



The Question Of Professionalism And Partisanship In Navigating Security Dynamics In Nigeria's Presidential Elections

Abstract

This study examined whether security agencies in Nigeria's presidential elections have acted professionally or partisanly. Through qualitative analysis of elections from colonial origins to the Fourth Republic, it demonstrated a consistent pattern of partisan deployment favouring incumbents. Security forces have systematically facilitated electoral fraud through ballot box theft, voter intimidation, selective law enforcement, and provision of false evidence for result manipulation. Drawing on Schedler's electoral authoritarianism framework, the analysis reveals how security agencies function as instruments of "garrison democracy," staging elections to legitimise predetermined outcomes rather than protecting democratic processes. This partisanship generates significant consequences, like increased public trust deficit, increased post-election violence, compromised judicial processes, which ultimately destroys "institutionalized uncertainty", a foundational principle of democracy. The study concluded that security sector reform, including independent oversight and reduction of executive influence, is essential for Nigerian democratic consolidation. Without critical structural change, elections will remain authoritarian performances rather than genuine democratic choice.

Keywords: Professionalism, Partisanship, Institutionalized Uncertainty, Democratic Consolidation, Militarized Elections, Electoral Authoritarianism, Neutrality.

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Introduction

Elections are the fulcrum of democratic governance, where the people freely elect leaders into different offices. This process should ordinarily happen peacefully, but elections have become the hot bed for violent conflict, some resulting in loss of property and death. In Nigeria, a nexus between the involvement of security agencies and the outcome of electoral processes will be illuminative and helpful in the proper understanding of presidential elections and conflict in Nigeria. A retrospective look at Nigerian elections, especially those for the office of the president reveals that elections have

been rapid catalysts of large-scale violence and provided an avenue for the manifestation of electoral malpractices (Olurode, 2013). Thus, making the use of security to protect election materials, lives and property, necessary (Onuoha, *et. al.*, 2020). The electoral commission does not have its own security apparatus, so it has always relied on the government security agencies, led by the Nigerian Police Force, to protect materials, secure personnel and ensure general safety during elections. To achieve this purpose, different security agencies have been involved at different stages of all elections in Nigeria. Some provide security for the officials,

accompanying them and materials, while others are posted to the polling units to ensure that order is maintained, others are stationed at critical places like the collation centre and declaration venue, to provide security cover and prevent unauthorised persons from having access. Officially these security agencies are to collaborate with and provide tactical support to the electoral commission. But it is observable that these security agencies operate within two spectra as the protector of democratic culture and electoral sanctity, or the potential manipulator of public will (Olurode, 2013).

This study interrogates the role of security agencies in presidential elections in Nigeria, to determine whether they have acted professionally or in a partisan manner. It will examine the circumstances that underpinned the introduction and use of security agencies in elections, the mandate and scope of these agencies, abuse of their roles and powers, and the implication on the outcome of election and democratic consolidation. The understanding of the evolving role of security agencies, the question of neutrality and professionalism, and their contribution to the legitimacy question that trails elections (presidential elections inclusive) is central to the fuller and better understanding of the knotted tensions inherent in presidential elections and conflict in Nigeria.

This is a qualitative study that deploys both primary and secondary evidence, analysed through the interpretivist lens, to ensure the better understanding of the nuanced context

under which these security agencies operated and were observed. Reliance will be on primary evidence like crime report data from security agencies, election monitoring reports from international and local Election monitoring groups, while documented data in journals, books and other materials will serve as secondary evidence.

This analysis is situated within the theoretical constructs of electoral authoritarianism and the deployment of state institutions. Andreas Schedler's framework of electoral authoritarianism elucidates how regimes maintain a facade of democracy by holding regular multiparty elections while systematically subverting their democratic essence. A key mechanism of this subversion is the instrumentalisation of state apparatus (particularly security agencies), to manipulate electoral processes and tilt the competitive playing field. This work applies this lens to Nigeria, arguing that the security forces have not been neutral arbiters but have been consistently used as strategic tools of electoral manipulation. Their deployment, often under the guise of maintaining order, serves to enforce a pre-determined outcomes, thereby sustaining a system of "garrison democracy" (Omotola, 2009: 196) where electoral contests are staged to legitimise power rather than to reflect the popular will. This theoretical perspective provides a critical foundation for understanding the systemic nature of security partisanship in Nigeria's electoral history.

Antecedents of Security involvement in Nigerian Elections

The involvement and use of security agencies in elections in Nigeria has colonial origin, where they were introduced to maintain order during the limited electoral experiences of the 1950s predating the country's independence (Joseph, 2003: 469). Thereafter, the security agencies were drafted to provide security in the early post-independence elections 1960-1966, due to the escalating political violence and prevalence of electoral malpractices at the polling units (James and Udem, 2023: 1-13). Specifically, the chaotic elections of the Western Region were a justification for the introduction of security into the electoral eco-system (Post and Vickers, 1973). While the early intervention and the resultant relative stability achieved in the region immediately after the elections must be credited to the security agencies, it must also be stated that early signs of abuse of power showed up at this time, as the security forces were unable to exhibit neutrality in the face of ethnic, regional and religious pressures (Osaghae, 1999).

On a positive note, immediately the conflict broke out, the security agencies reacted swiftly and protected government buildings, judicial and electoral officers and civil servants who had critical roles to play within the region, helping to restore relative peace, preventing total breakdown of law and order (Post and Vickers, 1973). They mounted checkpoints, undertook patrols and created buffer zones between warring parties in places like Ibadan. They also helped in the

evacuation of families from areas of violence, saving lives.

Conversely, some security agents have been accused of participating in the conflict directly, while others became instruments of political suppression, where they sided with those in government to molest their opponents, instead of displaying professionalism and neutrality (Post and Vickers, 1973). The Nigeria Police was accused of supporting Chief Akintola and his supporters, because of the Federal Government's support for him, against Chief Awolowo. The police violently dispersed rallies of the opposition parties, while offering protection to government-backed groups (Diamond, 2021). Selective investigation of crimes and partial enforcement of court orders made obvious the favouritism of the security agencies which resulted in a huge public distrust for the police, making containment of the protest difficult (Post and Vickers, 1973).

The tensions that emanated from the elections provided a justification for the sustained involvement of security in elections till date. This involvement had received commendation, as well as condemnation, with copious evidence to back both positions. However, a critical analysis will reveal that the involvement of security has derailed democratic consolidation more than it has protected or advanced it.

Military Rule and the Institutionalization of Security Dominance

The military take over which ended the First Republic delayed the

conduct of elections from 1966 till 1979, when civil rule was reinstated, through military-monitored elections. Expectedly, during that election, security was a paramount concern, thereby necessitating the large deployment of security agencies in the performance of roles critical to the success of the elections (Duyile and Ojo, 2021). The Obasanjo transition programme made a comprehensive engagement plan for the use of security personnel in the election, deploying them to all polling stations and collation centres. This practice persisted and was implemented during the inconclusive third republic under the Babangida Transition programme, where the security agencies played key roles before, during and after the elections. It was the security who provided the evidence of Bashir Tofa's ineligibility due to forged nomination details and Abiola's financial impropriety to the Federal Government in addition to the false report of widespread electoral malpractices, which were among the reasons canvassed in cancelling the elections (Babangida, 2025).

The 1999 election which was birthed by the Abdulsalami regime, after the death of Abacha, operated in a similar manner like other military-organised elections, relying on the extensive use of security operatives for election duties (Enemuo, 1999). The Military took a dual position as the government and security provider for the elections, and as was evident, became the planner and determinant of the entire outcome, effectively capable of, and in fact, controlling the outcome of the process. The security agencies, as

deployed by the military regimes, took a more central position in the conduct of elections, rather than the tangential role of providing security for material and people.

Continuity and Intensification of Security in the Fourth Republic

The return of democracy did not fundamentally change or reduce the involvement of security forces in elections. In fact, the fourth republic being midwifed by the military, took on the same form and format of other military-manned elections, with large deployment of security, leading to what many scholars have termed as the "militarisation of election" (Oluoha, 2001). Asides from the monitoring disposition of the military who were in government at that time, the many cases of violent acts and electoral malpractices, like ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, invasion of collation centres during collation and so on provided a basis for the increased mobilisation and use of heavily armed security personnel in elections.

Additionally, the fact that the 1999 Presidential election was won by Chief Obasanjo who was an ex-military head of state, who had engaged the security personnel heavily in 1979, the 2003 elections witnessed a large mobilization of security agencies during the elections (Ajayi, 2006: 57). The deployment and operation of the security were seen as being partisan and unprofessional, in favour of the ruling People's Democratic Party (Sule and Sambo, 2024). There was an increased use of the military during this election cycle, especially in the Niger Delta

region, possibly because of the rise of militancy in that area (Ani and Ojakorotu, eds., 2022).

In 2007 and 2011, there was increased use of security operatives in the conduct of the elections, despite the opposition directly accusing the security agencies of working in favour of the ruling party (Sule and Sambo, 2024). The 2007 election was largely condemned by both foreign and local observers as being below standard, and almost all the reports indicted the security agencies, as either, directly manipulating the results or aiding the manipulation (Adebayo and Omotola, 2007: 201). The declared winner Umaru Musa Yar'Adua admitted that the election that produced him was faulty and promised comprehensive reforms to strengthen the electoral and allied institutions and to ensure electoral sanctity (Adisa, 2018). Electoral violence within these election cycles was increasing in all fronts, requiring the use of security to prevent, curtail and quash it. Interestingly, it has been observed that in some instances, the security agencies were the catalysts of the violence they were later invited to solve, creating a vicious cycle that has made them indispensable to the electoral process (Aja, 2006).

There was heightened tension in 2015 stimulated mostly by the opposition, who threatened that an attempt to rig the election, will result in blood shed. This rhetoric was replied by the ruling party, and the entire country was very tensed (Ani and Ojakorotu, eds., 2022). Different fault lines like religion, ethnicity, region etc were manifestly at work exacerbating the

tension. This pre-election tension necessitated the massive deployment of security personnel across all the military and para-military agencies, to combat the perceived threat (Rosenau *et. al.*, 2015).

Mandate and Scope of Security Agencies in Elections

INEC issued a Code of Conduct pursuant to the powers enshrined in the Electoral Act 2022 empowering them to make regulations concerning the conduct of elections. The Code stipulates the distance that security personnel should stay at election venues, interaction with voters, intervention in violent situation and general demands for their professionalism and neutrality all through the stages of election. Despite these comprehensive regulations, the security agencies have been largely perceived as partisan, selective in enforcement and generally as tools of manipulation of election processes in favour of government or their patrons (Rosenau *et. al.*, 2015). The code recognises the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES), which is jointly chaired by the INEC Chairman and the National Security Adviser, both appointees of the President. Additionally, the constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria (1999 as amended) places the Police as the lead agency in internal security (which includes election duties). Other military and para-military agencies have been drafted in to support the police at different time. This Committee oversees the request, deployment, operation and logistics for the security personnel and

agencies used during the election. The challenge for this committee, especially when an incumbent President is seeking re-election, lies in their objectivity being that all of them are appointees of the President. This has stimulated the clamour for a change in many aspects, especially the process of appointing an INEC Chairman, the role of security agencies in election, which were some of the reforms recommended by the Uwais Panel (Basiru and Adesina, 2018; 207).

Furthermore, the security personnel were accused of devising various strategies to manipulate the results of elections to favour the ruling party or their respective clients, the strategies included but were not limited to partisan deployment and strategic posting, where officers aligned with politicians are posted to their preferred areas to 'help', while reducing or completely withdrawing security from opposition strong holds, to allow room for violence and contention, leading to cancellation of the results. Overall, security officials have been severally implicated in either direct or indirect acts of electoral malpractices like ballot box snatching, ballot stuffing, protection of rigging etc (Adebayo and Omotola, 2007; 201). According to the European Union Report (European Union, 2007), security personnel were concentrated in states controlled by the opposition parties, under the guise of maintaining order, but they were being used by the ruling party to manipulate elections. Using the security agencies, access was granted to agents of the ruling party, while agents of opposition parties were denied access, at the collation centres at

the Local Government Areas, while results were being changed (Adebayo and Omotola, 2007; 201). Police personnel have been documented physically assaulting election observers who were seen documenting electoral fraud, in addition to not allowing foreign and local observers access to collation centres, during collation (Oyadiran and Olorungbemi, 2015: 57). Members of intelligence gathering agencies have been accused of partisanship by deploying their capabilities to monitor activities of opposition parties, infiltration of opposition structure, strategic leaks of damaging information about opposition candidates, concoction of security reports to justify their operation and occupation of some areas before and during elections (Hakeem Onapajo and Dele Babalola, 2020: 367).

One of the main challenges for the security agencies is the fact that they are by their structure attuned to obeying executive commands, considering that all their leaders serve at the mercy and pleasure of the President, who determines their stay, and funding. So, during elections, it is a big challenge to attain fairness and professional conduct, when the President who is their Commander-in-Chief is on the ballot. In 2003, security personnel were seen providing cover for election materials being carted to undisclosed locations and returning them after hours to the collation centre, during the presidential elections in Anambra, Rivers, and Delta (Human Rights Watch, 2004). In 2007 and 2015, Rivers state witnessed the brazen use of security forces to manipulate elections, including ballot

box stuffing, voter intimidation, prevention of INEC staff from stopping electoral malpractice or cancelling elections where malpractice had been proved (Adibe, 2015: 7).

Implications for Electoral Outcomes and Democratic Consolidation

Security agencies conduct directly influences electoral outcomes and causes increased public trust deficit in elections. When security agencies brazenly undertake these acts of electoral fraud, it carries concomitant security challenges as the public trust and respect that should ordinarily avail them is reduced or exterminated. Selective enforcement of law and discretionary apprehension and prosecution of those who go contrary to the law, breed anger against the security agencies and led to civil unrest in some communities who wanted to know why one person has been apprehended while the other was allowed to go free (Adebayo and Omotola, 2007; 201). Voter suppression achieved through intimidation and violence by security personnel reduce turnout in opposition areas and artificially inflates ruling party margins. Security agencies facilitating electoral fraud through ballot box theft, result manipulation, and protection of rigging operations directly alter electoral outcomes and concomitantly make the beneficiary of the process unaccountable to the people and result in voter apathy in subsequent elections. All of these add to the already existing trust deficit among the electorates against government and makes the newly elected administration struggle from the beginning to build

trust. When the elected officials are certain that their security network, not the real votes of the electorate, is the determinant of political success, their loyalty will lie more to servicing those security structures than satisfying the yearnings of the people, leading ultimately to entrenchment of prebendalism in governance (Suberu, 2013).

From observation, security abuse during elections significantly contributes to post-election violence. When opposition parties and their supporters believe security forces manipulated results, they are more likely to reject outcomes and resort to protests or violence, as a means of self-help. This is so because they believe that the bias of the security agencies has changed the results of the election, without which they would have won (Ayobolu, 2025). In 2011, post-election violence which resulted in the loss of more than 800 lives and property worth millions of Naira, was linked to security bias, ethnic tensions and religious extremism. There is causal relationship between trust deficit in electoral institutions (including security bias and judicial inconsistency) and post-election violence (Aja, 2006).

The unprofessional and bias conduct of security agencies during elections affect even the judgement of courts on election matters. Since the courts are superior courts of record, they will rely more on documentary evidence like crime report and investigation reports from security agencies. Where they refuse to log the reports of electoral offences, or refuse to arrest the offenders, or undertake

selective enforcement and arrests, the facts before the court will not be helpful to the petitioner, as the burden and standard of proof which is required will be lacking (Adisa, 2018). The courts have reiterated in a plethora of cases that the standard of proof for electoral, malpractices is not the preponderance of evidence, but proof beyond reasonable doubt (Gidado and Ojukwu, 2003). Where the security agencies compromise at the point of election, the petitioner will be wanting in court as his testimony with that of the security agencies will differ on material facts, leading to a failure in the petition.

Political party development is also hampered by the sustained influence of security in elections, as political parties now spend more time and resources in cultivating security contacts and courting them in preparation for elections (Omotola, 2009: 196). This is done in preference to painstaking development of policy and programmes to be marketed to the electorate or developing and energising grassroots support structures. Apart from the negative effect that such improper relationship between the political class and the security, has on the outcome of the elections, it is generally unsafe for democratic consolidation, as politicians can instigate a military take-over when they achieve unfavourable election results, as witnessed in the first and second republics (Falola and Heaton, 2010).

Furthermore, the result of the consistent deployment of security agencies to elections and their recorded undue interference with the process and the ultimately, the outcome defeats a

key characteristic of democracy, which is institutionalised uncertainty (Przeworski, 1999). This concept stipulates that democracy is a system of governance where people and parties trust the process of elections, accepting defeat if they lose, knowing that they can contest again and win. The unpredictability of the result is the strength, not weakness of democracy, as it allows people to trust that the process of election can cause anyone to emerge through the votes of the electorates. But with security-influenced elections, the predictability is certain (Ayobolu, 2025), especially for the incumbent, making the election a mere charade. When participants and observers are certain that the outcome of an election will not be reflective of the will of the people, they resort to self-help in the enforcement of the will of the people, which ultimately results in loss of human lives and property. Democratic credibility is seriously eroded under this atmosphere, derailing democratic consolidation. In the Nigerian experience, the incumbent has always had the security behind them, except in 2015, when the incumbent lost. Even the loss has been attributed to 'betrayal' by some security chiefs, due to the interplay of two very strong factors- ethnicity and religion (Adibe, 2015: 7).

Additionally, the nature of institutionalised uncertainty is further derailed by electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2013), where regular multiparty elections are held, but the apparatus of government is deployed to determine the winners. With the use of security, the elections are staged-managed to achieve the set goal, while

trying to maintain the veneer of democratic credibility. Schedler identifies two critical dimensions of electoral authoritarianism, being the manipulation of electoral processes and the strategic use of state resources to tilt competitive playing fields. Both dimensions are at play in the Nigerian political spaces, using primarily the security agencies to enforce the pre-determined result.

In conclusion, while a counter perspective steeped in reality that, the deployment of security is to protect the election personnel, materials and the voters, from attackers, who seek to derail democracy by unduly influencing the elections, this study clearly demonstrates that the role of security agencies in Nigeria's presidential elections has been overwhelmingly partisan, systematically undermining the very democratic processes they are sworn to protect. From the foundational crises of the First Republic to the "militarized" elections of the Fourth Republic, a consistent pattern has emerged, where security forces have been deployed as tools of incumbents to intimidate opponents, facilitate fraud, and ultimately determine electoral outcomes. This partisanship has significant implications, among which are increased public trust deficit, escalated violent conflict, compromised judicial redress, and stunted political party development. The result is the decimation of what Przeworski identifies as "institutionalized uncertainty" (Przeworski, 1999: 34), which is the foundational principle that makes democracy a system of genuine choice. To break this cycle, mere

electoral reforms are insufficient. Future efforts must confront the structural deficiency of professionalism by the security agencies and instituting robust, independent oversight systems that punish culpable officers and insulate election security management from executive manipulation. Until the security apparatus is decisively uncoupled from partisan politics, Nigeria's elections will remain a theatre of authoritarian practice, not an expression of democratic will.

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