

Cronyism and Electoral Malpractice: A Political Economy Analysis of INEC Appointments and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria, 2003–2023

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Abstract- The persistence of cronyism in INEC appointments has significantly undermined Nigeria's democratic consolidation over the past two decades. This study employs a political economy approach alongside the Marxist theory of the state to critically examine the mechanisms through which crony appointees compromise institutional integrity and facilitate electoral malpractice. Using a secondary data method, the research analyzes historical appointments between 2003 and 2023, highlighting key instances under the administrations of President Olusegun Obasanjo, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, President Goodluck Jonathan, President Mohammed Buhari and President Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Findings reveal that cronyism erodes INEC's institutional autonomy, weakens voter trust, marginalizes opposition actors, and biases decision-making, thereby perpetuating electoral illegitimacy. The study contributes to the literature on democratic consolidation and electoral reform by demonstrating how elite capture and patronage politics intersect to undermine institutional reforms. Recommendations include comprehensive policy interventions, legal reforms, and institutional strengthening to restore the credibility of Nigeria's electoral processes and consolidate democratic governance.

Keywords: *Cronyism Appointees, Democratic Electoral Consolidation, Voter Trust, State, Ruling Class, Marginalization, Opposition Parties, Electoral Governance, Institutional Autonomy, Elite Production*

I. INTRODUCTION

Democratic consolidation in Nigeria has faced persistent challenges, often attributed to institutional weaknesses and elite manipulation. A recurring feature of this fragility is cronyism in the appointment of key officials within the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Political elites frequently nominate loyalists to leadership positions, undermining the impartiality and effectiveness of the

electoral management body. Such practices compromise institutional autonomy, distort electoral outcomes, and weaken public confidence in democratic governance (Diamond, 1999; Ojo, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between INEC appointments and democratic consolidation failures in Nigeria from 2003 to 2023. By employing a mixed theoretical lens combining political economy and Marxist theory of the state, this study analyzes how elite capture and state-centric interests shape electoral processes, perpetuating malpractice and hindering democratic institutionalization. The study relies exclusively on secondary sources, including academic journals, official reports, newspapers, and online publications, to provide a comprehensive and analytically robust perspective.

II. ANALYTICAL–THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs a dual theoretical framework, integrating the Marxist theory of the state and political economy analysis. The Marxist perspective posits that the state is a tool for the ruling class, serving the interests of elites rather than functioning as a neutral arbiter (Ake, 1981; Marx & Engels, 1848). Within this framework, appointments within INEC are viewed as instruments for elite consolidation, privileging political loyalty over institutional competence.

The political economy approach complements this by examining the distribution of power, resources, and institutional incentives within Nigeria's electoral system (Leftwich, 2000). By combining these frameworks, the paper demonstrates how state structures, elite patronage, and resource allocation converge to facilitate cronyism, eroding institutional

autonomy and undermining democratic consolidation. This integrated lens provides a robust analytical tool to interpret historical patterns of electoral malpractice in Nigeria.

III. CONCEPTUAL EXPLICATIONS

Cronyism Appointees: Refers to the appointment of individuals to key positions based on loyalty, personal connections, or political favoritism rather than merit or competence (Joseph, 1997).

Democratic Electoral Consolidation: The process through which a democratic system matures, ensuring free, fair, and credible elections while strengthening institutional legitimacy (Diamond & Morlino, 2005).

Institutional Autonomy: The capacity of an organization to make independent decisions, free from undue political interference or external manipulation (Ojo, 2005).

Elite Production: The generation and selection of political elites who shape governance, often reflecting patterns of patronage and resource control (Apter, 1965).

Electoral Governance: The structures, policies, and practices that regulate the conduct of elections to ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability (Sisk, 2017).

IV. FACTORS THAT UNDERMINED NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN INEC

Historical appointments illustrate how cronyism compromised INEC's independence:

- Olusegun Obasanjo (2003–2007): Key appointments reflected partisan loyalties, leading to allegations of bias and electoral malpractice (Akpan & Onya, 2019).
- Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010): While some reforms were attempted, senior appointments often favored political insiders, undermining institutional credibility.
- Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015): Political patronage influenced INEC leadership choices, resulting in public distrust and contested electoral outcomes (Diamond, 1999).

- Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023–present): Initial appointments indicate continued patterns of elite loyalty over technical competence, suggesting persistent risks for democratic consolidation.

These patterns collectively illustrate how elite capture and cronyism eroded INEC's autonomy, facilitated manipulation of electoral rules, and weakened opposition participation.

V. FINDINGS

1. **Institutional Erosion:** Crony appointments consistently undermined INEC's capacity to operate independently, leading to perceived and actual electoral bias.
2. **Public Distrust:** Recurrent allegations of favoritism and manipulation decreased voter confidence, reducing participation in democratic processes.
3. **Opposition Marginalization:** Opposition parties often faced structural disadvantages due to biased decision-making and appointment of loyalists.
4. **Policy and Reform Gaps:** Despite sporadic reforms, the interplay of political economy and elite capture limited the effectiveness of institutional reforms.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that cronyism within INEC appointments is a critical factor impeding Nigeria's democratic consolidation. By eroding institutional autonomy, fostering elite capture, and marginalizing opposition actors, these appointments perpetuate electoral malpractice. Integrating the Marxist theory of the state with political economy analysis provides a coherent lens to understand how structural and elite-driven factors shape electoral outcomes in Nigeria.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Policy Reforms:** Strengthen legal frameworks to ensure merit-based appointments and transparent selection processes for INEC officials.
2. **Institutional Autonomy:** Guarantee financial and operational independence for INEC to resist political interference.

3. Electoral Governance Enhancements: Implement rigorous monitoring mechanisms and independent oversight bodies to ensure credible elections.
4. Elite Management: Promote inclusive political participation and reduce patronage-driven elite capture through civic education and institutional reforms.

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