



## **The 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election Result**

### ***Fraud or BVAS's Inability to Function***

#### **Commentary**

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Historically, Nigeria has not witnessed free and fair elections. Elections are often characterized as a "do-or-die" affair marked by violence, electoral rigging, vote buying, ballot paper snatching, falsification of results, and the use of thuggery to intimidate voters.<sup>1</sup> Tribalism and religious affiliations also play a significant role in Nigeria's electoral landscape, with access to power and control over the country's abundant natural resources often determined by election outcomes. This has led politicians, driven by their self-interests in sharing the national wealth and "oil money," to resort to any means necessary to manipulate election results and secure power. Unfortunately, **Nigeria, despite its rich resources, has failed to conduct a single election free of electoral malpractices and crises since 1959.**

With the aim of fostering transparency and fairness, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in 2021. **Nigerians pinned high hopes on the BVAS, anticipating free and fair elections in 2023.** However, their hopes were dashed when the results of the 2023 presidential election were announced.

The 2023 presidential election held on 25th February proved to be of significant interest for several reasons. Firstly, it featured three dominant political parties: the All Progressives Congress (APC), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and Labour Party (LP). These parties dominated discussions and debates surrounding the Nigerian 2023 elections. Secondly, the candidates representing these major political parties hailed from the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria: Bola Tinubu (a Yoruba from the south-west) contested under the All Progressives Congress, Peter Obi (an Igbo from the south-east) ran for the Labour Party, and Atiku Abubakar (a Fulani from the North) sought office under the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party. **The religious factor also played a role,** with concerns raised over the Muslim-Muslim ticket, wherein Bola

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<sup>1</sup> Sule B et al. 2020. The 2019 General Election in Nigeria: Examining the Issues, Challenges, Successes and Lessons for Future General Elections, *International Journal of Social Sciences Perspectives* 6 (2).

Tinubu, a Muslim, chose a fellow Muslim as his running mate—a departure from the norm. For some, the election became a question of which tribe would emerge victorious, while for others, religious considerations influenced their preferences. However, **the youth appeared to prioritize candidates with integrity, political will, and the capacity to address pressing national issues, including insecurity, unemployment, and academic strikes.**

The actual election day witnessed a significant surge in first-time voters, primarily comprising youth. Nevertheless, **the usual challenges persisted, such as ballot paper snatching, violence in certain polling units, difficulties with BVAS in capturing voters, and reports of result manipulation.** These circumstances led to suspicions of election rigging. INEC's chairman bore the brunt of the blame, with Nigerian professors also criticized for their involvement in electoral malpractices. Despite the tradition of appointing professors as INEC chairman since 1998, electoral irregularities have persisted. The 2023 election further fuelled allegations against Prof. Mahmood, the INEC chairman, who was accused of accepting bribes from the incumbent political party (APC) to manipulate results in favour of Bola Tinubu. Such events sparked heated debates in Nigeria, with prominent figures like Prof. Wole Soyinka expressing dissatisfaction over the apparent paradox of professors rigging elections while expelling students for exam malpractice. Public discontent was heightened by the memory of the previous year's eight-month academic strike during which academics remained unpaid, leaving Nigerian students out of school for an extended period.

The declaration of Bola Tinubu as the winner with 37 percent of the votes, while candidates from the Peoples Democratic Party and Labour Party secured 29 and 25 percent of the votes respectively, met with widespread rejection, especially among the youth and opposition parties. **The act of rejecting election results is not uncommon in Nigeria, and past instances have led to military takeovers.** Many Nigerians believed the election was rigged due to videos depicting candidates winning in polling units during the ballot counting, but these results were not uploaded to the BVAS. Reports of BVAS malfunction further fuelled doubts about the integrity of the election. Consequently, a substantial number of Nigerians, particularly the youth, perceived Tinubu's claimed victory as a massive fraud.

To address these recurring issues, several suggestions can be considered.

1. Firstly, it is essential to reduce the allure of politics in Nigeria, which currently serves as the most lucrative industry. Demonetizing politics and viewing it as an opportunity to serve the people rather than accumulate wealth could curb the prevalence of electoral malpractices.
2. Secondly, digitizing the entire election process, from voting to counting and collation of votes, would minimize opportunities for result manipulation. While BVAS was introduced to verify voters' identities and transmit results, manual collation remained susceptible to technical challenges, such as poor network connections, which hindered result uploads. Improving network infrastructure and enlisting technical experts to work with INEC during elections would facilitate the smooth implementation of digitized electoral processes.
3. Thirdly, ensuring complete independence for INEC is crucial. Controversy surrounds the extent of INEC's independence, with allegations that it is largely influenced by the president and various security agencies. Strengthening INEC's independence and transparency would foster public trust in the electoral process.

In conclusion, the 2023 Nigerian presidential election once again highlighted the challenges facing electoral integrity in the country. Despite the introduction of BVAS and efforts to promote transparency, allegations of election rigging persist. **Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to demonetize politics, digitize the election process, and ensure the complete independence of INEC.** Only then can Nigeria strive towards conducting elections that truly reflect the will of the people and promote genuine democratic governance.