

# International Observation Missions And Democratic Accountability In Nigeria: An Analysis Of The 2023 Presidential Election In Oyo State

OLORUNSO ISMAIL BAYO

SAF POLYTECHNIC ISEYIN  
bayo.folorunso@hotmail.com  
08034029503

**Abstract:** *This paper examines the role of international observation missions in relation to democratic accountability in the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State, Nigeria. Situated within the broader discourse on electoral integrity and democratic consolidation in emerging democracies, the study draws on democratic accountability theory and electoral integrity theory to assess whether international observation missions meaningfully enhance electoral credibility or primarily serve symbolic and normative functions. Using a qualitative critical analytical approach, the study reviews the conduct of major observation bodies including the European Union Election Observation Mission, African Union, and ECOWAS alongside domestic observer groups, and evaluates key dimensions of the electoral process in Oyo State, including transparency, credibility of results, voter confidence, institutional reforms by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and political party reactions. Data were derived from published observer reports, academic literature, media sources, and policy documents, analysed through thematic content analysis. Findings suggest that international observation missions contributed positively to procedural transparency and reinforced democratic norms during the election. However, their influence on substantive democratic accountability remains limited and uneven, as structural and institutional challenges within Nigeria's electoral system persist. The study argues that while observer missions enhance visibility and normative legitimacy, democratic accountability is ultimately determined by domestic institutional strength and political will. The paper concludes that credible elections remain central to democratic consolidation in Nigeria and Africa, but international observation missions should be viewed as supportive rather than decisive actors in electoral legitimacy. Strengthening domestic institutions and electoral processes is therefore essential for sustainable democratic development.*

**Keywords:** Democratic accountability, electoral integrity, international observation missions, Nigeria, Oyo State, 2023 elections

## INTRODUCTION

Elections remain a central mechanism for legitimizing political authority and sustaining democratic governance. Within democratic theory, credible elections are expected to provide citizens with opportunities to choose their leaders freely, while ensuring that governmental authority remains accountable to the electorate (Dahl, 2020). In practice, however, electoral integrity is often contested, particularly in emerging democracies where institutional weaknesses, political interference, and logistical challenges undermine public trust.

Nigeria's Fourth Republic exemplifies this contestation. Since 1999, electoral processes have been characterized by both progressive reforms and persistent challenges. While the introduction of technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) aimed to improve transparency, the 2023 general elections generated mixed reactions. Debates surrounded credibility, logistics, voter suppression, and the transparency of result collation (EU EOM, 2023; AU EOM, 2023).

The presidential election in Oyo State provides a valuable subnational context for examining electoral accountability. As a politically significant state in South-West Nigeria, Oyo witnessed active participation from major parties and displayed competitive electoral dynamics. While reports indicated improvements in voter accreditation and reduced ballot manipulation, others highlighted issues such as delays in election materials, voter turnout fluctuations, and public skepticism regarding result transmission (ECOWAS, 2023). These contrasting narratives raise important questions about the extent to which reforms and observation mechanisms have enhanced democratic accountability at the state level.

International election observation missions have become increasingly influential in shaping perceptions of electoral credibility in Africa. Organizations such as the European Union, African Union, and ECOWAS deploy missions to assess electoral processes based on democratic standards. Their reports often influence both domestic legitimacy and international recognition of outcomes (Hyde, 2020). However, scholarly debates persist regarding whether such missions genuinely strengthen democratic accountability or merely serve symbolic or diplomatic functions (Kelley, 2019). Within Nigeria, this debate is particularly significant due to recurring electoral disputes and allegations of irregularities. While observer reports are frequently cited in validating or questioning election outcomes, their actual influence remains contested. Some scholars argue that observation missions contribute

to improving transparency and deterring malpractice, while others suggest their impact is limited by political constraints and local complexities (Burchard, 2021; Cheeseman et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State offers a critical case for examining the relationship between international observation missions and democratic accountability in Nigeria. The central concern is whether the presence and reports of observers significantly enhanced electoral credibility and accountability, or whether they functioned primarily as external validation mechanisms with limited transformative impact.

This study takes a critical position that while international observation missions contribute to procedural transparency and normative reinforcement of democratic standards, their capacity to ensure substantive democratic accountability in Nigeria remains constrained by domestic political realities, institutional limitations, and contextual complexities within subnational electoral environments such as Oyo State.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative critical analytical approach to examine the role of international observation missions in the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State. This approach is appropriate for investigating complex social and political phenomena where meaning and context are central (Bryman, 2016). The research adopts a case study design with Oyo State as the focal unit, justified by the need to capture subnational variations in electoral conduct, which national-level analyses often obscure (Yin, 2014). Oyo was selected due to its political significance in South-West Nigeria, its competitive electoral dynamics, and the availability of observer reports and stakeholder commentaries specific to the state.

### **Data Sources**

Data were derived from secondary sources, including: (i) official observer reports from the EU EOM, AU EOM, and ECOWAS; (ii) peer-reviewed academic literature on electoral integrity and democratic accountability; (iii) INEC publications, press releases, and reports; (iv) Nigerian and international media sources; and (v) civil society reports from domestic observer groups, including the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Documents were systematically collected through online database searches (Google Scholar, Scopus), direct access to observer mission websites, and media archives from February 2023 to December 2024. A total of 42 documents were initially reviewed, with 28 selected for final analysis based on relevance and credibility. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded through familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation through the lenses of democratic accountability and electoral integrity theories.

### **Limitations**

This study is subject to certain limitations, including reliance on secondary data, the absence of primary fieldwork such as interviews with INEC officials or voters in Oyo State, and the potential influence of diplomatic framing on observer reports. Despite these limitations, the study provides a robust analytical contribution by synthesizing available evidence and applying rigorous theoretical frameworks.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### **International Observation Missions**

International observation missions refer to organized groups of foreign or transnational actors deployed to monitor electoral processes in sovereign states in order to assess their credibility, transparency, and compliance with democratic standards. These missions are commonly constituted by intergovernmental organizations, regional bodies, and non-governmental organizations with mandates to observe elections and provide independent assessments of electoral conduct. Prominent examples include missions deployed by the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

### **Democratic Accountability**

Democratic accountability refers to the principle by which elected leaders and political institutions are held responsible to citizens for their actions, decisions, and governance outcomes within a democratic system. It is grounded in the expectation that political authority is derived from the consent of the governed and must therefore be exercised in a transparent, responsive, and responsible manner. In electoral democracies such as Nigeria, accountability is closely linked to the ability of citizens to freely choose and replace leaders through credible elections (Dahl, 2020).

### **Electoral Integrity**

Electoral integrity refers to the degree to which electoral processes are conducted in accordance with democratic principles, legal frameworks, and internationally accepted standards of fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness. It encompasses the entire electoral cycle, including voter registration, campaigning, voting, counting, result collation, and dispute resolution. High electoral integrity ensures that elections accurately reflect the will of the people without manipulation, coercion, or systemic bias (Norris et al., 2021).

The assessment of electoral integrity is commonly based on several key indicators. Fairness is a primary indicator, which relates to equal opportunities for political parties and candidates to compete without undue advantage or discrimination. Transparency is another crucial indicator, referring to the openness of electoral processes, including access to information, visibility of procedures, and accountability in result management. Credibility is also central, reflecting the degree of public trust in the electoral process and the extent to which election outcomes are accepted as legitimate by stakeholders, including political actors, citizens, and international observers (Burchard, 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on a combination of democratic accountability theory and electoral integrity theory, both of which provide a strong explanatory foundation for understanding the relationship between international observation missions and electoral credibility in Nigeria. These theories are particularly useful in analysing how elections function as mechanisms of political legitimacy, citizen control, and institutional transparency within emerging democracies such as Nigeria.

#### **Democratic Accountability Theory**

Democratic accountability theory is grounded in the idea that political leaders and institutions are answerable to citizens through regular, competitive, and credible elections. The theory assumes that in a functioning democracy, authority is derived from the consent of the governed, and citizens retain the power to reward or punish political actors through electoral choices (Dahl, 2020). Accountability is therefore achieved when elections provide a genuine opportunity for citizens to evaluate government performance and influence leadership selection.

A key assumption of this theory is that elections must be free, fair, and transparent to ensure meaningful citizen participation. Where electoral processes are compromised, accountability becomes weakened, and political legitimacy is undermined. The theory also assumes that institutional mechanisms such as electoral commissions, judicial systems, and observation bodies play a critical role in safeguarding accountability by ensuring adherence to democratic norms.

In relation to elections and international observation missions, democratic accountability theory provides a framework for understanding how external observers contribute to reinforcing electoral credibility. Observation missions are expected to enhance transparency, deter malpractice, and strengthen public confidence in electoral outcomes. Their presence is also assumed to increase pressure on electoral stakeholders to comply with democratic standards, thereby improving accountability.

In the Nigerian context, the theory is highly relevant due to recurring concerns about electoral malpractice, voter intimidation, and disputes over election results. International observation missions are often perceived as external accountability mechanisms that complement domestic institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). However, the effectiveness of this accountability depends on the credibility of both electoral institutions and observer reports (Burchard, 2021).

#### **Electoral Integrity Theory**

Electoral integrity theory focuses on the quality of electoral processes and the extent to which they adhere to democratic principles and international standards. The theory emphasizes that elections must not only be procedurally conducted but must also reflect fairness, inclusiveness, transparency, and credibility. According to this perspective, electoral integrity is achieved when all stages of the electoral cycle from voter registration to result declaration are conducted without manipulation or systemic bias (Norris, 2019).

The key assumption of electoral integrity theory is that democratic legitimacy depends on the perceived and actual fairness of elections. When electoral processes are compromised, public trust declines, and political instability may increase. The theory also assumes that both domestic institutions and international actors play significant roles in safeguarding electoral standards through monitoring, reporting, and evaluation mechanisms.

In the context of elections and observation missions, electoral integrity theory explains the evaluative role of international observers. Observation missions assess whether electoral processes meet established standards of fairness and transparency, and their reports contribute to shaping both domestic and international perceptions of electoral quality. Their findings often influence whether elections are accepted as credible or disputed by political stakeholders (Norris et al., 2021).

Combining democratic accountability theory and electoral integrity theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State. While democratic accountability theory focuses on the relationship between citizens and political authority, electoral integrity theory emphasizes the procedural and institutional quality of elections. Together, they allow for a balanced assessment of whether international observation missions genuinely enhance democratic accountability or merely serve as symbolic validators of electoral outcomes.

In Nigeria's context, where electoral processes are often characterized by both reform efforts and persistent credibility challenges, these theories help explain the complex interaction between domestic institutions, international observers, and political actors. They also provide a basis for critically examining whether international observation missions contribute meaningfully to strengthening democracy or whether their impact is constrained by structural and political realities within the Nigerian electoral system.

### Overview of the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria (Oyo State Focus)

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria represented a significant moment in the country's democratic development, particularly because of the heightened expectations surrounding electoral reforms and technological innovations introduced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). These elections were widely anticipated as a test of Nigeria's commitment to improving electoral transparency, credibility, and inclusiveness after decades of contested electoral outcomes. Despite these reforms, the elections generated mixed assessments from both domestic and international observers regarding their overall integrity and efficiency (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2023; ECOWAS Election Observation Mission, 2023).

At the national level, the presidential election featured major political parties, including the All Progressives Congress (APC), the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and the Labour Party (LP), among others. The APC fielded the incumbent ruling party candidate, while the PDP remained the main opposition force with significant national support. The emergence of the Labour Party as a strong third force introduced a new dynamic into Nigeria's electoral competition, particularly among youth voters and urban populations. This multiparty contest significantly shaped voter mobilization, political campaigns, and electoral expectations across the country, including Oyo State.

### Electoral Dynamics in Oyo State

In Oyo State, the electoral environment reflected both competitiveness and heightened political engagement. As one of the key states in South-West Nigeria, Oyo recorded active participation from the major political parties, with intense campaigning and voter mobilization efforts across urban and rural areas. Political awareness among the electorate was relatively high, and the state witnessed significant interest from youth voters and civil society organizations. However, like many parts of the country, the electoral atmosphere was also marked by concerns over security, logistics, and public trust in the electoral process.

Table 1 below presents a summary of key electoral indicators for Oyo State during the 2023 presidential election:

**Table 1: Key Electoral Indicators – Oyo State, 2023 Presidential Election**

| Indicator                      | Details                                                   |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Registered Voters              | Approximately 3.4 million                                 |
| Voter Turnout                  | Estimated 35-40% (varies by local government)             |
| Major Political Parties        | APC, PDP, LP                                              |
| Number of Polling Units        | 6,234                                                     |
| BVAS Deployment                | Full deployment across all units                          |
| Reported Logistical Challenges | Delays in materials in 15% of units; network failures     |
| Observer Coverage              | EU, AU, ECOWAS, TMG, and others                           |
| Post-Election Disputes         | Minor local-level disputes; no major statewide annulments |

**Source:** Compiled from INEC (2023) and observer reports

### INEC's Role and Technological Innovations

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) played a central role in the administration of the 2023 elections. The commission introduced several technological innovations aimed at improving electoral transparency, including the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV). These tools were designed to enhance voter authentication, reduce multiple voting, and allow real-time transmission of results. INEC also undertook voter education campaigns and logistical planning to improve electoral efficiency. Despite these efforts, questions were raised about the effectiveness and consistency of technology deployment across different polling units.

### Challenges Encountered

Several challenges were reported during the conduct of the elections, both nationally and within Oyo State. Logistical difficulties, including delays in the arrival of electoral materials and late commencement of voting in some areas, were widely documented. Technical issues related to the BVAS machine, such as accreditation delays and device malfunction in some polling units, also affected the voting process. Additionally, voter turnout was inconsistent, with some areas recording relatively low participation compared to expectations, partly due to voter apathy and concerns about electoral credibility.

Security concerns and isolated incidents of electoral violence further complicated the electoral process in some locations. Although Oyo State was generally considered more peaceful compared to other regions, there were reports of political tension, intimidation, and disruptions in certain areas. These challenges contributed to public skepticism regarding the efficiency of electoral administration and the overall credibility of the process.

Overall, the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State must be understood within the broader national context of electoral reform, political competition, and institutional constraints. While significant efforts were made by INEC to improve transparency and enhance public confidence, the persistence of logistical, technical, and security challenges underscores the complexity of conducting credible elections in a large and diverse democracy such as Nigeria.

### Role of International Observation Missions in the 2023 Election

International observation missions played a significant role in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria by providing independent assessments of the electoral process and contributing to global and domestic perceptions of electoral credibility. These missions, deployed by various intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, are central to contemporary democratic elections as instruments for monitoring compliance with international electoral standards and promoting transparency within electoral systems (Hyde, 2020).

### Major Observation Bodies

Among the major observation bodies present during the 2023 elections were the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the African Union Election Observation Mission (AU EOM), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Election Observation Mission. In addition to these international actors, several domestic observer groups, including civil society organizations such as the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), also participated actively in monitoring the electoral process. These organizations collectively contributed to a multi-layered observation framework that assessed different dimensions of the election across Nigeria, including Oyo State.

### Observation Activities and Timelines

In Oyo State and across Nigeria, these observation missions engaged in a range of activities aimed at assessing electoral preparedness, procedural compliance, and the overall integrity of the voting process. Prior to election day, long-term observers monitored the political environment, campaign activities, voter education efforts, and the preparedness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). They also assessed issues such as electoral security, media access, and the conduct of political actors. These pre-election assessments were crucial in identifying potential risks and challenges that could affect the credibility of the elections.

On election day, short-term observers were deployed to polling units across various states, including Oyo State, to monitor voting procedures, voter accreditation processes, ballot casting, and the conduct of electoral officials and security agents. They also observed the functionality of technological tools such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the efficiency of result collation processes. Their presence was intended to deter electoral malpractice and enhance transparency in real time.

After the elections, observation missions conducted post-election assessments, which included monitoring result collation, announcement processes, and the handling of electoral disputes. These post-election activities also involved consultations with stakeholders such as political parties, electoral officials, civil society organizations, and voters. The findings from these engagements were compiled into preliminary statements and final reports that provided comprehensive evaluations of the electoral process.

### Key Findings from Observer Reports

Preliminary statements issued by organizations such as the EU EOM, AU EOM, and ECOWAS generally acknowledged improvements in certain aspects of the electoral process, particularly in relation to the introduction of technological innovations by INEC. However, these reports also highlighted significant challenges, including logistical delays, inconsistencies in result transmission, voter suppression concerns in some areas, and instances of violence and intimidation. While some missions described the elections as competitive and reflective of citizens' political choices, others emphasized that procedural shortcomings affected the overall credibility of the process.

Table 2 below summarizes the key findings of major observation missions:

**Table 2: Summary of Observer Mission Findings – 2023 Nigerian Elections**

| Observation Body | Positive Assessments                                                                   | Critical Observations                                                          |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EU EOM           | Improved BVAS functionality; increased voter access; competitive political environment | Logistical delays; result transmission issues; violence in some states         |
| AU EOM           | Enhanced transparency; peaceful conduct in many areas; civic engagement                | Operational challenges; technology inconsistencies; voter suppression concerns |

|        |                                                                                    |                                                                                    |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ECOWAS | Positive pre-election environment; improved accreditation; political participation | Late material delivery; collation center transparency concerns; security incidents |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Source:** Compiled from EU EOM (2023), AU EOM (2023), and ECOWAS (2023)

### Oyo State-Specific Observations

In the case of Oyo State, observer assessments generally reflected a relatively peaceful electoral environment compared to some other regions, although concerns were still raised regarding logistical inefficiencies and delays in voting procedures in certain polling units. Domestic observer groups similarly reported mixed experiences, noting both improvements in voter accreditation systems and persistent operational challenges.

Overall, the role of international observation missions in the 2023 Nigerian elections can be understood as both evaluative and normative. They provided independent assessments of the electoral process while also reinforcing international democratic standards. However, their reports also revealed the complexity of Nigeria's electoral environment, where improvements in procedural technology coexist with persistent structural and institutional challenges that continue to affect electoral credibility (Kelley, 2019).

### Assessment of Democratic Accountability in the Oyo State Election

The assessment of democratic accountability in the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State reveals a complex interaction between institutional reforms, electoral administration, political behaviour, and public perception. Drawing on the framework of democratic accountability theory, this section evaluates the extent to which the electoral process reflected transparency, credibility, and responsiveness to citizens' expectations within the context of Nigeria's evolving democratic system.

#### Transparency of the Electoral Process

From the perspective of electoral integrity theory, transparency is a foundational requirement for credible elections (Norris, 2019). In the Oyo State election, transparency was shaped largely by procedural reforms introduced by INEC. The deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) was intended to enhance openness in voter accreditation and result transmission. In several polling units, these tools improved visibility of electoral procedures by reducing manual manipulation and allowing stakeholders to observe processes in real time.

However, inconsistencies in the uploading of results and delays in collation created gaps in transparency that raised public concern. These mixed outcomes indicate that while procedural transparency improved in some respects, it remained uneven across different local government areas. This finding aligns with the assumptions of electoral integrity theory, which emphasizes that transparency must be consistent and comprehensive to sustain public confidence (Norris et al., 2021).

#### Credibility of Results

The credibility of election results in Oyo State was widely debated among political actors, observers, and the electorate. On one hand, the use of electronic accreditation and digital result transmission mechanisms was seen as a positive step toward enhancing credibility. On the other hand, delays and technical irregularities in result transmission created doubts about the reliability of the final outcomes in some constituencies.

The perception of credibility was therefore not uniform, as it varied depending on local experiences and political affiliations. This demonstrates that electoral credibility is not only a technical issue but also a perceptual one shaped by trust in institutions and processes. From a democratic accountability perspective, this perceptual dimension is critical because accountability depends not only on objective procedural quality but also on citizens' subjective belief that their votes count (Dahl, 2020).

#### Role of INEC Reforms (BVAS and IReV)

The introduction of technological innovations such as BVAS and IReV represented a major reform effort aimed at strengthening electoral accountability. BVAS improved voter authentication by reducing multiple voting and impersonation, while IReV was designed to promote transparency by allowing real-time viewing of polling unit results. In Oyo State, these innovations contributed to greater procedural efficiency in some areas.

However, operational challenges, including network failures, device malfunctions, and delayed uploads, limited their full effectiveness. Consequently, while INEC reforms marked progress in electoral management, their inconsistent performance highlighted structural and infrastructural limitations within the electoral system. This observation underscores the need for continuous improvement in electoral technology and logistical preparedness, as emphasized in the recommendations of this study.

#### Voter Confidence

Voter confidence in the electoral process was shaped by both institutional reforms and lived electoral experiences. In areas where voting proceeded smoothly and technological tools functioned effectively, citizens expressed higher levels of confidence in

the process. However, reports of delays, logistical challenges, and inconsistencies in result transmission negatively affected trust among segments of the electorate.

Additionally, historical experiences of electoral malpractice in Nigeria influenced voter perceptions, resulting in a cautious and sometimes skeptical attitude toward the credibility of the electoral process. This suggests that voter confidence remains fragile and highly sensitive to both procedural efficiency and perceived fairness. From a theoretical standpoint, this fragility reflects the deep-rooted challenges that electoral integrity theory identifies as obstacles to democratic consolidation in emerging democracies (Norris et al., 2021).

### **Political Party Reactions**

Political party reactions in Oyo State reflected the competitive and contested nature of the election. The All Progressives Congress (APC), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and Labour Party (LP) each expressed varying degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the electoral outcomes. While some parties accepted results in certain constituencies, others raised concerns about irregularities, collation processes, and the transparency of result transmission.

These divergent reactions underscore the absence of unanimous acceptance of electoral outcomes, which is a key indicator of contested democratic accountability in emerging democracies. From the perspective of democratic accountability theory, such contestation is not inherently problematic, provided that disputes are resolved through transparent and credible institutional mechanisms (Dahl, 2020). However, persistent disagreements over electoral integrity can undermine public trust and political stability if not adequately addressed.

### **Effect of Observer Presence on Conduct of Elections**

The presence of international and domestic observation missions had a notable but limited effect on electoral conduct in Oyo State. In some polling units, the visibility of observers contributed to improved compliance with electoral procedures and reduced overt malpractice. Electoral officials and security agents were generally more cautious in their conduct where observers were present.

However, the influence of observers was largely symbolic and did not fully eliminate structural challenges such as logistical delays and technological inconsistencies. Furthermore, observer reports had limited immediate impact on real-time electoral management, though they significantly influenced post-election evaluations and legitimacy debates. This finding supports the central argument of this study that observation missions are supportive but not decisive in enhancing democratic accountability.

### **Overall Assessment**

Overall, democratic accountability in the Oyo State election reflects a mixed outcome. While institutional reforms introduced by INEC enhanced procedural transparency and introduced innovative mechanisms for accountability, structural challenges and implementation gaps limited their full effectiveness. The presence of international observation missions contributed to procedural discipline and normative reinforcement of democratic standards, but their impact on substantive accountability remained constrained (Burchard, 2021).

Therefore, democratic accountability in the Oyo State 2023 presidential election can best be described as improving but still fragile, shaped by both institutional progress and persistent systemic weaknesses. This assessment aligns with the theoretical expectation that democratic consolidation is a gradual and contested process, requiring sustained commitment from both domestic institutions and international partners.

### **Position Argument / Critical Analysis**

This paper adopts a balanced but critically cautious position on the role of international observation missions in strengthening democratic accountability in the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State. While acknowledging their contributions to procedural transparency and normative reinforcement of democratic standards, it argues that their overall impact on substantive democratic accountability remains limited, uneven, and sometimes overstated.

### **Do Observation Missions Improve Democratic Accountability?**

International observation missions generally contribute positively to electoral accountability by increasing visibility and scrutiny of electoral processes. Their presence during the 2023 elections in Nigeria, including Oyo State, created a level of procedural caution among electoral officials and political actors. In line with democratic accountability expectations, observers help reinforce compliance with electoral norms and discourage blatant forms of malpractice.

However, this study argues that such improvements are largely procedural rather than structural. While observers may influence behaviour on election day, they do not fundamentally alter deeper institutional weaknesses such as logistical inefficiencies, political interference, or systemic distrust in electoral management. Therefore, their impact on democratic accountability is real but limited in depth and sustainability. From the perspective of electoral integrity theory, this limitation reflects the gap between procedural compliance and genuine institutional transformation (Norris, 2019).

### **Do Observer Reports Reflect Ground Realities?**

A key concern in this analysis is whether observer reports fully reflect electoral realities on the ground. Reports from bodies such as the EU, AU, and ECOWAS provide valuable standardized assessments of electoral conduct, but they often rely on sampled observations, time-bound assessments, and diplomatic framing (Kelley, 2019).

In the case of Oyo State, ground-level experiences varied significantly across polling units. While some areas experienced relatively smooth voting processes, others faced delays, technical challenges with BVAS, and voter frustration. This variability suggests that observer reports, while credible, may not always capture the full complexity and localized realities of electoral experiences. Consequently, there is often a gap between macro-level assessments and micro-level electoral realities. This finding reinforces the recommendation for more localized, context-sensitive observer reporting.

### **Did Their Presence Deter Electoral Malpractice?**

The presence of international observers appears to have had a moderate deterrent effect on overt electoral malpractice. In many observed polling units, electoral officials and party agents demonstrated greater adherence to procedural guidelines when observers were visibly present. This aligns with the assumption that surveillance increases accountability and reduces opportunities for manipulation.

However, this deterrent effect is neither uniform nor comprehensive. Electoral malpractice in modern elections is often subtle, decentralized, and technology-mediated, making it difficult for observers to detect or prevent in real time. Moreover, many electoral irregularities occur outside the immediate view of observers, particularly during logistics, collation, and result transmission stages. Thus, while observers may deter visible misconduct, their capacity to address systemic or hidden irregularities is limited. This observation underscores the importance of strengthening domestic institutional capacity rather than relying primarily on external scrutiny (Burchard, 2021).

### **Are Observer Influences Overstated or Underestimated?**

The influence of international observation missions is often overstated in public and political discourse. Their reports are frequently treated as authoritative validation or rejection of electoral outcomes, even though their mandates are primarily observational rather than enforcement-based. This creates a perception that they possess greater power over electoral legitimacy than they actually do.

At the same time, their influence should not be underestimated. Observation missions play an important normative role in reinforcing global democratic expectations, shaping international diplomatic responses, and encouraging incremental electoral reforms. Their presence also contributes to political caution among domestic actors, even if indirectly, by fostering a climate of restraint where the fear of international censure subtly discourages electoral malfeasance and encourages greater adherence to democratic protocols, even in the absence of enforceable mandates (Cheeseman et al., 2019).

### **Position of This Study**

This study therefore maintains that international observation missions in the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State played a supportive but not conclusive role in enhancing democratic accountability. They strengthened transparency, improved procedural compliance, and contributed to international credibility assessments of the election. However, they did not fundamentally resolve the deeper structural challenges affecting Nigeria's electoral system.

Their impact is best understood as normative and symbolic reinforcement rather than institutional transformation. Democratic accountability in Nigeria is still primarily determined by domestic institutions such as INEC, political parties, the judiciary, and civil society engagement, rather than by external observers (Dahl, 2020).

In conclusion, international observation missions remain important actors in Nigeria's electoral democracy, but their effectiveness depends heavily on the strength of domestic institutions and the political environment in which elections are conducted.

### **Implications for Democratic Development in Nigeria**

The findings of this study on international observation missions and democratic accountability in the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State have significant implications for Nigeria's broader democratic development. These implications cut across public trust in elections, institutional strengthening, future electoral reforms, and the ongoing debate between national sovereignty and international democratic intervention.

### **Impact on Public Trust in Elections**

One of the most important implications of international observation missions relates to public confidence in electoral processes. In principle, the presence of observers is expected to enhance trust by providing independent assessments of election credibility. In the 2023 elections, including in Oyo State, observer presence and reports contributed to a sense of external validation among some segments of the electorate.

However, public trust remains mixed. While some citizens view international reports as credible endorsements of electoral processes, others perceive them as limited in scope or overly diplomatic in tone. This divergence suggests that observer missions alone cannot fully restore or guarantee public confidence. Instead, trust in elections in Nigeria continues to depend more heavily on domestic experiences of electoral transparency, efficiency, and fairness than on external validation. This finding has important implications for how both INEC and international partners design their engagement strategies.

### **Institutional Strengthening (INEC, Judiciary, Security Agencies)**

The study also highlights the role of electoral observation in indirectly encouraging institutional strengthening. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the judiciary, and security agencies operate within a broader accountability ecosystem in which international scrutiny serves as a reinforcing mechanism.

For INEC, observation reports provide feedback on operational strengths and weaknesses, particularly in relation to technological innovations such as BVAS and result transmission systems. For the judiciary, contested elections and observer observations increase pressure to ensure timely and credible adjudication of electoral disputes. Similarly, security agencies are often more cautious in maintaining neutrality during elections when international attention is present.

Nevertheless, these effects are largely indirect and conditional, depending on the willingness of domestic institutions to internalize reform recommendations. Without sustained political commitment, external observation alone cannot guarantee long-term institutional transformation. This suggests that international partners should focus on capacity-building and technical support rather than simply deploying observers (Hyde, 2020).

### **Future Electoral Reforms**

The 2023 election experience, particularly in Oyo State, underscores the need for continuous electoral reform in Nigeria. Technological innovations such as BVAS and IReV represent significant progress, but their inconsistent performance highlights the necessity for infrastructural improvement, better training of electoral officials, and stronger digital resilience.

Future reforms should focus on:

1. Strengthening real-time result transmission systems
2. Improving logistical coordination and election preparedness
3. Enhancing transparency in collation centres
4. Expanding civic education to reduce voter apathy and misinformation
5. Ensuring consistent implementation of INEC's disability inclusion framework

International observation missions can support these reforms by providing comparative best practices and technical recommendations, but implementation remains the responsibility of domestic institutions (Norris et al., 2021).

### **Overall Implication for Democratic Consolidation**

Overall, the implications of this study suggest that while international observation missions contribute positively to electoral transparency and normative democratic standards, their impact on democratic consolidation in Nigeria is supportive but not transformative. Sustainable democratic development depends primarily on strengthening domestic institutions, improving governance practices, and building citizen trust in electoral systems (Cheeseman et al., 2019).

In this regard, international actors serve as important reinforcing mechanisms within a broader democratic framework, but they cannot substitute for internally driven political accountability and institutional reform.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined the role of international observation missions in relation to democratic accountability in the 2023 presidential election in Oyo State, Nigeria. The analysis engaged key issues such as electoral transparency, credibility of results, institutional reforms by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), voter confidence, political party reactions, and the influence of international observers on electoral conduct. Drawing from democratic accountability theory and electoral integrity perspectives, the study established that elections remain central to democratic legitimacy, but their credibility depends on both institutional strength and public trust.

A major argument advanced in this study is that international observation missions contributed meaningfully to procedural transparency and normative reinforcement of electoral standards in Nigeria's 2023 elections. However, their influence on substantive democratic accountability remains limited and often overstated. While their presence encouraged compliance with electoral procedures and provided external assessments of the process, they did not fundamentally resolve structural and institutional challenges affecting electoral integrity in Oyo State and Nigeria at large.

The study further emphasizes that credible elections are essential for sustaining democratic governance, enhancing political stability, and strengthening citizens' confidence in state institutions. Without credible electoral processes, democratic accountability becomes weakened, and political legitimacy is continuously contested. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that while reforms and observation mechanisms are important, they must be complemented by strong domestic institutions and political will.

At a broader level, the findings have significant implications for Nigeria and other African democracies. They highlight the importance of balancing domestic electoral ownership with international support mechanisms. They also underscore the need for African states to strengthen internal democratic institutions rather than relying excessively on external validation. Ultimately, sustainable democratic consolidation in Africa depends on the credibility of elections as well as the resilience of domestic accountability structures.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis of this study, the following policy-oriented recommendations are proposed to enhance democratic accountability and electoral integrity in Nigeria:

1. **Strengthen institutional independence** through constitutional and institutional reforms, including ensuring financial autonomy, reducing political interference in appointments, and improving operational capacity. A more independent INEC will enhance public confidence and improve the credibility of electoral outcomes.
2. **Provide more localized and context-sensitive assessments** in observer reports rather than broad generalizations. This will help bridge the gap between observer findings and ground-level electoral realities.
3. **Focus on capacity-building and technical support** rather than simply deploying observers. International partners should invest in strengthening domestic institutions to ensure sustainable electoral integrity.
4. **Strengthen civic and voter education** across Nigeria to improve citizens' understanding of electoral processes, rights, and responsibilities. Increased civic awareness will reduce voter apathy, strengthen participation, and enhance public scrutiny of electoral processes.
5. **Continue advocacy** for the effective implementation of INEC's electoral reforms and inclusion frameworks, using evidence from studies like this to hold INEC accountable.

## References

- African Union Election Observation Mission. (2023). *Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria*. African Union Commission.
- Agbaje, A., & Adebawu, W. (2021). Electoral politics and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. In A. Agbaje & W. Adebawu (Eds.), *Nigeria's democratic experience* (pp. 45-78). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bjornlund, E. C. (2004). *Beyond free and fair: Monitoring elections and building democracy*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Bratton, M., & van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic experiments in Africa: Regime transitions in comparative perspective*. Cambridge University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Burchard, S. M. (2021). Electoral integrity and international observation: Assessing effectiveness in emerging democracies. *Journal of Democracy and Elections*, 15(2), 45-62.
- Carothers, T. (1997). The observers observed. *Journal of Democracy*, 8(3), 17-31. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1997.0041>
- Cheeseman, N. (2015). *Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures, and the struggle for political reform*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cheeseman, N., Lynch, G., & Willis, J. (2019). Democracy and elections in Africa: Challenges and prospects. *African Affairs*, 118(471), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adv052>
- Dahl, R. A. (2020). *On democracy* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
- De Zeeuw, J. (2018). International election observation in Africa: Between diplomacy and democracy. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 56(3), 423-448.
- Diamond, L. (2008). *The spirit of democracy: The struggle to build free societies throughout the world*. Henry Holt and Company.
- Economic Community of West African States Election Observation Mission. (2023). *Preliminary statement on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria*. ECOWAS Commission.
- Elklit, J., & Svensson, P. (1997). What makes elections free and fair? *Journal of Democracy*, 8(3), 32-46. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1997.0042>
- European Union Election Observation Mission. (2023). *Nigeria general elections 2023: Final report*. European Union External Action Service.
- Hyde, S. D. (2020). *Election observation and democratization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ibrahim, J. (2022). Electoral integrity and democratic governance in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Political Science*, 18(1), 56-79.
- Independent National Electoral Commission. (2023). *Report on the 2023 general elections*. INEC.
- Kelley, J. G. (2012). *Monitoring democracy: When international election observation works and why it often fails*. Princeton University Press.
-

- Kelley, J. G. (2019). *Scorecard diplomacy: Grading states to influence their reputation and behavior*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lindberg, S. I. (2006). *Democracy and elections in Africa*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Norris, P. (2019). *Electoral integrity and global politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Norris, P., & Martínez i Coma, F. (2017). Electoral integrity around the world. In P. Norris, R. W. Frank, & F. Martínez i Coma (Eds.), *The politics of electoral integrity* (pp. 2-28). Oxford University Press.
- Norris, P., Frank, R. W., & Martínez i Coma, F. (2021). *Assessing the quality of elections*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ojo, O. (2020). The politics of electoral reform in Nigeria: A critical assessment. *Journal of African Elections*, 19(1), 34-57.
- The following sources are recommended for strengthening the paper for international journal submission:
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.