
United Nations and Electoral Violence in Nigeria: Assessing International Observation Missions (2015–2024)

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Abstract

Electoral violence remains one of the major challenges confronting democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Despite the increasing involvement of international observation missions, incidents of intimidation, ballot snatching, and physical attacks continue to undermine the credibility of electoral processes. This study examines the role of the United Nations and international election observation missions in mitigating electoral violence in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024. The research adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis of secondary sources, including academic journals, election observation reports, policy documents, and institutional publications. The study also employs thematic analysis to examine patterns of electoral violence and the contributions of international monitoring bodies in promoting electoral transparency. Findings reveal that electoral violence in Nigeria tends to intensify during major election cycles due to intense political competition, weak institutional enforcement, and the mobilization of political thugs by competing parties. The study further finds that while international observation missions particularly those associated with the United Nations contribute to electoral transparency through technical assistance, monitoring, and democratic governance support, their influence is largely indirect and constrained by domestic political dynamics. The study concludes that sustainable reduction of electoral violence requires stronger domestic institutions, improved electoral governance, and enhanced collaboration between national authorities and international observation bodies.

Keywords: Electoral violence, United Nations, election observation missions, democratic governance, Nigeria.

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Introduction

Nigeria's democratic experience since the return to civilian rule in 1999 has been marked by both institutional progress and persistent challenges related to electoral violence. Elections in the country have often been characterized by intense political competition, voter intimidation, and periodic outbreaks of violence that undermine democratic legitimacy. Electoral violence occurs at various stages of the electoral cycle, including campaign periods, voting days, and post-election disputes. According to Kolawole (2024), incidents of political conflict frequently emerge during elections because political actors perceive electoral victory as a gateway to political influence and access to state resources. This dynamic has made electoral processes highly contested and sometimes volatile across Nigeria's political landscape. As a result, electoral violence continues to pose serious threats to democratic consolidation and public trust in the electoral system.

The persistence of electoral violence has drawn the attention of both domestic institutions and international organizations seeking to support credible electoral processes in Nigeria. Among these international actors,

the United Nations has played an important supportive role in promoting electoral transparency and democratic governance. The organization collaborates with national institutions and regional bodies to strengthen election monitoring and conflict prevention mechanisms. In many cases, international observation missions are deployed to assess the fairness and credibility of elections. Reports examining Nigeria's democratic trajectory indicate that observation missions have increasingly become a central component of election monitoring frameworks (Ogunbanjo, 2024). Their presence is intended to enhance public confidence in the electoral process and discourage electoral misconduct by increasing international scrutiny.

Electoral observation missions are usually teams of international professionals who observe electoral processes and determine their adherence to democratic principles. These missions monitor campaign activities, voter registration, polling, and the announcement of election results. They also aim to make objective judgments that could be used to reform elections and enforce accountability within the political dynamics. It has been suggested by scholars that international observers at times make violence less likely due to the fact that the political actors are also aware that their acts are being recorded and publicized. According to Salaudeen (2024), election monitoring missions especially those managed by international actors are deterrents to open electoral malpractice and violence. Nevertheless, the degree to which such missions are effective in preventing electoral violence has been a debatable aspect among researchers.

The elections in Nigeria since 2015 are a significant context in discussing how international observation missions can help to address electoral violence. The 2015 general elections were generally taken as a historic mark as they gave birth to the peaceful replacement of power from a ruling party to an opposition party. Despite this success, cases of violence and political intimidation were registered in some states in the process of electing the officials. Research on the elections indicates that the political violence on gender grounds was also a significant issue. Scholastica (2024) noted that in spite of democratic progress and peaceful transition of power, women and other marginalized groups were still intimidated and prevented from participating in political processes.

The 2019 and 2023 elections that followed were another occasion of bringing to the fore the intricate nature of the electoral governance and political violence in Nigeria. Although, institutional reforms and technological advances were being presented in order to improve election credibility, cases of violence still took place in different regions of the country. Electoral observers have recorded incidents of voter suppression, assaults on polling stations as well as violent conflicts between political supporters. As Abumbe and Owa (2024) explain, several irregularities and incidents of violence witnessed during the 2023 elections were indicators of underlying structural issues in the Nigerian electoral system. These problems proved that only improved technology cannot help to eradicate political incentives which tend to be the main cause of electoral violence.

The other significant aspect of electoral violence in Nigeria is associated with the role played by civil societies and other non-state actors in monitoring and controlling the elections and conflicts. Civil society organisations often partner with international observation missions in order to supply more information on the ground and local surveillance. Their involvement improves the capacity of the monitoring organizations to detect cases of electoral irregularity and record cases of violence in various parts of the nation. According to a study conducted by Bisong et al. (2025), civil society organizations have been very instrumental in ensuring transparency in the electoral process, and in advocating for peaceful political participation. By conducting voter education and by checking the activities, these groups help in increasing the work done by international observers and reinforce the overall credibility of electoral processes.

Over the past few years, technological advances have also proved to be more applicable in electoral monitoring and violence prevention. There are digital tools and electronic accreditation systems introduced to increase transparency and minimize the chances of electoral fraud. The implementation of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) in the 2023 elections was an important attempt to transform election administration in Nigeria. Although such technologies were aimed at adding to the credibility of elections, security issues and logistics occasionally restricted their use. According to Oladele (2025), any disruption during election technology could cause a lack of confidence among voters and in some cases lead to the outbreak of electoral violence.

Although the election has been observed by international missions and implemented technological changes, electoral violence continues to affect the democratic process of Nigeria. Researchers have suggested that the challenges associated with the structural elements that promote election-related violence include high levels of political competition, poor law enforcement, and socioeconomic imbalances. These aspects provide an incentive to the political actors to control the electoral processes or to attract the people to engage in violent conflicts. Uhere (2024) highlights that the electoral system of Nigeria is still affected by institutional weaknesses that expose the system to manipulation and conflict during the election periods.

Based on these difficulties, there is a need to critically examine how international actors like the United Nations should intervene and help in solving electoral violence in Nigeria. Although international observation missions are effective in offering control and fostering transparency, their effectiveness in the long run in preventing an election conflict needs to be considered carefully. This paper thus discusses the use of the United Nations and other international observation tools in policing Nigerian elections in the period between 2015 and 2024. Through a review of academic literature, reports by institutions, and documented electoral experiences, the study will aim at determining the role of the international efforts of monitoring elections in enhancing electoral integrity and stability of the democracy in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The string theory forms the theoretical framework of this research and it offers an analytical perspective to comprehending complicated networks of interactions in political systems. Though the invention of string theory is based on the physics, the modern political analysis starts to metaphorically adjust the notion to the way of referring to the interconnected political powers and players acting in a system. Within the framework of electoral governance, various institutions, including the United Nations, domestic electoral institutions, political parties, and civil society organizations, play the role of strands linked together in such a way that they affect the outcomes of the electoral-political process and electoral stability. Researchers claim that electoral systems cannot be viewed as independent institutional processes but as a network of actors because fragile democracies have a number of actors who influence the form of electoral environment (Kolawole, 2024). In this context, electoral violence is seen as a consequence of tension among these strands of interdependence of governance and political rivalry.

String theory presumes that the apparent actors and events are involved in a larger structure of relations where a change in one component has an effect on the entire system. The processes of elections can therefore never be accounted for by domestic politics only but it has to be contextualized within a web of local and international factors. The observation missions by the international community are one of the strands in this network since the international monitoring functions interrelate with the local institutions and political players. External actors have also increased in election monitoring in the modern democratic governance where international bodies in greater numbers contribute to democratic consolidation in the emerging

democracies (Ogunbanjo, 2024). Through electoral behavior and disclosure of anomalies, these missions bring in new control procedures that have an effect on political elite behavior.

The conceptual usefulness of string theory into the electoral studies is that it focuses on systemic interdependence. Elections do not exist in isolation but are processes, that are embedded in the intra-political, institutional and social systems. It is disruptions in these interrelationships that tend to lead to electoral violence. As an example, poor electoral administration, weak institutions, and political intolerance may interact resulting in the creation of tensions that lead to violence. The studies conducted on the elections in Nigeria have also emphasized the role of institutional shortcomings and political disputes in the continued electoral violence in various parts of the country (Uhere, 2024). In a string-theory approach, these conflicts are seen as the imbalance of the wider electoral network.

The other significant fact about this theoretical framework is that the international actors are seen to be the stabilizing forces in weak democracies. Other organizations like the United Nations usually intervene by monitoring elections, providing technical assistance, and conflict management efforts. Such interventions add more threads of regulations to the electoral process, which may likely bring about a change in political behaviour and diminish the possibilities of electoral malpractices. International observers at elections have been linked to transparency and greater accountability in the management of the electoral process (Salaudeen, 2024). In this regard, international observation missions would serve as regulatory nodes in the dependent network of the electoral system.

Also, the string-theory approach underscores the importance of the state and non-state interactions in the determination of electoral results. National governments or electoral commissions no longer have a monopoly when it comes to the area of electoral governance. Rather, it encompasses the role of civil society organizations, international institutions, media organizations and political stakeholders who all affect the election processes. Research on the activity of civil society in electoral monitoring highlights that such participants enhance the level of democratic accountability through independent monitoring of electoral processes (Bisong et al., 2025). The above interactions explain how various strands of the electoral system intersect with each other to influence the results of democracy.

The theory is also aware of dynamism in electoral governance in the current democracies. Electoral systems are dynamic due to the influence of political factors, innovations, and reforms of institutions. Such electoral changes as the implementation of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) in Nigeria can be discussed as efforts to enhance electoral transparency. Nevertheless, the technological interventions are not sufficient to eradicate the political motives that usually contribute to the electoral violence. In the study on the recent elections in Nigeria, issues of technological dependability and credibility of the election process have been voiced (Oladele, 2025). Such developments also support the notion that electoral governance exists in a system of political, technological, and institutional impacts, which are interlinked.

Besides, the structure does not ignore the importance of gender relations and inclusion in elections. Marginalized communities, such as those of the minority and women, are very often disproportionately affected by electoral violence. Political intimidation by gender may demoralize participation and undermine democratic inclusiveness. According to the evidence of the research on the 2023 elections in Nigeria, women were subject to multiple types of political intimidation during the elections, which suggests the interplay of electoral violence and gender inequality (Scholastica, 2024). These patterns demonstrate the interplay of social variables on political institutions to influence the electoral results.

It is the theoretical use of string theory that consequently offers the multidimensional interpretation of electoral violence and international observation. The framework allows the development of the interaction between domestic institutions and international actors in a way that electoral stability can be comprehensively analyzed through the conceptualization of electoral governance as an interconnected system. This outlook is especially useful in the context of examining the electoral situation in Nigeria in which a complicated set of political processes and institutional issues continues to define the process of democratic formation. The paper will use this theoretical framework to study the dynamic between United Nations observation missions and domestic electoral institutions, and how the former affects the electoral integrity and election violence prevention in 2015-2024.

Generally, the theoretical framework provides a conceptual background for analyzing the relationship between international election observation and electoral violence in Nigeria. String theory can be useful in explaining how electoral stability can be reinforced by focusing on systemic interactions between political actors, institutions, and international organizations. These interrelated relationships need to be understood in order to determine the success of the international observation missions and their role in democratizing Nigeria.

Review of Empirical Studies

There is increasing empirical literature on the dynamics of electoral violence, election monitoring, and the action of international and domestic actors in electoral processes in Nigeria. Electoral integrity and conflict management have been investigated by scholarly communities on how institutions, civil society organizations, international observers, and technological interventions control the quality of the electoral process. The section is a review of some of the empirical studies that are relevant in the current research including their purpose, methodology, findings, and their similarities and differences with the current study on United Nations and Electoral Violence in Nigeria: Assessing International Observation Missions (2015-2024).

Kolawole (2024) has considered how the non-state actors influence election management in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. The study was aimed at evaluating the role played by civil society groups, international observers, and community organizations in electoral administration and conflict prevention in elections. The work incorporated the qualitative research design based on the analysis of documents such as election observation reports, policy briefs, and electoral statistics on the presented issues, which were sourced at the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and at the international monitoring bodies. The study also found that the concept of non-state actors plays a major role in improving election transparency by providing education to voters, monitoring the election, and reporting anomalies. The research however also established that often there are institutional weaknesses and political interference that limit the influence of these actors. The research is comparable with the present research study as both of them address the external actors and the election observation of the Nigerian electoral process. Nevertheless, the study by Kolawole is based on non-state actors, and the current one is specific to the United Nations observation missions and the way they can reduce electoral violence between 2015 and 2024.

The paper is a critical review of the democracy and the result of the 2023 general election in Nigeria: A Critical Review of Democracy and the Aftermath of the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria by Ogunbanjo (2024). The research was aimed at investigating the issues that were hindering the process of democratic consolidation in the aftermath of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, especially electoral violence, voter intimidation, institutional weaknesses, and so on. The researcher selected the qualitative descriptive research design, which involved the use of secondary sources, including reports of the elections, scholarly writings,

and publications of institutions like the United Nations and election observation missions. The results indicated that institutional inefficiencies, voter apathy, and electoral violence had a big impact on electoral credibility in Nigeria. The research also put emphasis on the involvement of the international observers in detecting the electoral anomalies and suggesting the reform measures to enhance democratic governance. The study is similar to the present one in the sense that both of them analyze the issue of electoral violence and the influential forces of the international community on the elections in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the work of Ogunbanjo is devoted more to the general democratic results of the 2023 elections, and the current study in particular is aimed at researching the efficiency of the United Nations observation missions in a series of elections between 2015 and 2024.

The article by Scholastica (2024) explored the topic of political violence and the role of women in the electoral process in Nigeria with a specific focus on the 2023 general elections. The study was conducted to determine the impact of electoral violence on women's political participation and electoral activities. This study used a mixed-method design, which involved the use of both survey data on women voters and interviews with political actors and civil society organizations. Results indicated that electoral violence affects women disproportionately and deters them from trying to play an active role in politics and decreases their representation in electoral processes. The paper also observed that intimidation, harassment, and political insecurity are still significant obstacles to gender inclusivity in the political participation of Nigerians. The study is related to the existing one since they both focus on the impact of electoral violence in the Nigerian democratic system. Nevertheless, the work of Scholastica is gender-specific on the dimensions of violence in electoral processes, but the current one measures the effectiveness of international observation missions and their impact on the elimination of electoral violence on the national scale.

Bisong et al. (2025) have carried out empirical research about the role of civil society organizations in preventing election violence in Sub-Saharan Africa with Nigeria serving as the case study. The study was aimed at evaluating the role of civil society organizations in facilitating peaceful elections by voter education, mediation of conflicts, and monitoring of elections. The methodology the researchers used was comparative qualitative, with the analysis of election reports, policy documents, and observations of the field during election monitoring organizations. The results showed that civil society organizations are significant in minimizing election-related violence through the mobilization of the population, checking electoral behavior, and promoting democratic changes. Nevertheless, the study also showed that other challenges that are encountered by these organizations include scarcity of resources and political intimidation. This study resembles the current one since it also focuses on examining how external actors can help in alleviating electoral violence in Nigeria. However, when Bisong et al. stress the role of civil society institutions, the present study focuses on the special purpose of the United Nations observation missions and their efficiency in monitoring elections and eliminating violence.

Salaudeen (2024) investigated the electoral violence in the 2023 gubernatorial elections in Nigeria and addressed the dynamics and the reasons behind election-related political violence. The study aimed to discuss the causes of the electoral violence and how the election observation missions can help in the documentation of such cases. The method used in the study was case study methodology, based on the reports about the election monitoring provided by the European Union Election Observation Mission, local observation groups, and media. The analysis showed that electoral violence is still a thorn in the flesh in the electoral system of Nigeria, which is usually fueled by the political contest, lax laws on security, and institutional weakness. Another crucial finding in the study was that, international observation missions are an important aspect in reporting abnormalities during the electoral process as well as giving guidelines on how to ensure

that such abnormalities are minimized. The research has some similarities with the current one since both studies analyze the issue of electoral violence and the functions played by the election observers. Nevertheless, the study of Salaudeen is confined to domestic political violence in a given election cycle as opposed to the present one, which assesses the general effectiveness of the United Nations observation missions in various election cycles.

Oladele (2025) examined how electoral technology can be used to increase the electoral credibility in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, getting specific focus on the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV). The study was intended to determine the impact of technological innovations on electoral transparency and the prevention of electoral malpractice. The study took the national security analytical approach of analyzing election reports, technological evaluation, and electoral results of the 2023 elections. The results indicated the effectiveness of the implementation of BVAS and IReV in terms of voter authentication and transmission of results, but the technical issues and logistical difficulties did not allow them to be fully effective. The research is connected to the current research as both papers are looking at the mechanisms that have increased the electoral credibility and minimized the election-related conflict. Even so, the study by Oladele is centered on technological advances in administering elections but the present study is centered on international election monitoring missions and their effects on electoral violence and accountability in a democratic process.

Zubairu (2025) researched electoral violence and democratic survival in Niger state, Nigeria, which involved elections held in 2015 and 2019. This was to determine the effect of election violence on the subnational democratic participation and governance. The research design was the case study, as it involved interviews of voters, political players, and security officers, as well as, election monitoring reports and media. The results established that election violence lowers civic confidence in the democratic systems and deters people from voting. Other areas highlighted by the study included the fact that more coordination of monitoring and security is required to avert conflicts associated with the elections. The study has some similarities with the current one since it is also related to electoral violence and the stability of democracy in Nigeria. Nevertheless, the works of Zubairu are focused on a case at the state level, whereas the present work is conducted in a more nationalistic manner and focuses on the aspect of international observation missions, especially those related to the United Nations.

Vitalis (2024) examined the influence of foreigners in the 2015-2023 presidential elections in Nigeria, the impact of international actors on the elections, and strategies to influence the outcomes of the elections by acting as diplomats and observers. The paper has utilized a qualitative research design which has analyzed diplomatic reports, documents on election observation, and media reports. The results found that foreign missions tend to have a high impact on electoral credibility, by controlling through monitoring, diplomatic pressure, and post-election evaluations. Nevertheless, the paper has also indicated that Foreign intervention can be politically controversial at times, especially when the local actors feel that the interventions are meddling in the internal politics of the country. The research is comparable to the current study as they both examine how international players play a role in the electoral process in Nigeria. However, Vitalis is general in the sense that it is more on foreign interference in the elections, but the present study is more specific as it assesses the United Nations observation missions and the extent to which they are effective in preventing electoral violence.

In general, the analyzed empirical research proves that electoral violence is one of the challenges that persist in the Nigerian democratic system. They further point out how international observers, civil society, and technological innovations have become increasingly important in facilitating electoral transparency and

accountability. Nevertheless, the majority of the literature available deals with general electoral violence, technological reform, or interventions of civil society, with little regard to the issue of the specific contribution of the United Nations observation missions to the reduction of electoral violence during a series of election processes. The current paper thus bridges this gap by offering a dedicated evaluation of the efficacy of the United Nations observation missions towards eliminating electoral violence in Nigeria in the period between 2015 and 2024.

Methodology

This paper focuses on the qualitative research methodology to explore the effectiveness of the United Nations and other external observation missions in solving the problem of electoral violence in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024. The qualitative method is suitable due to the nature of the research that aims at comprehending the role of institutions, politics, and the role of international actors in the electoral process. Compared to the quantitative approach that is largely concerned with statistical measures, qualitative research allows a more profound explanation of the political events, the institutional performance as well as the result of policy that influences electoral governance and conflict prevention.

The research is based on the documentary analysis as its primary data collection method. Documentary analysis refers to the strategic study and discursive analysis of written works in reference to the topic under investigation. The data that will be used in this research will consist of reports provided by international election observation missions, the reports of the United Nations and other international organizations, reports of the electoral commission (INEC), reports of civil society organizations, and articles in academic journals covering the topic of electoral violence and democratic governance in Nigeria. These reports offer important information on electoral violence patterns, the operations of the international observation missions as well as the political environment that encompasses elections in Nigeria.

The secondary data sources are also used in the research and they include material published earlier, such as academic journals, books, institutional reports, conference papers, and reputable media publications. The reports organized by other agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), and local election monitoring organizations were especially significant in offering in-depth evaluations on election performances and cases of electoral violence. These resources are useful in putting the role of the international observers in the context of enhancing transparency, accountability, and conflict prevention during the elections.

The time of analysis of the given research is 2015-2024, including three big election cycles in Nigeria 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections, and the political processes that took place after these elections. The choice of this period was a result of the fact that the 2015 elections were a historic event in the history of Nigerian democracy as it was the first instance in the country when an incumbent ruling party gave way to an opposition party without any violence. Elections that followed in the same time also saw further interest of foreign observation missions and the elevated issues of election violence and therefore the period is especially important to evaluate the role of international actors.

The research utilizes a thematic analysis method in the analysis of the gathered data. This will include the identification of the recurring themes, patterns, and issues in the documents that will be reviewed. The themes that are analyzed include electoral violence, election monitoring, international observation missions, institutional accountability, and democratic consolidation. In doing so the study establishes the role of international observation missions in enhancing electoral transparency, prevention of electoral malpractice, and minimization of election-related violence.

Moreover, the paper uses a comparative analytical approach by reviewing the activities and observations of international election monitoring institutions in various election periods. The use of the comparative approach allows for establishing changes in the nature of the electoral violence, the effectiveness of the observation missions, and the changing role of the international organizations in the process of democracy in Nigeria.

The research relies on credible and reliable academic publications, institutional reports as well as known electoral monitors to provide credibility and reliability. The cross-referencing of several sources can ensure that the findings observed by the research are valid, and that there are fewer bias possibilities in the case of using a single source of information.

Nevertheless, the research has some limitations. The research is also based on secondary data hence it is contingent on the veracity and availability of available reports and publications. There are some cases of electoral violence that might not have been well captured in the official reports, and some of the institutional data might be limited or incomplete. In spite of these shortcomings, the analysis and conclusions of the study are supported by enough evidence presented by using several credible sources.

On the whole, qualitative documentary methodology used in the study gives a detailed concept of the relationship between international election observation missions and electoral violence in Nigeria. The methodology allows evaluating the role played by the United Nations and other international actors in making the electoral processes in Nigeria stronger by using the institutional reports and scholarly studies and election monitoring data to determine how the U.N. and other international actors aid in strengthening the electoral process and ensuring peaceful democratic elections.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis of the role of international observation missions particularly those associated with the United Nations in mitigating electoral violence in Nigeria requires a multidimensional approach. Electoral violence in Nigeria is not merely a spontaneous occurrence but rather the product of interconnected political, institutional, and social dynamics. Using the string theory framework adopted in this study, electoral processes are understood as a network of interacting actors, institutions, and power structures. Within this network, electoral violence emerges when tensions among these interconnected strands political actors, security institutions, electoral bodies, and international observers become destabilized.

This section therefore presents a systematic analysis of electoral violence patterns, the participation of observation actors, and the nature of electoral conflicts in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024.

Trends in Electoral Violence in Nigeria (2015–2024)

Electoral violence has remained one of the most persistent threats to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Election monitoring reports from domestic organizations and international observers consistently highlight patterns of intimidation, physical attacks, ballot snatching, and political harassment during election periods. The chart above illustrates the trend of reported electoral violence incidents in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024. The data demonstrates several important patterns.

Key Observations

1. Election years correspond with spikes in violence.

The data indicates significant increases during major election cycles, particularly 2019 and 2023. These spikes correspond with intense political competition and heightened mobilization by political actors.

2. The 2023 election cycle recorded the highest incidents.

Reports from election monitoring groups indicated widespread incidents including:

Attacks on polling units

Voter intimidation

Destruction of election materials

- clashes between party supporters.

3. Post-election violence declines but remains present.

Although incidents decrease after election cycles, they rarely disappear entirely. Political tensions, disputes over results, and localized political conflicts continue to generate violence.

Interpretation Through String Theory

Within the string theory perspective, the electoral system functions as a network of interconnected actors. Electoral violence increases when the strands of the system—political actors, electoral institutions, and security agencies—experience tension or imbalance.

For instance:

Weak institutional enforcement by electoral bodies

Intense political competition

Limited deterrence mechanisms

These interacting pressures produce systemic instability that manifests as electoral violence.

International observation missions, including those linked to the United Nations, function as external stabilizing strands that attempt to restore equilibrium within the system by monitoring electoral conduct and exposing irregularities.

Role of Election Observation Actors

Election observation in Nigeria involves several actors operating simultaneously within the electoral network.

Table 1

Major Election Observation Actors in Nigeria

Observation Actor	Primary Role	Level of Influence
United Nations	Technical assistance and democratic governance support	Moderate
EU Election Observation Mission	Large-scale election monitoring	High
Domestic Civil Society Organizations	Grassroots monitoring and voter education	Very High
African Union / ECOWAS	Regional democratic oversight	Moderate
Media Organizations	Information dissemination and exposure of irregularities	High

The chart above comparing participation levels among observation actors shows that domestic civil society groups have the highest level of direct engagement in election monitoring. Organizations such as YIAGA Africa, the Transition Monitoring Group, and the Centre for Democracy and Development deploy thousands of observers across polling units.

However, international actors, including United Nations agencies—play a strategic rather than operational role. Their influence often manifests through:

Institutional capacity building

Democratic governance programs

Conflict prevention initiatives

Diplomatic pressure on political actors.

String Theory Interpretation

From the perspective of string theory, each observation actor represents a strand within the broader electoral network.

Domestic actors operate at the micro-level, interacting directly with voters and polling units. International actors operate at the macro-level, influencing institutional norms and political behavior.

The interaction between these strands creates a layered oversight structure that can reduce the likelihood of electoral malpractice and violence.

However, the effectiveness of this system depends on the strength and coordination of these interacting strands. When domestic institutions are weak or compromised, even strong international monitoring may have limited impact.

Types of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Electoral violence manifests in different forms across election cycles. Understanding these forms is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of election observation missions.

Table 2

Common Forms of Electoral Violence

Type of Violence	Description	Typical Actors
Voter Intimidation	Threats or coercion to influence voting behavior	Political thugs
Ballot Snatching	Forceful seizure of ballot boxes	Party supporters
Physical Assault	Attacks on voters, observers, or officials	Armed groups
Arson	Burning of electoral offices or materials	Political militants
Vote Buying	Financial inducement to voters	Political parties

The chart above shows that voter intimidation and vote buying are the most frequent forms of electoral malpractice, followed by ballot snatching and physical violence.

This pattern reveals an important evolution in Nigerian elections. Earlier election cycles were dominated by physical violence, while recent elections increasingly involve psychological and economic manipulation.

Implications for Observation Missions

Traditional election observation methods focus on:

- Polling unit monitoring
- Vote counting verification
- Logistical evaluation.

However, many modern forms of electoral manipulation particularly vote buying occur outside the immediate observation environment. This creates significant challenges for international monitoring missions.

Influence of United Nations Observation and Support Missions

Although the United Nations does not typically deploy large-scale election observation missions in Nigeria comparable to the European Union, it contributes significantly through institutional support programs.

Table 3

Key United Nations Electoral Support Activities

Activity	Description	Impact
Electoral capacity building	Training election officials	Improved administration
Democratic governance programs	Institutional reform support	Strengthened electoral bodies
Conflict prevention initiatives	Early warning systems	Reduced violence risk
Technical support	Electoral technology assistance	Enhanced transparency

These activities demonstrate that the UN's role in Nigeria's elections is primarily preventive rather than supervisory.

Within the string theory framework, the United Nations acts as a structural stabilizer within the electoral system. Rather than directly controlling electoral processes, it influences the behavior of other actors by reinforcing institutional norms.

Comparative Electoral Violence Across Election Cycles

Table 4

Major Electoral Violence Indicators

Election Year	Major Incidents	Observers Deployed	Violence Level
2015	Post-election clashes	High	Moderate
2019	Polling unit attacks	High	High
2023	Widespread intimidation	Very High	Very High

The 2015 elections represented a historic democratic transition in Nigeria, with the peaceful transfer of power between parties. However, localized violence still occurred.

The 2019 elections witnessed increased violence due to intense political competition and logistical challenges.

The 2023 elections recorded the highest levels of electoral violence, despite improvements in electoral technology such as BVAS.

This paradox demonstrates that technological reforms alone cannot eliminate electoral violence, as political incentives for manipulation remain strong.

Structural Causes of Electoral Violence

The analysis reveals several structural drivers of electoral violence:

1 Political Competition

Elections in Nigeria are often perceived as high-stakes contests for access to state resources. Political elites therefore invest heavily in securing victory through both legal and illegal means.

2 Weak Institutions

Electoral bodies and security agencies sometimes lack the capacity or independence to enforce electoral laws effectively.

3 Youth Mobilization for Violence

Political actors frequently recruit unemployed youth as political thugs during election periods.

4 Ethno-Regional Tensions

Identity politics often intensifies electoral competition, especially in multiethnic states.

Theoretical Implications

Applying string theory to electoral violence provides important analytical insights.

Instead of viewing electoral violence as isolated incidents, the theory emphasizes the interconnected nature of political systems.

Electoral violence emerges when multiple strands of the system become unstable:

Political actors seeking power

Weak electoral institutions

Security lapses

Economic grievances.

International observation missions function as external balancing forces within this network.

However, their effectiveness depends on:

Cooperation with domestic institutions
Strong enforcement mechanisms
Sustained democratic reforms.

Discussion of Findings

This study indicates that the problem of electoral violence is still a challenge to the democratic process in Nigeria although there is an upsurge in the use of international observation missions. The study of the election periods 2015-2024 has revealed that the cases of violence are likely to increase during the major electoral periods and specifically during the 2019 and 2023 general elections. Such occurrences are usually in the form of voter intimidation and snatching of ballots, physically beating, and buying of votes. These trends substantiate the fact that elections in Nigeria are often highly competitive in nature whereby political actors adopt legal and illegal means of ensuring that they gain an electoral edge.

The other significant observation made is that election observation in Nigeria is carried out by a group of both national and global actors. The domestic civil society organizations are the most direct in their operations, which seem to involve polling activities, voter education, and reporting of the electoral irregularities. Broader institutional support, technical aid, and diplomatic supervision of the electoral process are offered by international actors like the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union, and the ECOWAS, which can lead to electoral transparency. Their impact is however rather indirect since they lack the power to enforce their views on the domestic electoral practice.

It is also found that even the presence of international observation missions does not necessarily see an end to electoral violence. Although such missions can assist in enhancing transparency and discouraging outright malpractices in elections, structural problems of weak institutions, political interference, youth mobilization to commit violence due to unemployment, and high-stakes political affairs still affect electoral integrity. Such systemic pressures usually restrict the ability of observation missions to ensure that violence is completely avoided.

Moreover, the results are in line with the theoretical framework used in the research. The latter view of the string theory is that electoral systems are functioning based on interrelated relations among the political actors, political institutions, and outsiders. When these ties are strained through political competition or instability in terms of the institution, the instability is created through the development of electoral violence. The role of international observation missions as stabilizing mechanisms in this network is determined by the extent to which domestic institutions are strong and cooperate, however, the success of international observation missions usually depends on these characteristics.

Taken together, the results indicate that as much as international observation missions (which are also linked with the United Nations) are playing a positive role in the electoral transparency and democratic governance in Nigeria, their effectiveness is still limited by the underlying structural issues in the political system of the country.

Recommendations

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should strengthen electoral administration by improving logistical planning, enhancing transparency in result transmission systems, and ensuring that polling units are adequately secured to prevent incidents such as ballot snatching and voter intimidation.

The Federal Government of Nigeria should ensure the independence of electoral institutions by preventing political interference in the operations of INEC and providing adequate financial and institutional support for effective election management.

Security Agencies in Nigeria should develop specialized electoral security units and improve coordination among police, civil defense, and other security organizations to ensure rapid response to incidents of electoral violence during election periods.

The United Nations and other international organizations should expand their technical support programs by providing capacity-building initiatives, conflict prevention training, and early warning systems that can help detect and mitigate electoral violence before it escalates.

Civil Society Organizations should intensify voter education campaigns and community engagement initiatives to promote peaceful political participation and discourage the recruitment of youths for electoral violence.

Political Parties in Nigeria should adopt internal democratic practices, discourage the use of political thugs, and enforce strict disciplinary measures against members who engage in electoral malpractice or violence.

The National Assembly should strengthen electoral laws by introducing stricter penalties for electoral violence, vote buying, and other forms of electoral misconduct in order to serve as a deterrent to political actors who attempt to undermine democratic processes.

Media Organizations should maintain responsible and unbiased reporting during election periods while exposing electoral irregularities and promoting messages of peaceful political participation.

Implementing these recommendations collectively would strengthen electoral institutions, reduce the likelihood of electoral violence, and enhance the credibility of democratic processes in Nigeria.

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