as well lead to election postponement. These at times are attempts to thwart the efforts of the Electoral Commission and also to sabotage governance and frustrate the masses. It could also be a deliberate strategy to rig elections through planned irregularities and violence.

Election postponement, as provided for in Section 24(2-5) of Nigeria's Electoral Act of 2022, can occur where there is a perceived breach of peace or in the midst of natural "natural disasters or other emergencies" that may threaten the conduct of an election. The section provides *inter alia*:



(2) Where a date has been appointed for the holding of an election, and there is reason to believe that a serious breach of the peace is likely to occur if the election is proceeded with on that date or it is impossible to conduct the elections as a result of natural disasters or other emergencies, the Commission may postpone the election and shall in respect of the area, or areas concerned, appoint another date for the holding of the postponed election, provided that such reason for the postponement is cogent and verifiable.

(3) Where an election has commenced and there is reason to believe that there is or has been substantial disruption of election in a polling unit or constituency or it is impossible to continue with the election occasioned by threat to peace and security of electoral officials and materials, the Commission shall suspend the election and appoint another date for the continuation of the election or the process.

(4) Where the Commission appoints a substituted date in accordance with subsections (2) and (3), there shall be no return for the election until polling has taken place in the area or areas affected.

(5) Notwithstanding subsection (3), the Commission may, if satisfied that the result of the election will not be affected by voting in the area or areas in respect of which substituted dates have been appointed, direct that a return of the election be made.

On the basis of the above provisions, INEC has postponed elections four times since 2011. Hence, the postponement of future elections should not come as a surprise to most Nigerians who have observed the electoral process in the country over time.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this paper is based on the structural functional theory propounded by Gabriel Almond and George Bingham Powell in 1966. This theory's central claim is that there are political functions to be performed in every political system, along with the structures necessary to carry them out. In modern democratic systems these structures are specialized and differentiated. Within the scope of this paper, the theory addresses how the electoral body operates in a particular society to guarantee both the well-being of the populace and the survival of democracy (Idowu, 2010). Consequently, the theory is used to describe how the Independent National Electoral Commission functions in relation to election administration and how its operations impact the socio-economic well-being of the electorate.

INEC is saddled the responsibilities as spelt out in the Third Schedule, Item F, paragraphs 14 and 15 of the Nigerian Constitution 1999 including supervising the entire electoral process which entails registration of voters, provision of electoral materials, conducting of free, fair and credible election and announcing the election result without external interference. In essence, the powers and roles of INEC are clearly identified in the constitution and explained unambiguously in the electoral laws, but the problem is the applicability of the powers within the context and form of its institutional reality. In other words, there is no clear diversification between the structure and the functions in the case of INEC and the roles it plays in general elections in the country because the level of democratic ethic is still in its low ebbs.

The contention of this paper is that government should provide all the necessary election materials to INEC to enable the electoral body distributes them to the various polling units on time to avoid postponement of elections (Idowu, 2010). In the course of performing its



function, INEC had to collaborate with other institutions or structures, which also had roles to play in the electoral process. In the course of performing their different roles, some intended or unintended, recognized or unrecognized consequences manifested which enhanced or lessened the adaptation or adjustment of the system thereby bringing about dysfunction in the system as demonstrated in the postponement of various elections by the commission. These intended and unintended consequences as well as the dysfunctions are analysed in this paper.

With respect to election postponements in Nigeria, the rapid growth of voter sensitization programmes has lent an increased importance to establishing credible systems for reducing the possibilities of a postponed election. A related development has been the recognition that Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can be important in ensuring that elections hold on the stipulated dates. Their participation may include initiating campaigns to inform citizens about their rights and the dangers of election postponement on Nigeria's democratic process, performing third-party monitoring of the electoral commission, and conducting citizens' perception surveys. They can also undertake polling materials tracking to ascertain the distribution of election materials to every polling unit on election day. The growing pressure to focus on achieving results during elections reinforces the importance of improving, monitoring, and evaluation systems, particularly in the context of elections in Nigeria.

### **INEC and the Postponement of Elections: A Glimpse at Historical Trends**

It is a truism that postponement of elections is not new or entirely strange to some Nigerians who are familiar with Nigeria's electoral history. On June 15, 1991, delegates' elections into Local Governments and State Congresses were postponed till 30 June 1991 (Teniola, 2019). In 2011, INEC under Prof. Attahiru Jega had moved the 2 April National Assembly election by two days over the late deployment of electoral materials in some parts of the country. The commission announced the sudden postponement after voting had started in some parts of the country, including Kaduna, Kebbi, Delta, Lagos, Zamfara, and Enugu blaming the situation on non-availability of materials to conduct the polls in some places (Abdullahi, 2013). Justifying the postponement while addressing Nigerians, Jega (cited in Nnamdi, 2019, p. 1) said:

As you know the National Assembly (House of Representatives and Senate) elections are supposed to be taking place as I speak. You would also have noticed that things have not proceeded smoothly as expected with the elections. The reason for this is the unanticipated emergency we have experienced with late arrival of result sheets in many parts of the country. The result sheets are central to the elections and their integrity. Accordingly, in many places, our officials have not reported at the polling units, making it now difficult to implement the Modified Open Ballot Procedure that we have adopted. Not only do we have to enter the results in the sheets, the number of accredited voters is also to be entered in the result sheet. While we could have proceeded with the elections in a few states of the country, where all the materials are available, such as Lagos, Kaduna, Kebbi, Delta, Zamfara and Enugu, among others, in order to maintain the integrity of the elections and retain effective overall control of the process, the commission has taken the difficult but necessary decision to postpone the National Assembly elections to Monday, April 4, 2011.

Again, on 16 February 2015, INEC under the leadership of Jega, adjusted the timetable for the general elections by six weeks over security concerns. The 2015 Presidential and National Assembly elections were shifted from 14 February to 28 March, while the governorship and States Houses of Assemblies elections were shifted to 11 April. Heads of security agencies at



that time were said to have informed the then National Security Adviser (NSA) that Boko Haram insurgents were still ravaging and had overrun and took full control of 14 Local Government Areas in some parts of the North-Eastern region of the country, particularly Borno, Yobe and Gombe States (Baiyewu, 2019).

Accordingly, on the advice of National Security Adviser and Council of States, INEC opted for postponement of the 14 February presidential election since the security of its personnel, electoral materials and the electorate could not be guaranteed during the exercise. The postponement, as Jega (cited in Ogala, 2015, p. 1; Olatunji, 2019, p. 1 and Oluwafemi, 2023, p. 1) explained in justification, was to allow security agencies to tighten up loose ends and make the areas concerned safe for the elections, and consequently submitted that:

INEC not being a security agency that could by itself guarantee protection for personnel and materials, as well as voters during elections, the commission cannot lightly wave off the advice by the nation's security chiefs. The commission has decided to reschedule the 2015 general elections thus: the national elections (i.e. presidential and National Assembly) are now to hold on March 28th, 2015; while the state elections (governorship and state assembly) are to hold on April 11th, 2015.

Notably, the 2015 general elections were postponed without much hue and cry from Nigerians. One would have expected that with the experience, the electoral umpire would have developed a robust, anticipatory strategy to militate against sudden postponement of another election.

Contrarily, the commission, on 16 February 2019 postponed the 2019 Presidential and National Assembly elections, five hours before polls were scheduled to open for voting, to 23 February (one week) while the Governorship and States Assemblies elections were postponed to 9 March 2019 owing to logistics problem it faced in the delivery of election materials to States. Announcing the postponement, the Chairman of the Commission, Professor Mahmood Yakubu, (cited by Maclean & Egbejule, 2019, p. 1) averred that:

Following a careful review of the implementations of the logistics and operational plan and the determination of the commission to conduct free, fair and credible elections, proceeding with the elections was no longer feasible. The Presidential and National Assembly elections that were supposed to take place on February 16 will now take place on February 23, while the Governorship and States Houses of Assemblies elections initially scheduled for March 2 have been moved to March 9. This was a difficult decision to take but necessary for successful delivery of the elections and the consolidation of our democracy.

Justifying the reasons for the postponement of the elections thereafter, Yakubu (2019) stated that the plan for the 2019 general elections was ready in November 2017 and INEC subsequently issued the timetable and schedule of activities for the elections on 9 January 2018, over a year to the elections. He stressed that the commission carefully followed its timetable and implemented 13 of the 14 activities as scheduled and had not missed the date fixed for any single activity.

Nonetheless, the postponement of a process to which four years and billions of naira (189 billion naira or \$522,821,571) were dedicated is still inexcusable. In point of fact, the commission had ample opportunity to work on the elections and perfect its processes to accommodate all manner of hitches and to correct its perennial logistics maladministration



which has always plagued Nigeria's elections and disenfranchised millions of electorates; so, it sounds ridiculous that it failed spectacularly at its job. Even though this was not the first time that elections were postponed in Nigeria, as earlier pointed out, the plan has often been to avoid mistakes of the past and that did clearly not manifest during the 2019 elections.

No real evidence was produced showing that any of the legal justifications, namely, the likelihood of 'a serious breach of peace', 'natural disasters' or 'other emergencies' were at play. Instead, the elections were postponed due to logistical challenges, bad weather, and sabotage (Toromade, 2019; Attah, 2019). Ultimately, it was not the security of the election, but the inability of the commission to actually administer the process to Nigerian voters around the country that informed the postponement. Thus, while security concerns were warranted, they were not believed to be of greatest impact in the decision to postpone the election by INEC.

In 2023, as preparations were on top gear for the conduct of the general elections, INEC Chairman, Prof. Yakubu, at the presentation of the electronic copies of the 93,469,008 voters register to leaders of political parties on Wednesday, 11 January 2023 in Abuja, assured Nigerians that the 2023 General Elections will hold as scheduled; any report to the contrary is not the official position of the commission, adding that more than ever before, the commission was more prepared for the 2023 general elections and had successfully implemented 11 out of the 14 activities on schedule for the elections. Yakubu (2023, pp. 1-2) further asserted that:

The last batch of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) has been received while the ongoing configuration of the critical technology in readiness for elections will soon be completed. In the last two days, we commenced the airlifting of other sensitive materials to states across the country. Already, some of the materials for 17 States in three geo-political zones have been delivered. Furthermore, 13,868,441 Permanent Voters' Cards (PVCs) have been printed, and delivered to States and are being collected by citizens as new voters or by existing voters who applied for transfer or replacement of cards as provided by law.

Regarding postponing the election, the INEC boss remarked that the commission was not contemplating any adjustment to the election timetable, let alone postponing the 2023 general elections. He added that following the display of the voters' register nationwide and the conclusion of claims and objections by citizens, a new national register of voters had been compiled. In glowing terms, he remarked that:

In short, at no time in the recent history of the commission has so much of the forward planning and implementation been accomplished 44 days ahead of a general election. Therefore, the commission is not contemplating any adjustment to the election timetable, let alone the postponement of the General Election. For the avoidance of doubt, the Presidential and National Assembly elections will hold on Saturday, February 25, 2023, while Governorship and State Assembly elections will hold two weeks later on Saturday, March 11, 2023.

As the election was drawing closer, there were claims on social media that the electoral umpire might postpone the Presidential and National Assembly elections slated for 25 February and the Governorship and States Houses of Assemblies' polls scheduled for 11 March 2023. The INEC Chairman, (as cited by Ajayi, 2023) was quoted as saying that the commission was affected by cash crunch and petrol scarcity across the country and that the postponement of the elections would be in the best interest of Nigerians.





As reported by Ajayi (2023, p. 1) INEC in a tweet titled ‘Fake News Alert’, through the Chief Press Secretary to the Commission’s Chairman, Mr Rotimi Oyekanmi, debunked the claims as false and asked Nigerians to ignore such social media hoax, as he stated:

Our attention has been drawn to a fake report circulating on the social media with the title: ‘INEC May Postpone Feb 25 Election by a Week or Two’. The commission will not and is not contemplating postponing the 2023 General Elections. Nigerians should disregard it. It is not true. INEC will not, and is not even contemplating postponing the 2023 general elections. To be sure, the presidential and national assembly election will take place on 25th February, while the governorship/state assembly election will hold on 11th March 2023.

Remarkably, the commission conducted the Presidential and National Assembly elections as scheduled. However, ten days after the conduct of the election, and three days to the Governorship and States Assemblies elections, which many Nigerians were prepared to participate with the expectation that the political drama associated with the elections would end by the weekend so that they can fully resume their normal lives, the unexpected happened. These expectations were cut short on 8 March as INEC officially announced the postponement of the Governorship and States Assemblies elections to 18 March 2023 (one week) due to legal issues concerning the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS).

According to Oluwafemi (2023), the postponement was to accommodate an *ex parte* order by the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal to allow some political parties to inspect materials used for the presidential election. The order also allowed a forensic investigation into over 176,000 BVAS devices utilised in the presidential election and at all INEC offices across the country’s 774 Local Government and Area Councils. INEC wanted the tribunal to reconsider the order, fearing that the absence of an explicit timeframe for the inspection would disrupt its ability to conduct the Governorship and States Assemblies’ elections.

From INEC’s point of view, it could only activate BVAS for a specific date and time, so having used it for the Presidential and National Assembly elections, it needed a reconfiguration for the Governorship and States Assemblies elections. While the Court of Appeal in Abuja refused an application by Peter Obi, presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP), to restrain INEC from reconfiguring BVAS machines ahead of the Governorship and States Assemblies elections and acceded to INEC’s request to reconfigure BVAS, the commission complained that the ruling had come far too late for properly reconfiguring the devices for conducting the election at the previously scheduled date, making a postponement necessary (Stears.co, 2023; Oluwafemi, 2023). In effect, INEC justified the postponement on the ground that it needed adequate time to back up the data stored on the over 176,000 BVAS machines from the election held on 25 February 2023, and reconfigure them for the Governorship and States Assemblies elections.



## **The Aftermath of Election Postponements and Implications for Nigeria's Electoral Process**

Indisputably, election postponements are not often warmly received by Nigerians. INEC's decisions to postpone elections always get many Nigerians disappointed and even more frustrated. Comparatively, in 2011, the parliamentary election was moved forward and in 2015, the presidential election was shifted up by two weeks with minimal agitations. On the contrary, the dying minutes rescheduling of the 2019 general elections by INEC came with great economic and financial losses, not just for the commission and stakeholders in the electoral process, but also for a vast majority of Nigerian voters. Though it may be difficult to ascertain the amount to the losses that this postponement must have brought about, it sure ran into billions of naira (Sunday, 2019; Okoosi-Simbine, 2019).

It becomes imperative at this juncture to discuss some socio-economic aspects, the categories of casualties and the losses incurred occasioned by the postponements of elections vis-a-vis its impacts on Nigeria's electoral process.

**Disruption of Voters' Plans:** Despite the introduction of a somewhat computerised voter's card with smart card readers to determine their authenticity, a voter is still allowed to vote only at the polling unit where he or she had registered. This usually involves making painstaking and expensive travel plans. Prior to the elections date, thousands of Nigerians, including the president himself, had travelled great distances to their localities to cast their votes at their polling units. Many others even put their businesses on hold in order to make the journeys. Many of them took leave from work, paid exorbitant fares to travel (and some paid for temporary accommodation) so that they could exercise their civic rights as enshrined in the nation's laws. Many booked flights and those who could not afford such 'luxury' had to endure the nightmare of Nigerian roads (Toromade, 2019). But with the postponement, all those inconveniences came to nought as the over 84 million registered voters across the nation woke up to learn that the election has been postponed for another week. This left a majority of the people in this category stranded at their various locations and left with three choices:

- (a) to return home and travel back for the elections which will incur extra cost;
- (b) to extend their stay at their current location which will also incur extra cost, risking their jobs;
- (c) to travel back and miss the vote altogether, robbing themselves of their basic and civic right.

It was a straight choice for many to travel back as they could not risk their jobs to vote and many were not able to repeat the journey.

**Ceremonial/Social Events:** In Nigeria, weekends, especially Saturdays, are used for ceremonial and traditional events such as marriages and burials. Obviously, to avoid clashing with the election dates, several persons had planned their weddings for 23 February 2019, invitation cards printed and dispatched, reminders sent, and advance payments made for venues and needed items; and preparations were on top gear. Then amidst all of these, elections that were originally planned for 16 February 2019 were postponed and rescheduled for that date, forcing the affected would-be couples to put their plans on hold for the elections and to begin preparations all over again while coping with devastating financial, emotional and



psychological trauma. This is dangerous, not because of its scale but numbers, as simple wedding event in Nigeria can easily involve 500 people because Nigerian ceremonies do not just involve the immediate families, it ripples through to various communities connected to that single family in many extended ways. Similarly, many burial plans were wrapped to the detriment of the bereaved families.

**Commercial/Economic Undertakings:** On election days in Nigeria nothing else happens; they are declared as work-free days by the government. One cannot even drive out of one's home for more than a few hundred metres except for persons on election duty or professionals on essential services. In effect, during elections, the nation's economic process is brought to a halt as all commercial activities are suspended to enable citizens cast their votes effectively. What this entails is that as a result of election postponement, markets across Nigeria were closed for two straight weekends as was the case in Onitsha, Anambra State and Aba, Abia State as well as other renowned commercial cities, with huge revenue losses (Obiejesi, 2019). The traders had to readjust their lives and finances around the new timetable to perform their roles in the electoral process.

The postponement imposed heavy financial losses on the economy as a whole resulting in a week-low fall in stocks. For instance, according to the Director General of Lagos Chambers of Commerce and Industry (LCCI), Muda Yusuf, the local economy lost about \$1.5 billion due to the election postponement. He emphasized that the partial and total shutdown of businesses, including the closure of borders "means the different outputs of the economy for a whole day are practically gone" (Sunday, 2019, p. 1). Again, as reported by Obisesan (2019), the postponement not only cost Nigerians and Nigeria a huge financial loss - pegged at ₦196 billion (\$542,185,333) - it also caused an embarrassment on a global scale.

Apart from the areas discussed above, the postponement of the elections also had far-reaching effects on a number of groups, organisations, and international bodies with negative implications for the electoral process. These include:

- **Electoral Commission:** Although it was INEC that postponed the election, the electoral umpire was also affected by its decision even as it incurred extra cost to deploy personnel and materials for the election. Indeed, transportation of materials, both sensitive and non-sensitive, to voting points spread between urban and rural areas, with varying degrees of difficulty in access. For example, in remote areas that do not have quality infrastructure, airlifting materials for Election Day was an ideal means of transportation. According to INEC (2019), this was not feasible, thus the materials were instead loaded on to trucks for transportation, which delayed delivery and further slowed the process. All these required huge sums of money. Although the commission had all the money - approximately 700 million US Dollars - approved for the elections, a greater part of the amount got wasted due to the sudden shift in election dates.

The postponement was damaging to the credibility of the electoral body as many Nigerians had expressed doubt about the competence of the INEC since the postponement, reasoning that, after all, INEC had four years to prepare for the election. It also had time to observe the glitches with logistics and take preventive steps earlier enough.



● **Political Parties:** All the political parties that presented candidates for the election were affected by the postponement. These parties, irrespective of their political strength, had spent huge sums of money to mobilize and deploy their agents for the 119,973 polling units across the country to monitor the electoral process as well as the conduct of the elections proper. All these went down the drain as the elections were postponed causing financial losses for the parties. Party chieftains and stalwarts expressed disappointment over INEC's last-minute decision to change election date. For instance, Iroanusi (2019, p. 2) quoted the National Chairman of All Progressives Congress (APC), Mr Adams Oshiomhole, as saying:

Political parties mobilised agents across the country and this came with a cost. Unlike INEC who can fall back on public treasury, political parties have to look for other resources to mobilise their agents. I am shocked, disappointed and disgusted. Why wait till 2 a.m. to postpone elections? Why wasn't it announced 48 hours before the due time? That way, observers and political parties would not have mobilised their agents. Why at 2 a.m. on the day of the election? One-week notice would have saved a lot to us who are the real players of the election and the cost we incurred.

Similar concerns were also echoed by many Nigerians who reacted to the development with frustration and disappointment with the commission, even as they questioned the credibility of the rescheduled elections and how well the results of the elections will be accepted when Nigerians eventually vote.

● **Security Agencies/Personnel:** On Election Day, security forces consisting of 8,000 special protection personnel and 4,030 non-security personnel drawn from Nigerian Police, Civil Defence Corp, the Nigerian Army, and Road Safety, among others were mobilised to maintain peace and order at various polling booths throughout the nation (Adamu, 2019). These officers were sent to various locations across the nation at the expense of the agencies to which they belong, and extending their stay or redeploying them involved additional costs for these agencies and personnel. Some of the officers who were drafted for the elections expressed dissatisfaction over the last-minute postponement of the elections, claiming that it would result in the non-payment or late payment of their allowances.

● **Media Houses:** Prior to the initial dates of the elections, several local and international media houses, such as the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio Africa as well as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and members of the international community had deployed hundreds of reporters, observers and monitors across the length and breadth of Nigeria to cover the elections (Iroanusi, 2019). The postponement implied an extra cost of withdrawing the deployed reporters or extending their stay as well as making them comfortable. In light of the fact that no eateries or restaurants would operate on Election Day some newsrooms are reported to have purchased an abundance of snacks and other items for their on-duty reporters in anticipation of the election, these costs would have to be incurred again on the new Election Day. In a personal note, international journalist, Paul Carsten, of the Reuters News Agency recounted his ordeal on Twitter (now X), as he was holed up in a "cockroach-infested hotel" in Daura, Kano State, his phone stolen, and the election he came to cover, postponed (Obiejesi, 2019).



- **Local and Foreign Observers:** Massive losses were incurred by numerous local and international observer groups, such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), Commonwealth, African Union (AU), National Democratic Institute (NDI), and International Crisis Group (IC), among others, which sent hundreds of personnel from various states across the nation to monitor and observe the elections (Iroanusi, 2019). These organisations had spent lots of money on staff preparation, reimbursement for round-trip airfare, lodging, meals, and other allowances, all of which turned out to be a waste. Consequently, arranging for their personnel to be present at the polls on the rescheduled dates resulted in additional costs for those organisations that could afford it.

From the preceding analysis it is discernible that organising and carrying out elections in Nigeria is a labour-intensive process. As a result, INEC, NGOs, and civil society organisations invested a great deal of time, resources, and labour in encouraging Nigerians to get involved in the political process and cast their ballots. Members of the Youth Corps were mobilised to various polling points nationwide as part of their civic duty to their country, and materials were transported to various INEC offices for distribution to various polling stations. Despite the numerous inputs used in the process of planning the elections, the Nigerian electorate were unable to exercise their right to the democratic process and vote for the candidate of their choice on the anticipated date (Clair & Williams, 2019).

Without a doubt, postponement of elections actually leads to some degree of voter apathy among registered Nigerian voters and deterred a great number from eventually participating in the elections, especially those that crossed states, and even international borders, to exercise their rights. Hence, the percentage of votes, *vis-à-vis* registered voters normally drops below expectations. Nigerians are often willing to vote, and so, take huge risks, endure high costs of participation but the frequent shift of elections have repressed that enthusiasm sharply. What this portends is the palpable fear that majority of registered voters would refuse to vote in subsequent elections as a large number of eligible voters have lost faith in the electoral commission and its commitment to the conduct of credible, free and fair elections. This in turn may undermine INEC's credibility and Nigeria's democracy. In a nut shell, the serial postponement of elections has done more than expose how ill-prepared INEC has been for election, as well as dampens the citizens enthusiasm for electoral participation.

## CONCLUSION

This paper assessed the frequencies and socio-economic effects of election postponements and its impacts on Nigeria's electoral process and democratisation agenda. From the analyses, the paper has established that logistics challenges, security inadequacies and court verdicts are the major causes of this phenomenon, as it affects INEC and the conduct of elections in the country. This is evident in the serial postponements of 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections. Although Section 24(2-5) of Nigeria's Electoral Act 2022 (As Amended) provides for postponement of elections, this is on the grounds of natural disasters, war, and other emergencies that may threaten the conduct of an election.

Certainly, to have justified the postponement of the 2019 general elections on the basis of logistical difficulties as a kind of national emergency provided for in the Electoral Act remains a hard sell to Nigerian voters. The commission has had years to work on the elections and



perfect its processes to accommodate all manner of hitches that could occur for such a gigantic project, so it is inexcusable that it has failed spectacularly at its job. Postponement of elections is no doubt a big blow to a nation that has been raring to go to the polls for months to elect leaders that will steer the course of the country for the next four years, and the ripple effect of the decision is staggering.

However, though, it may be argued that Nigeria's democracy is still fragile and growing, and that it was a fairer outcome to postpone elections in the interest of free and fair elections which should be appreciated as a learning curve rather than a setback, it should also be noted that the sudden postponement of elections have had adverse effects on socio-economic lives of the electorate. Each time an election is postponed, many Nigerians suffer losses either in businesses, works and personal relationships which quickly transform to apathy; others waste their transportation traveling home all in the name of election; many Ad-hoc staff comprising of majority of Youth Corp members often get stranded after traveling to their duty posts to perform their civic duties only to hear that the much anticipated elections were cancelled. Cost aside, the postponement often appeared ill-timed as was the case with 2019 elections which came just five hours ahead of commencement of the polls - at a time when a lot of international observers, journalists and stakeholders had arrived, checked into hotels and spent deeply into their budget.

The most immediate problem with the postponement is how badly it affects the integrity of the electoral process in Nigeria. The rescheduling of the polls has resulted to voter fatigue and apathy, especially among those residing outside their voting jurisdiction that must have to travel long distances to cast their votes. Such apathy may undermine INECs credibility and Nigeria's democratisation agenda. In the 2015 presidential elections, which were delayed by six weeks, only 33.5 per cent of eligible voters turned up to cast their ballots. The electorate's response to the postponement of the 2019 and 2023 elections were similar (turn out rate was less than 30 per cent) as people became disenchanted with the electoral process, a situation that does not bode well for the development of Nigeria's democracy.

Nevertheless, Nigeria must continue to move forward with each election, inch by inch, to assume the leading role in Africa that many believe it can fill. With another general elections scheduled for 2027 to sort out the mess that has been created by INEC's clumsy handling of its operations, one can only hope it does not jeopardise the entire process and set the nation's democratic journey back a few more years. Hence, INEC must develop anticipatory strategies to militate against sudden postponement of future elections. If the progress is sustained, the future holds much for the growth of democracy in the country.



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## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to forestall the scourge of election postponement and for INEC to improve upon the electoral process and attain credibility in its conduct of elections in Nigeria, the following recommendations are proffered:

- ✓ In preparation for future elections, the government and all bodies involved in the electoral process should work to ensure that adequate pre-emptive measures are adopted and implemented. Previous elections were postponed due to logistics and operational reasons. These are definitely reasons that can and should be avoided in future elections.
- ✓ The Nigeria's electoral process should be digitalized. In effect, e-voting should be encouraged to enable voters cast their votes at their convenience within the comfort of their homes. Provision should be made to enable persons who are physically absent from their registration locations, including those on election duty, to participate in the voting process. This will also enable Nigerians in the diaspora to be involved in the electoral process without traveling home. Moreover, this digital-based process has the potential of curtailing the delay in distributing electoral materials as well as preventing the possibility of street thugs or *area boys* from hijacking ballot boxes or burning votes due to insecurity.
- ✓ The Electoral Act 2022 should, as a matter of necessity, be amended to introduce e-registration as an alternative to the traditional waiting-in-line registration. Citizens should be automatically registered to vote when they turn 18 years. This entails that a system should be put in place to register new voters on a permanent and continuous basis and not just before every election. This method is not only cost effective but it also boosts the rate of voters' registration and consequent voting. This will be a forerunner to e-voting.
- ✓ INEC budgets should be presented to and approved by the National Assembly early enough, and funds provided at the right time to facilitate judicious execution of projects/programmes prior to the elections, such as: registration of voters, securing and distributing elections materials and prepare for unforeseen situations that may logistically result in elections postponement in the country.
- ✓ There is need for close collaboration between INEC and the various security agencies with respect to every activity proposed by the commission in the election timetable. This agreement would go a long way in allowing the security agencies to integrate election security into their plans with a view to making personnel available when and where desired.

It is believed that if the above-proffered recommendations are considered as learnable lessons that should be learnt and are practically studied and implemented ahead of the 2027 general elections, the somewhat emerging electoral tradition of election postponements in Nigeria and its attendant socio-economic losses will have become history.



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