

The Statutory Duration for Determination of Electoral Proceedings as an Impediment to Electoral Justices in Nigeria

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Abstract

Elections are the life blood of any democracy, offering citizens the opportunity to choose their leaders and shape the direction of their country. The timely and fair resolution of election disputes is necessitated. This study provides proof of the increasing circumstances of post-election petitions and evidential court determinations of election outcomes in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Since 1999, Nigeria has organised four cycles of national elections. Each of the elections was contested either in or out of court (in the latter case, for example, in the form of election violence). In Nigeria, the delayed resolution of election petitions has become a persistent issue undermining the democratic process. This paper investigates the causes of these delays, the importance of timely election dispute resolution, and the implications for democratic stability. The primary objective is to identify factors contributing to prolonged election petitions and propose reforms to enhance the judicial system's efficiency. Key gaps include judicial inefficiencies, political interference, and a lack of clear guidelines for handling petitions. The paper relied largely on the qualitative method of analysis, in which relevant historical evidences, books, journals and newspaper reports were content analyzed. Key findings indicate that the backlog of cases, judicial under-resourcing, political pressure, and unclear procedural timelines are significant contributors to delays. These delays erode public trust in the electoral system and create political instability. The paper recommends judicial efficiency reforms, clearer timelines, judicial independence safeguards, and technology integration to streamline the process and ensure fair, timely adjudication. Implementing these reforms will foster democratic stability by improving the credibility of Nigeria's electoral system and enhancing public confidence in the legitimacy of elected leaders.

Keywords: Statutory Duration, Electoral Proceedings, Electoral Justice, Nigeria

Word Count: 261

Introduction

Elections are the life blood of any democracy, offering citizens the opportunity to choose their leaders and shape the direction of their country. The timely and fair resolution of election disputes according to a scholar is an essential component of a well-functioning democracy, as it ensures that the electorate's voice is respected, and that the legitimacy of elected officials is

maintainedⁱ. However, in Nigeria, the issue of prolonged delays in resolving election petitions has become a recurring problem that threatens the country's democratic stabilityⁱⁱ.

The inability to quickly resolve election-related disputes not only undermines the credibility of the electoral process but also erodes public trust in democratic institutions, which is crucial for fostering political stability and encouraging active civic engagement^{iii,iv}.

In Nigeria, elections have always been accompanied by petitions, with candidates and parties contesting the outcome of electoral processes in the election tribunal courts and respective courts of jurisdiction. These petitions arise for several reasons, including claims of electoral fraud^v, irregularities in the voting process, and the improper conduct of electoral officers. While the election petition process is crucial for safeguarding the integrity of the election process, the prolonged delays and the constitutional timeline of 180 day in resolving these disputes have become a significant concern for the nation. Cases such as the 2019 presidential election petition, which was not resolved until months after the election, illustrate the scale of this issue⁵. The delayed resolution of such cases casts a shadow over the legitimacy of the election and weakens public confidence in the electoral system.

Meanwhile, the central issue that Nigeria faces regarding election petitions is the length of time it takes to resolve them. The legal and judicial processes involved in the adjudication of election petitions are often slow, causing a ripple effect that undermines the democratic process.

This delay is particularly evident in presidential and governorship election petitions, where the results are contested in the tribunals/courts by those who lost in the election, resulting in prolonged legal battles. For instance, in the 2019 elections, the petition of the opposition party against the re-election of President Muhammadu Buhari was decided more than five months after the election, leaving the country in political limbo^{vi}. Such delays not only tarnish the credibility of the electoral process but also breed political instability by creating uncertainty about the legitimacy of elected leaders.

Several factors contribute to these delays, including the backlog of cases in the judicial system, inadequate resources for election tribunals, and the often-convoluted legal procedures that complicate the swift resolution of disputes^{vii}. Additionally, the lack of clear guidelines and reforms to expedite the process further compounds the issue. The delay in resolving election petitions has far-reaching consequences, such as the erosion of public trust in the electoral system, which can discourage voter participation in future elections^{viii}. When disputes linger for months, citizens may become disillusioned, and the legitimacy of the electoral process is questioned both domestically and internationally. The inability to resolve election petitions promptly also undermines political stability, as it leaves the nation in a state of uncertainty regarding the true winner of the election. As such, it is critical to address the causes of these delays and implement reforms that will ensure a more timely and efficient resolution of election disputes in Nigeria, fostering greater confidence in the electoral system and promoting democratic stability.

Conceptual Review

Democracy

Democracy, as a scholar suggests, is often heralded as the ideal, if not the only, political framework capable of addressing the myriad challenges facing humanity, whether social, economic, or political. In this view, democracy is not merely a form of government but the optimal system for resolving the pressing issues of the modern world^{ix}.

Historically, from the era of the ancient Athenians to the present day, democracy has been regarded as a system of governance designed to serve the people and meet their diverse needs^x. The term itself, originating from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power), literally translates to "rule by the people," reflecting the foundational idea that governance should be a collective endeavor.

Euripides, the renowned Greek playwright, defined democracy as a state in which citizens collectively determine the direction of governance through their chosen representatives, who are accountable to them^{xi}. This classical vision of democracy has evolved into a more modern understanding, which, as a scholar elaborates, emphasizes the principles of representative government and shared decision-making. In contemporary democracies, elected representatives serve as the voices of the people, with mechanisms in place to ensure they are held accountable for their actions and decisions^{xii}.

The fundamental appeal of democracy lies in its ability to uphold several core values. These include egalitarianism, liberty, the moral development of citizens, the pursuit of the common good, protection of individual rights, social utility, and the facilitation of effective decision-making. However, for democracy to function effectively in practice, it requires several crucial elements: an impartial system of checks and balances, a robust and independent judiciary, an informed electorate, a free and energetic press, a culture that fosters democratic values, and a climate of peace and security. A scholar emphasizes that these elements are indispensable for ensuring genuine democratic governance^{xiii}.

Democracy is not simply a method of governance based on majority rule; rather, it is a means of determining who will govern and for what purposes. The process of deciding who holds power is rooted in public opinion, expressed through regular elections where the verdict of the polls guides the election of leaders. This recurring interaction between the electorate and the government is what distinguishes democracy from other forms of governance, as it allows citizens to have a direct or representative say in the decisions that affect their lives. In essence, democracy is about ensuring that governance is responsive to the will of the people, with accountability being a central principle that shapes the functioning of the state. Without these principles, there is little to distinguish democracy from other political systems.

Election

An election is widely defined as a formal and structured process through which citizens choose their representatives or make decisions on policy issues. According to scholars, elections are a mechanism for elite selection, emphasizing the competition among political elites for the

voters' support^{xiv}. This definition, while applicable in many democratic settings, often fails to capture the evolving dynamics in countries like Nigeria, where electoral processes have historically been marred by irregularities such as rigging and voter manipulation. Despite this, scholars view underscores the importance of elections in fostering political legitimacy, a critical component in Nigeria's ongoing democratic evolution¹³.

On the other hand, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines an election as a process by which individuals are selected through voting. This straightforward description is broadly accurate but overlooks the complexities involved in Nigeria's electoral system. In recent years, Nigeria as posited by scholars has witnessed increasing public skepticism about the integrity of its elections, especially in light of reports of electoral fraud, violence, and vote-buying, which distort the essence of a democratic election^{xv}. Thus, while the definition is applicable in the simplest form, it fails to reflect the challenges faced by Nigerian voters in a climate of corruption and lack of transparency.

Further, scholars argues that elections are significant tool for direct political participation, allowing citizens to express their political preferences^{xvi}. This definition aligns with the theoretical framework of democracy, where elections should serve as a true reflection of the electorate's will. However, in Nigeria, the practice of voter suppression, intimidation, and election violence in some regions undermines this ideal.

In reality, many Nigerians find their ability to participate freely and safely in elections constrained by these barriers, limiting the election's role in authentic political expression. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance defines elections as processes that should promote inclusivity, transparency, and accountability^{xvii}.

While this definition speaks to the universal expectations of fair elections, it is in stark contrast to the historical and ongoing issues in Nigeria's electoral system, such as lack of trust in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), delayed results, and allegations of vote rigging. This calls for a redefinition of the electoral process in Nigeria, where trust-building mechanisms must be a focal point in improving electoral credibility. While the various definitions

of elections provide a broad theoretical understanding, the application of these definitions in the Nigerian context reveals significant discrepancies. Elections in Nigeria often fall short of the ideals of fairness, transparency, and participation due to deep-rooted systemic flaws^{xviii}. As the nation continues to strive for democratic consolidation, these definitions should evolve to reflect the contemporary challenges facing Nigerian elections.

Theoretical Explanation

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of election disputes and the role of the judiciary in ensuring democratic stability. The theory examines the structures, norms, and practices that govern societal behavior, with a particular focus on formal institutions like the judiciary. In the context of elections, institutions such as the courts are

central in resolving electoral disputes, which have a profound impact on the democratic process.

Election petitions, which arise from disputes over the validity of election outcomes, are typically adjudicated by the judiciary, whose role is crucial in maintaining the legitimacy of the electoral process and ensuring that the will of the people is respected^{xxix}. However, the efficiency and impartiality of the judiciary in resolving these disputes are often challenged by institutional inefficiencies, political influences, and capacity issues, particularly in developing democracies such as Nigeria^{xx}.

In the Nigerian context, the judiciary plays a critical role in resolving election disputes, as it is the final arbiter on contested elections. Institutional theory posits that the functioning of these formal institutions is influenced by both structural factors and the behavior of individuals within them. In Nigeria, judicial institutions are tasked with adjudicating electoral petitions filed by parties dissatisfied with the outcome of elections, but they are often beset by challenges that hinder their effectiveness^{xxi}. These challenges are not only a result of the institutional structure of the courts but also arise from external pressures that shape the judicial process.

One major issue that prolongs the election petition process in Nigeria is judicial inefficiency. The judicial system in Nigeria is burdened with a high caseload, and the delay in resolving election petitions is often attributed to a lack of resources and administrative inefficiency^{xxii}. Judges are overloaded with cases, leading to delays in hearing and ruling on election petitions. As a result, the judicial process becomes protracted, leaving petitioners and the public in uncertainty. The backlog of cases, however, also undermines the credibility of the judiciary, as citizens begin to question the fairness and timeliness of the electoral process. This inefficiency reflects an institutional weakness that compromises the judiciary's ability to resolve disputes quickly and effectively, which is essential for maintaining democratic stability.

Another critical factor influencing the election petition process in Nigeria is political interference. Political elites often attempt to influence judicial decisions in their favor, either through direct or indirect means. Political interference takes many forms, including pressures on judges, manipulation of public opinion, and attempts to sway the outcomes of petitions^{xxiii}. Institutional theory suggests that external actors, including political elites, can shape the behavior of judicial institutions by altering the incentives of those involved in the decision-making process.

In Nigeria, the judiciary is not immune to political influence, and this undermines its independence. When political pressure is exerted on judges, it not only compromises the integrity of the electoral process but also threatens the legitimacy of the democratic system as a whole. The impact of these challenges on the election petition process is significant. Delays, inefficiency, and political interference in the judiciary lead to a lack of public confidence in the electoral system and undermine the stability of the democracy^{xxiv}. In a situation where electoral disputes remain unresolved for extended periods, the legitimacy of the elected government is

questioned, and public trust in the electoral system diminishes. This erodes democratic stability and can create an environment of political unrest.

An Overview of Election Petition in Nigeria

Election petitions and conflicts in Nigeria have always been a contentious issue, often marked by fierce rivalry between the two dominant political parties, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC). However, the battle for political power extends beyond these two parties, with other political entities also getting involved in the disputes. These political conflicts, particularly during and after elections, are often characterized by intense legal battles, protest actions, and widespread violence^{xxv}. There are multiple reasons for the heightened bitterness and legal challenges that follow elections in Nigeria, and understanding these causes requires a deeper examination of the country's political and electoral systems.

One major reason for the deep animosity in Nigeria's electoral processes is the country's developing economy and its relatively weak institutional structures^{xxvi}. The absence of robust and independent institutions capable of overseeing elections without external influences or corruption is a significant factor in election-related conflicts.

Nigeria's political landscape is fraught with instances of electoral fraud, vote-buying, and other forms of manipulation. This leads to the perception that elections are not free and fair, and the legitimacy of the outcomes is often questioned. The lack of confidence in the electoral process compels many political players to resort to various forms of conflict, often culminating in prolonged legal battles or violent protests.

Politicians in Nigeria, particularly those from the major political parties, have also developed a mindset of winning at all costs. This mindset stems from the belief that political power is an essential means of economic and social advancement, and therefore, it becomes a matter of survival for them. In the face of electoral defeat, these politicians are willing to do whatever it takes to challenge the results and regain power^{xxvii}. The desperation to win creates a breeding ground for conflicts, particularly when the stakes are high, and the consequences of losing are perceived as too costly. Another key factor contributing to the acrimony and disputes is the manipulation of Nigeria's electoral framework. The Constitution and Electoral laws, which should serve as the foundation for transparent and fair elections, are often seen as flawed, ambiguous, or easily manipulated^{xxviii}. This makes it difficult to ensure that election outcomes are both fair and widely accepted by the Nigerian electorate. The lack of clarity in legal provisions allows political actors to exploit loopholes, often making it impossible to hold those responsible for electoral malpractice accountable. When the legal framework is weak, the electoral process becomes vulnerable to manipulation, undermining the integrity of the entire system.

Furthermore, in Nigeria, electoral contests are often marred by violence, with politicians or their supporters resorting to intimidation, harassment, and sometimes even physical violence to achieve their goals^{xxix}. However, these violent acts are usually not carried out by the

politicians themselves, but rather by hired thugs or "boys" who are paid to cause chaos during the election process. These hoodlums disrupt voting, intimidate voters, and in some instances, use force to prevent opponents from gaining an advantage. Such violence not only hinders the ability to conduct free and fair elections but also contributes to a climate of fear and uncertainty, making it difficult to trust the outcomes of the election.

Key Causes for Delays in Election Petitions

Delays in election petitions often arise from several interrelated factors, each exacerbating the overall timeliness and effectiveness of legal processes. One of the primary causes is the backlog of cases within the judiciary^{xxx}. Judicial backlogs in Nigeria are systemic issue that affects various branches of law, but they are particularly problematic in election petitions due to their time-sensitive nature. The high volume of cases pending before different courts of different jurisdiction places significant strain on the Nigeria judicial system, making it difficult for judges to process petitions efficiently. This backlog is often a result of an under-resourced judicial system that struggles to keep up with the increasing caseload, further delaying the resolution of cases and potentially prolonging the uncertainty surrounding election results.

Judicial backlogs create not only a logistical challenge but also a credibility issue, as delayed judgments may erode public trust in the fairness and efficiency of the electoral system^{xxx}. Another contributing factor to the delay in election petitions is the prolonged process of appointing judges. The timeliness of election petitions is heavily influenced by the speed at which judges are appointed, as vacancies in the judiciary can lead to delays in hearing cases. In many jurisdictions, the appointment process is politically driven, with nominees undergoing lengthy vetting processes that can take months or even years. The delay in appointing qualified judges to fill these vacancies means that fewer judges are available to handle election petitions, which increases the pressure on the existing judges and, consequently, extends the time it takes to reach a verdict^{xxxii}. This issue is particularly evident in regions where political influence plays a significant role in judicial appointments^{xxxiii}.

The large volume of election petitions is also a central factor contributing to delays. In Nigeria where elections are highly contested, particularly where there are multiple levels of government elections (presidential, parliamentary, local), the number of petitions filed by aggrieved parties in most cases do overwhelm the judicial system^{xxxiv}. When there is large number of petitions challenging the outcomes of elections, it takes longer for courts to process them due to the need for thorough hearings and investigations. The accumulation of petitions can stretch the resources of the courts, resulting in delayed hearings and prolonged litigation. The sheer number of cases creates logistical bottlenecks, causing delays that frustrate litigants and diminish public confidence in the judicial system's ability to adjudicate election disputes in a timely manner^{xxxv}.

Political interference in the judicial process is another significant factor that contributes to delays in election petitions. Attempts to influence judicial rulings through political pressure or manipulation can severely disrupt the timely resolution of election-related disputes. Political actors may attempt to sway the outcomes of cases by lobbying judges, using public campaigns

to influence judicial decisions, or even intimidating judges into delaying their rulings. These forms of interference often lead to the judiciary being perceived as biased or compromised, which undermines the integrity of the election process. When judges feel pressured or intimidated, they may procrastinate in making decisions to avoid political backlash, further delaying the resolution of election petitions^{xxxvi}.

Partisan behavior and a lack of independence within the judicial system exacerbate these delays. In countries where the judiciary is not sufficiently independent, judges may be influenced by political affiliations or partisan loyalty. This lack of independence can result in decisions being delayed as judges attempt to align their rulings with political expectations rather than adhering strictly to the rule of law. When the judicial system is subject to undue political influence, election petitions are less likely to be resolved impartially and expeditiously. The perception of judicial bias can not only delay the process but also delegitimize the outcomes of elections, fostering further political instability^{xxxvii}.

The 2019 Nigerian presidential election petition was a significant event in the country's political landscape.

The election, held on February 23, 2019, saw the former president, Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC), declared the winner by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). However, the opposition, led by Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), disputed the result, alleging widespread irregularities, including vote manipulation, voter suppression, and illegal alterations of the results. Atiku Abubakar, the main challenger, filed his petition with the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal, claiming that the election was marred by significant malpractices^{xxxviii}. The petition also sought to prove that Buhari was not eligible to contest the election due to issues related to his academic qualifications. The legal challenge started on March 18, 2019, when the petition was formally submitted to the tribunal.

The tribunal process began with the pre-hearing session on May 8, 2019, which set the stage for the presentation of evidence. The petitioners were required to prove their case beyond reasonable doubt, which involved providing evidence of electoral fraud, including testimonies from witnesses and the presentation of documents like election results from polling units. However, the petitioners faced an uphill battle as they struggled to gather substantial evidence to back their claims. In particular, the submission of witness testimonies and documents was often challenged by the APC and Buhari's legal team, leading to protracted legal debates and a lengthy process^{xxxix}.

One of the primary causes for delays in the process was the legal contest over the admissibility of evidence. The legal teams of the APC and Buhari argued that the evidence provided by the petitioners was either insufficient or inadmissible. For instance, the opposition presented results from the Nigeria Communications Commission (NCC) regarding the use of electronic

transmission of results, but these were disputed by the respondents, as the INEC had not adopted electronic transmission for the election. This led to delays as the tribunal had to rule on these matters before proceeding with the main case. Furthermore, the election tribunal had to consider the complex nature of the case, which involved not only technicalities related to the election process but also questions about the eligibility of Buhari to contest. Atiku's legal team argued that Buhari's academic qualifications were in question, but the tribunal ruled that the incumbent had met the necessary legal requirements.

The legal team for Buhari sought to dismiss the petition, claiming that the opposition had failed to provide enough evidence to substantiate claims of electoral malpractice.

The judicial process faced significant public and political pressure as well. The tribunal was aware of the high stakes involved, given that the outcome of the case could either confirm the legitimacy of the Buhari administration or potentially lead to the annulment of the election results. This placed considerable pressure on the judiciary, with accusations of bias and concerns over the fairness of the judicial process coming from both sides^{xi}. The legal process was also delayed by the volume of legal paperwork, lengthy testimonies, and the preparation required to address the multiple legal points raised by both parties. Each side presented its arguments, evidence, and witnesses, resulting in an intense back-and-forth. The nature of the legal challenge meant that the tribunal could not deliver a speedy verdict, especially with the many procedural and evidentiary issues that required careful review^{xli}. After months of deliberations, the tribunal finally delivered its ruling on September 11, 2019, rejecting the petition by Atiku Abubakar. The tribunal held that the petitioner had failed to prove that the election was rigged or that the outcome was manipulated. In terms of Buhari's eligibility, the tribunal found no merit in the argument that he had provided false information about his qualifications. The judgment solidified Buhari's victory and affirmed his status as the duly elected president of Nigeria. The judgment was a landmark moment in the country's legal and political history. However, the outcome did not end the dispute. Atiku Abubakar and the PDP sought to challenge the decision at the Supreme Court. The final judgment from the Supreme Court, delivered on October 30, 2019, upheld the tribunal's ruling, effectively ending the legal battle. The decision was a testament to the judiciary's role in the democratic process, despite facing criticism and challenges from different quarters. The Reforms Based on the explanation above, the paper proposes the following reforms:

1. Judicial Efficiency Reform: The backlog of cases and administrative inefficiency in the judicial system are major causes of delays. A reform to improve case management, resource allocation, and administrative support for election tribunals would help speed up the resolution process. This could include hiring additional judges and support staff specifically for election-related petitions.

2. Clear Guidelines and Timelines: The absence of clear guidelines on the handling of election petitions contributes to prolonged legal battles. Establishing well-defined timelines and procedures for processing and adjudicating these cases will help ensure that petitions are

resolved within a reasonable time frame. This reform should also address the swift appointment of judges to avoid unnecessary delays.

3. Judicial Independence and Protection from Political Interference: To protect the integrity of the election petition process, it is crucial to ensure judicial independence. This can be achieved by providing mechanisms to safeguard judges from political pressure, influencing their decision-making. Strengthening the independence of the judiciary will help in delivering unbiased and timely judgments, contributing to public confidence in the system.

4. Technology Integration: Introducing technology, such as electronic filing systems and real-time tracking of petitions, can greatly reduce administrative delays and improve transparency. Adopting digital tools will streamline the submission and review processes, making it easier for the courts to manage cases more efficiently and for the public to monitor the progress of petitions. This reform can also help mitigate issues like delayed evidence submission and the associated legal battles.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

In conclusion, the prolonged delays in resolving election petitions in Nigeria present a significant challenge to the country's democratic stability. The delays undermine public trust in the electoral system, create political instability, and erode confidence in the legitimacy of elected leaders. Several factors contribute to these delays, including judicial inefficiency, political interference, and the backlog of cases within the judicial system. Additionally, the lack of clear guidelines and reforms to expedite the process exacerbates the situation, making it difficult to resolve election disputes within the stipulated constitutional timelines. The 2019 presidential election petition serves as a clear example of how such delays create political uncertainty and undermine democratic legitimacy. Without timely resolution of election petitions, Nigeria's democracy face the risk of being undermined, as citizens lose faith in the electoral process and its outcomes.

Recommendations

To address these issues, it is recommended that Nigeria undertakes several reforms to streamline the election petition process. First, judicial efficiency should be enhanced by improving case management, allocating resources, and hiring additional judges and staff for election-related petitions. Second, clear guidelines and timelines for adjudicating election petitions should be established, ensuring swift decisions in accordance with constitutional requirements. Third, the judiciary's independence must be safeguarded to prevent political interference, thus ensuring unbiased and timely judgments. Finally, technology integration, such as electronic filing system sand real-time petition tracking, should be adopted to reduce administrative delays and improve transparency, fostering greater public trust in the electoral system. These reforms will help promote a fair, transparent, and efficient election petition process, strengthening Nigeria's democratic institutions.

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