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RESEARCH REPORT

Ballots and Bills: Electoral Competition in Political Marketplaces

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Abstract

Elections are one of the most competitive time periods within political marketplace countries. They offer opportunities for democratic gains and to challenge those in power, but they also epitomize the range of strategies that are employed to manipulate the results. This paper examines the reality of electoral competition and how it intersects with political marketplace dynamics using the 2023 elections in Nigeria as a case study. This paper argues that elections can embody some of the most destructive behaviours within the political marketplace, but they also create opportunities to shift political behaviour. The paper discusses these dynamics and their implications for strengthening democratic gains within political marketplace countries.

Key Findings

1. Elections are the market days of political marketplaces—presenting destructive competition as well as opportunities to reshape the system.

Electoral political marketplaces are nominally democratic political systems in which transactional politics, meaning elite deals, dominate formal democratic processes. While competition for political power is constant throughout the political calendar, elections are the most important period—akin to a market day. Elections demarcate a unique opportunity to compete, rearrange alliances, and renegotiate deals in ways that are not possible outside of election periods. This is when political competition is the fiercest, embodying the most destructive elements of the marketplace—the monied deals, the short-sighted political thuggery, and the zero-sum politics. Given their importance, elections are also moments of opportunity to reshape the political system. In multi-tiered systems like Nigeria, political power is fractured, and no single actor controls the political system. This creates both opportunities and hurdles for democratic activists to transform the system.

2. Violence and cash are key tools used to compete in elections, but these are contested and face opposition from the public.

Elections within Nigeria have been defined by the use of money and violence that manipulate and overshadow the will of the people. From party primaries better known as "money bazaars" and attempting to buy votes on election day, candidates rely heavily on the political loyalty that money, and lots of it, can buy. These costs are allegedly financed (directly or indirectly) with resources diverted from the state. Elections are also violent. Violence disrupted voting in 22 states, and the threats of violence likely contributed to low voter turnout. However, the election showed that the candidate who has the most money or willingness to use violence is not necessarily the one who will win the primary or election. Other factors are at play – notably a candidate's political acumen and how these tactics will be received and contested by the public. Candidates with significantly less money or use of violence won states in heavily contested elections, suggesting that the utility of cash or violence varies across the country and may have limits.

3. Electoral reforms can strengthen the voting process, but their implementation is subject to manipulation and can have unintended consequences.

The 2023 election cycle had a range of electoral reforms, such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System, the Election Results Viewing Portal, and currency swap, allegedly intended to improve the transparency of the process and mitigate common election rigging tactics such as ballot box stuffing and vote buying. However, the reforms faced varying levels of manipulation, logistical failures (intentional and not), and opposition that collectively decreased confidence in the election results. In addition, reforms such as the currency swap, partially aimed at attempting to cut down on vote buying, triggered an economic crisis for average Nigerians while elite politicians were still able to amass stockpiles of cash for election day. Electoral reforms within political marketplaces have the potential to reshape the rules of political competition, but they can also be manipulated or weaponized against opponents. In the process, average citizens may bear the consequences.

4. There are crosscurrents that challenge the marketplace's transactional politics.

The 2023 election cycle was historic in the emergence of a competitive, third-party candidate, Peter Obi, who drew support from voters and civic coalitions across the country. His campaign harnessed long-standing grievances of poor governance and kleptocratic politics, offering a different political vision for the country. While Obi was no stranger to how the game was played, his campaign and the support it garnered was a major contrast to the dominant transactional mode of electoral competition. Although Obi did not win, it is striking how close he came to winning despite the opposition he faced and the levels of voter suppression and manipulation that occurred on election day. Obi's campaign was significant, but the more important crosscurrents are the civic coalitions and youth engagement that emerged during the election. Many people "woke up" and engaged in politics for the first time. The key question is what comes next? Can the energy of the 2023 election be channelled and sustained in a long-term civic movement? Challenging transactional politics is extremely difficult, but Nigeria's civil society remains one of the most promising drivers of change.

Introduction

Across the globe, elections have increasingly become the way political power is legitimized, though in many countries, elections are far from free or fair. The hope and promise of the third wave of democracy has faded to reveal the emergence of countries that hold elections, but the elections bear little resemblance to the democratic ideals they allegedly represent (Cheeseman 2015). These weakly institutionalized states have been described as electoral autocracies (Evie et al. 2023), neopatrimonial states (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997), competitive authoritarians (Levitsky and Way 2010), new despots (Keane 2020), and hybrid political orders (Boege, Brown, and Clements 2009). In policy circles, weakly institutionalized political systems also characterized by high levels of violence, injustice, weak institutions, and poor governance are simply called "fragile states." While some research has shown that the repeated practice of holding elections contributes to long-term democratic gains, countries such as Madagascar or Zimbabwe seem to indicate a learning curve on how to manipulate electoral outcomes (Cheeseman 2015; van Ham and Lindberg 2018; Klaas 2018; Themnér 2017). How do we understand some of the patterns of electoral competition and manipulation, and moreover, what reforms can have an impact in these environments?

In this paper, I use the analytic lens of the political marketplace framework (PMF) to understand these dynamics. The PMF focuses on the transactional logic of how those in power negotiate political power within and outside of formal political institutions. This analytic lens is especially useful for countries allegedly governed by democratic institutions because it provides tools to separate the real politics from their democratic facades. Many of these countries can be described as electoral political marketplaces—nominally democratic political systems in which transactional politics, meaning elite deals, dominate formal democratic institutions (de Waal 2015). Political power in these countries is treated as a commodity that is bought and sold based on market conditions. At times, negotiations over political power seems to align with formal institutions and processes, while at others, the negotiations circumvent formal institutions. Elections are a key example. While elections take place in these countries, the backroom deals made among elite actors determine who holds power.

The Democratic Republic off the Congo (DRC), Nigeria, and Iraq are paradigmatic electoral political marketplaces. In each, elections are the only officially legitimate[1] path to political power, and as such – elections become the peak moments of competition for power. In other words, elections are the market days of electoral political marketplaces. On market days, elite actors compete for power, rearrange alliances, and renegotiate deals in ways that are not possible outside of election periods. For democratic reformers, market days may present a key opportunity to shift broader patterns of how the political system operates. The critical question is—how does this play out in practice?

This paper seeks to answer this question by exploring the reality of electoral reforms and civic movements as they play out amidst dynamic competition using the 2023 election cycle in Nigeria as a case study. Nigeria is by population, the largest electoral political marketplace in the world, but it also provides a complex case in which to interrogate these dynamics. While electoral politics are normatively accepted in Nigeria, they are incredibly complicated and rarely represent the will of the people. In exploring the Nigerian election, the paper seeks to shed light on how violence and money are used in elections, how markets respond to attempts at reforms, and the challenges and hope of civic movements.

Approach and Structure of the Paper

This paper is about the complexities of electoral competition in Nigeria. As a case study of one of the largest democracies in the world, it is important to understand in its own right, but I argue that it also provides insight into the reality of elections in political marketplace countries more broadly. It is based on existing secondary data as well as interview (INTs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) I conducted in Nigeria between October and December 2022, and virtually between 2021 and 2023. It also draws on ethnographic observation data I collected while in Nigeria during the same period and is informed by my previous experience living and working in Nigeria between 2015 and 2017. I note the source of data throughout for transparency in my analysis.

The paper begins with an overview of the political marketplace framework (PMF) followed by an introduction to the Nigerian political marketplace. It then turns to an exploration of electoral competition within Nigeria beginning with a vignette drawn from the 2023 election cycle. The paper then focuses on the ways cash and violence are used in electoral competition. The final section discusses the implications this study has for understanding electoral competition in other political marketplace countries.

Analytic Framework: The Political Marketplace

The political marketplace framework (PMF) is a theory of how contemporary politics are practiced in countries in which transactional politics, meaning dealmaking among elite actors, dominates formal institutions (de Waal 2015). Electoral political marketplaces are those in which elections are cemented as the only legitimate path to political power. As previously introduced, in political marketplaces (PM), political power is treated as a commodity that is bought and sold, and in some contexts, violently fought over. Cash and violence serve as the key currencies within the marketplace, though as will be discussed in later sections, each serves different functions and the preponderance of either is no guarantee of success—actors also need political acumen.

The PMF builds upon the neopatrimonial[2] school of thought (Bayart 2009; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Chabal and Daloz 1999) but seeks to explain how neopatrimonial states have evolved in response to globalization and the changing nature of violent conflict (Kaldor 2012; de Waal 2015, 32). In addition, it provides a framework for analysing the logic of the deals among the elite as a way for understanding why these deals at times align with formal institutions, and at others, dominate them. In line with Mbembe, the PMF focuses on the 'real politics' as they occur within and beyond formal positions of power and written rules (1992, 30).

Two of the key analytical tools that the PMF offers are the concepts of political budgets and political finance. Political budgets are the funds that individual actors have to buy loyalty or political services (de Waal 2015).[3] Political services can include anything from hiring political thugs to intimidate an opponent to bribes for election workers to tilt the ballot returns in favor of a certain candidate. Political finance is the overall amount of funds flowing through the political system to facilitate deals, fund patronage networks, and purchase the previously described political services. In PM contexts, political finance is the heart of what makes the political system function (Miller 2024).

While transactional politics dominate within PM contexts, this is rarely the only political logic at play. There are also competing political ideologies defined by civic ideals, ethnoreligious identities, competition over scarce resources, and violence (Kaldor and Radice 2022; Kaldor and de Waal 2020). Often times, these multiple logics are intertwined and are sometimes opportunistically employed as façades for the transactional deals being made among elite actors. However, on balance, it is the logic of transactional politics that dominates.

While the path to becoming a political marketplace is specific to each country, research suggests some common patterns. One of these patterns is Bates's argument of how declining state revenues in the 1970s and 80s triggered eventual state breakdown (Bates 2008). Bates argued that the declining state revenues set off a series of fiscal crises in the 1970 and 80s in states across Sub-Saharan Africa, leaving them with insufficient resources needed to function. Politicians, faced with fewer state resources and increasing public demands for reform, turned to predation and corruption in order to finance their own political survival. This created cycles of violence and predation that fuelled ethnic conflict, insurgencies, natural resource extraction, and undermined national economies. Versions of this story can be found in Nigeria, Venezuela, South Sudan, and the DRC—paradigmatic political marketplaces—as well as in countries like Sierra Leone and Cameroon which may not be full political marketplaces, but certainly qualify as weakly institutionalized political systems (Acemoglu 2012; Bayart, Ellis, and Hibou 1999; Burgess and Corrales 2023; Craze 2022; Ellis 2016; Schouten 2021). While the paths to becoming a political marketplace are many, research suggests that once these dynamics become established, they are extremely difficult to dislodge (Sarkar 2023; de Waal, Spatz, and Sarkar 2022).

Nigeria's Multi-tiered, Hierarchical Political Marketplace

On the surface, Nigeria is a federal republic governed by democratic institutions and processes. In practice, Nigeria is an electoral political marketplace. Elections are the official way that leaders are chosen, but it is the deals struck among the elite that determine who holds and can exercise power (Adebanwi and Obadare 2011a; Falola and Heaton 2008; R. A. Joseph 1987). Leveraging the rents of the state and distributing them through patronage and clientelist networks are key to how leaders gain and maintain political power (Ellis 2016; LeVan 2019). These ongoing deals among the elite and between the elite and average citizens play out within, in the guise of, and outside the formal political institutions.

One of the central aspects of the Nigerian political marketplace is the oil rents that have given rise to its rentier structure (Ellis 2016; Miller 2023). Since the 1970s, oil revenues have historically accounted for between 65 – 85% of government revenues.[4] Oil rents are collected by the federal government and then distributed to state and local governments through monthly allocations. Though there are leakages throughout the government's attempts to collect and distribute oil rents (Miller 2023; Sayne, Gillies, and Katsouris 2015). The lack of internally generated revenues within the states themselves has created an upward dependence on the federal government.[5] While transactional politics may be the lifeblood of Nigeria's political system, oil is what has historically financed it.[6]

Some of the most prized positions within the government are executive offices (e.g., president, vice president, governors, deputy governors, local government chairmen and deputy chairmen) because of their control over government budgets, public employment, contracts, and government appointments. In essence, executive officeholders have outsized opportunities to amass political budgets capable of ensuring political support and maintaining patronage networks (Ellis 2016; Page and Wando 2022). This becomes especially important during elections when politicians need to "share money around." Executive officeholders have more latitude in the formal rules they follow, and the ones they break than other elected officials. While in office, federal and state-level executives are immune from prosecution.[7] However, the immunity shield ends once they leave office, creating an incentive for those who have broken laws to ensure they are succeeded by an ally willing to protect them from prosecution. Because of the power of executive offices, they are also among the most contested and expensive to acquire.

In 2023, there were 420 candidates running for 28 gubernatorial positions (IRI/NDI 2023). This competition is also highly gendered. Ninety-four percent of the gubernatorial candidates were male (IRI/NDI 2023, 29). Not only are a majority of those contesting for political power men, but as is discussed in later sections of the paper, women face significant hurdles as candidates and in participating in politics.

The Nigerian marketplace is complex in its structure. Politically, the country is composed of 36 states, one federally-controlled territory, and 774 local government areas (LGAs). Each has its own dynamic market configurations that are shaped and shape the other levels of the market. The national level market—in part due to its control and distribution of the oil revenues—maintains an outsized influence shaping the lower markets. At the national level, the marketplace often resembles a rivalrous oligopoly with the two major parties—All Progressives Party (APC) and People's Democratic Party (PDP)—battling for control over power and their piece of the national cake. States, however, are more often dominated by a single party, usually the governor's, making their structure closer to a collusive oligopoly if not a centralized, authoritarian market that extends to the local government.

Elections are when competition in Nigeria's PM is at its peak. They are the equivalent of market days. Major vendors may still dominate and try to raise barriers to new vendors, but the election demarcates an opportunity to compete, rearrange alliances, and renegotiate deals. Elections also epitomize how the twin currencies of cash and violence are used to trade and secure political power. As Kew argued, elections are so important that, "political leaders have rarely allowed public preferences to get in the way of their preferred results" (2010, 499). As will be discussed later in the paper, aspiring candidates need to have significant political budgets in order to compete and win an election. These funds can come from a variety of sources, though two of the most significant are funds diverted from the state and financing from Nigeria's infamous "godfathers." "Godfathers" are wealthy, influential individuals who are seen as kingmakers operating in the shadows to get certain candidates elected (Albert 2005). This is akin to taking a loan for your political budget from a godfather, expecting to repay it by providing commensurate influence. This is also when political actors put themselves back on the market to see how much actors are willing to pay for their political support.

Election cycles are just as much about negotiating deals among political party elite, informal power brokers, and violence entrepreneurs (i.e., political thugs) as they are about appealing to voters. Each negotiation requires substantial resources and loyalties are subject to the shifting demands and opportunities of the marketplace. High-level actors (e.g., party chieftains, high profile members, current officeholders, and godfathers) attempt to maintain high barriers to entry by keeping the cost to enter extremely high and maintaining tight control over the political parties. Having a significant political budget or ability to stoke violence is no guarantee of success. It also takes significant political acumen to know how and when to use each tool and which powerbrokers to court.

Rules of the Market

There are a few rules within Nigeria's political marketplace worth noting – especially as they relate and differ from how politics is practiced in other political marketplace countries. These include rules around term limits, power shift, male dominance, big man politics, and the role of traditional leaders.

First, is an agreement among the political elite that executive officeholders may not be executives for life, though they can hold other positions in government (e.g., Bayart's (2009) circulation of the elites).[8] In fact, in contrast to a growing number of leaders working to circumvent or remove term limits across Africa, Nigeria has maintained its commitment to them (Reyntjens 2020; Siegle and Cook 2021). While term limits were established in the 1999 constitution, it was cemented as a rule in the political marketplace in 2006 when the national assembly rejected Obasanjo's attempt to amend term-limits to allow himself to run for a third term in office (R. Joseph and Kew 2008; Skylar, Onwudiwe, and Kew 2006). The rejection of a third term may be one of the most significant political developments of the Fourth Republic. Sklar, Onwudiwe, and Kew remarked that it represented "a neopatrimonial moment for Nigeria, when a supragrodfather [Obasanjo] sought ascendancy while old godfathers tried to decide whether sustaining or destroying the democratic system would best serve their interests" (Skylar, Onwudiwe, and Kew 2006, 101). While executives may be term-limited, they are given generous severance packages and they do not have to exit the political sphere.[9] In fact, many former governors go on (or "retire") to the National Assembly where they represent sections of the states they once governed.[10] A total of 18 former governors contested for seats in the 2023 National Assembly (Ugwu 2023).

Ten won their elections and were sworn in. Unlike the executive offices, the National Assembly does not have term limits. In essence, the political elite decided in favour of an explicit institutional check on executive tenure but left many other doors to the national cake open. However, this may be less related to democratic ideals and more related to a second tenant in Nigerian politics – an informal agreement in rotating power – "power shift."

"Power shift" is the belief that political power should rotate across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones to ensure that each group has its turn in power (LeVan 2019).[11] In Kenya, Wrong has described a similar principal of power shift as "our turn to eat" (2010). At the national level, this means presidential and vice-presidential candidates that rotate across the geopolitical zones, with one coming from a northern political zone and the other from the south (this often is seen through a religious lens of one Muslim and one Christian candidate). At the state level, this means candidates should come from across the majority ethnic groups within the states; that gubernatorial tickets need to similarly balance geopolitical/religious representation. While this was a "gentlemen's agreement" (indeed few women were or have been given space to participate) that emerged during the 1999 transition to democracy, it has been contested since. As exemplified in the All Progressives Congress' "Muslim-Muslim" 2023 presidential ticket, the "power shift"/balancing principle has not always held.

As previously introduced, a third dynamic worth noting is the gendered hierarchies and double standards applied to women in Nigerian politics. Women face significant barriers to participate in politics, both as voters and candidates. As candidates, women struggle to gain financial backing, face threats of violence, and struggle to gain the support of both male and female voters because of their gender.[12] Some male voters do not think a woman's place is in politics. Some female voters expressed doubts that female candidates would be able to overcome the barriers to their candidacy or draw enough public support to win an election, and so are therefore themselves reluctant to vote for them because they do not want to support a losing candidate – especially if it means they may get cut off from the patronage network of the winner.[13] As voters, women are threatened with violence to prevent them from voting or to pressure them to vote in line with their husband or male elders. The cumulative effect is that Nigeria has one of the lowest levels of women elected to high-level offices anywhere in the world (World Economic Forum 2023). In 2023, women held only 21 seats out of the total 469 seats in the two houses of the National Assembly (Iruke 2024, 5). As of April 2024, Nigeria has never elected a female governor (Iruke 2024).[14] Aisha Dahiru (APC), a 2023 gubernatorial candidate in Adamawa almost broke this trend, but her victory was later rescinded and the courts ruled that her male opponent, Ahmadu Fintiri (PDP), won the election (Premium Times 2024; Reuters 2023).[15]

The next point is about political parties as "parties of personalities", not platforms. Political parties are defined by the individuals within them – the "big men", and the "godfathers" – not necessarily by the political ideologies or democratic practices they claim to espouse (Omotola 2009).[16] As Ibrahim and Abaje have shown (2023; 2023a), there is very little that is democratic about contemporary political parties as primaries are more akin to competitions in bribery and rigging than representation of voters' choice of candidates. Candidates are "imposed by force" through bribes or violence, rarely by meaningful democratic voting (Ibrahim 2023a). In practice, in the Fourth Republic, political parties have acted as avenues to wealth, with political actors repeatedly jumping between parties depending on which could offer them best government office or the best financial package (Adebanwi and Obadare 2011a; Agbaje 2023; LeVan 2019). However, as will be discussed later in the paper, Peter Obi's campaign in 2023 claimed to deviate from this historical pattern.

Lastly, is the point about the complex role of traditional leaders in Nigeria. As described in everyday parlance in Nigeria, traditional leaders are those that are recognized as such in particular communities (Ehrhardt, Alao, and Umar 2023, 7). This includes the more historical Emirs, Obas, the Gbong Gwom Jos, Ardos, community leaders, and other types of local leadership, but it also includes the increasing number of newly minted traditional titles that are largely ceremonial and non-hereditary but signify a level of influence in the community (Ehrhardt, Alao, and Umar 2023, 275). While historically, traditional leaders have been some of the key individuals overseeing local governance[17], this changed in 1976 with the creation of democratically-elected local governments.[18] The reforms relegated traditional leaders to largely ceremonial and policy advisors, though they continued to be extremely influential in local governance, security, and politics (Ehrhardt 2023; Ehrhardt, Alao, and Umar 2023; Falola and Heaton 2008; Umar 2023). Some evidence suggests that this influence is in part influenced by traditional leaders exercising their "creative genius" to stay relevant, foster support from the community, and maintain their embeddedness within it without necessarily having to be seen as part of the state (Ehrhardt, Alao, and Umar 2023). Ehrhardt, Alao and Umar (2023, 286) argue that it is precisely their distance from the state that has created space for traditional leaders to create their own legitimacy among local groups and hold influence in daily life. Yet, traditional leaders are embedded within the marketplace and therefore can become intermeshed with prebendal and rent-seeking politics, as well as violent conflict (Akpomera and Omoyibo 2014; Alao 2023). This is especially true during elections when politicians attempt to utilize them as brokers capable of producing votes (Amusa and Ofuafor 2012; Alabi, Bamidele, and Nurudeen 2023).

The 2023 Election Cycle

A Vignette of Electoral Competition

The morning of 15 November 2022 was strangely quiet in Jos.[19] The roads, usually packed with cars, kekes, and okadas, in the morning bustle were oddly empty.[20] Instead, they were trafficked by the occasional passing car and a band of women fast at work sweeping the dust from the streets—not an easy feat during the dry season. Late the previous night, Governor Lalong had called a state-wide holiday in honour of the official launch of Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima's All Progressives Congress' (APC) presidential campaign. Jos lay quiet in anticipation.

Governor Lalong, the term-limited outgoing governor of Plateau State, was the Director General of the APC Presidential Campaign and planned to "flag off" the campaign from his home capital—Jos. The city was certainly prepared. Potholes that had existed so long that vendors set up shop on them were recently tarred, patched, and smoothed. However, these road repairs were mainly on the roads that the APC candidates and their entourages would travel – between the Jos airport, the Governor's complex, the Gbong Gwom Jos's palace (paramount traditional leader in the state), and the Rwang Pam Township stadium in the heart of Jos where the rally would be held. In essence, the most direct lines between the transit hub, the power brokers, and the public display. These routes were lined with freshly placed campaign billboards and posters—seemingly alternating between advertising the APC presidential ticket and Lalong's Legacy Projects, a series of infrastructure projects around the city intended to cement his legacy as contributing to the development of Jos.

Photo 1: APC campaign posters along Yakubu Gowon Way. 15 November 2022. Taken by Author.

The Jos airport, newly renovated and frequented by the well-heeled hoping to avoid the all-too-common armed robberies and kidnappings along the highways between Jos and Abuja, was crowded with private jets. By some reports, more than 30 private and chartered jets had landed at Jos with very important persons (VIPs) (Abioye et al. 2022). Dark Land Cruisers escorted by different branches of security forces stuffed into the back of freshly washed Hiluxes from seemingly every branch of the security forces. Rumour was that most of the official Plateau State vehicles had even been commandeered to transport rally attendees around the city. These were followed by gleaming (and potentially) armoured buses for the "notable personalities and dignitaries". These convoys arriving in Jos were tens of vehicles long, a show not only of the number of supporters, but also of wealth and power. Plateau State was in the midst of a fuel shortage. For those without connections, buying black market fuel was one of the few reliable but expensive ways to get it—likely not a concern for those in the convoys.

In other parts of the city, minibuses began flocking to the city centre. Some bearing the green and yellow of the common of the minibuses across Plateau State. Others bearing the colour schemes from surrounding states. Some from as far away as Borno State – Vice Presidential Candidate Shettima's home state and a full day's journey by road. Some supporters no doubt brought by belief in the candidate – others by monetary inducement.

One of Tinubu's key stops prior to the rally was to meet the traditional leaders of the state—the Gbong Gwom Jos and Council of Emirs. These are the top traditional leaders in the state. While they do not hold official governmental roles, they hold customary titles and are extremely influential within their respective communities. During elections, traditional leaders have also been power brokers for candidates. In receiving Tinubu, Shettima and their entourage, the Gbong Gwom Jos said that Tinubu "was a tested person, and by the grace of God, a reliable person" (TVC News Nigeria 2022). The Gbong Gwom Jos also appealed that the campaigns should be peaceful. If historical experience is any indication, this visit likely also included some "gifts" (i.e. monetary inducements) given on the side-lines intended to encourage the traditional leaders to use their influence to rally voters to the APC.

Hundreds filed into the stadium organized around a barbed-wire wrapped grandstand that housed some of the most powerful officials in the country—President Buhari, up-and-coming APC candidates, Bola Tinubu and Kashim Shettima, along with Governor Lalong and a host of senators and governors from across the country.[21] This was the weight of the APC and the official starting gun for the APC campaign machine. For the next several hours, members of the APC were celebrated while party leaders made sometimes short, sometimes long-winded speeches. The spirit was jubilant – of a party that felt in control and widely supported by the people. Many residents I spoke with, however, saw it as a charade that epitomized Nigerian politics. The Nigerian equivalent of Potemkin villages – from a distance they look real, but when you look closely, they are only a façade.[22]

It was rumoured that many of the people who attended the rally were paid to be there at the going rate of N5,000 (then equivalent to about $6.25 USD) (Nigeria at Sunset 2022). Some activists reported rumours of a secret meeting the previous night in which the APC tried to bribe well-known civil society members to leverage their influence to draw people to the campaign. This was not an ideological plea; it was a monetary one.

Jos itself was somewhat a surprising choice for the launch of the APC presidential campaign. While Lalong was governor of Plateau State and this was his home capital, the APC was deeply unpopular in the city. While some credited Governor Lalong's administration with bringing a level of stability back to the once violence-torn state, many felt that his administration was not doing enough and many that some in his administration were busier "chopping" money than focusing on projects to benefit the people.

Later that night, campaign staff for Peter Obi, a third-party candidate who had captured the attention of those hoping for democratic reform, would arrive in Jos and strategize how to mobilize grassroots support for Obi's unlikely candidacy. Obi had split from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) – one of the two dominant parties in the country – during the primaries alleging that the process was not about democratic will, but well-placed bribes. His candidacy was upending the historic pattern of a two-party election.[23] Obi's campaign would go on to be seen as one of hope for a new type of elected leader.

Six days earlier, the People's Democratic Party presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, held his own campaign rally in Borno state, but under very different circumstances. Instead of following a freshly paved road on the way to meet with the Shehu of Borno, one of the most important Muslim traditional leaders in the state, Atiku's convoy was met with attackers who threw stones at his convoy (Hussaini 2022). The PDP claimed that the thugs were APC members, whereas the APC claimed that they were part of infighting within the PDP (Aworinde 2022; Folorunsho-Francis et al. 2022). This was not the first time Atiku's campaign was attacked, nor would it be the last. Instead, violence allegedly carried out by the APC and PDP against rival candidates would become a routine event throughout the campaign period (ACLED 2023; IRI/NDI 2023).

These descriptions of the leading parties' campaigns epitomize the dynamics at the heart of electoral competition in Nigeria: the imagery and celebration of 'big men', the use of influence brokers to appeal to voters, the violence, the missing voters, and the promise of change—all occurring against a backdrop of monied politics. This was the reality of the 2023 elections in Nigeria.

The 2023 Electoral Context: A Strengthened Voter System under Stress

The 2023 presidential election cycle looked like it would be a historic moment for Nigeria. The sitting president, Muhammadu Buhari, was term-limited and seemed determined to make a free and fair election part of his legacy. Youth registered to vote in historic numbers. Electoral reforms created hope that the votes cast may actually matter. This section puts the 2023 election in context, explaining both the significance of it, and dynamics that emerged in the lead up to election day.

President Buhari took office in 2015 with campaign promises to tackle insecurity and a stalling economy. Eight years later, over half of the country was living in multidimensional poverty, insecurity stemming from banditry, kidnapping, and Boko Haram affected much of the country, and average citizens faced major economic challenges including inflation rates of more than 20% (Atwood n.d.; NBS 2022). From the perspective of many Nigerians, there was little to celebrate. According to Afrobarometer, almost nine out of ten Nigerians (89%) said the country was going in "the wrong direction," a 20% increase from 2020 (Galileo, Mbaegbu, and Duntoye 2023). Nigerians were frustrated with the direction of the country and the 2023 elections presented an opportunity to change course.

By the numbers, Nigeria's 2023 election was stunning. There were 18 political parties fielding 15,331 candidates for 1,491 positions (INEC 2023). This meant that on average, there were ten candidates contesting for almost every elected position from the presidency down to state houses of assembly. At the national level, there were 18 candidates for president, which while seemingly high for a political system dominated by two parties, is still a significant decrease from 2019 when there were 73 presidential candidates. In the language of the political marketplace, market day looked to be extremely competitive.

Nigeria's elections were conducted in two parts (as is the usual practice). The president/vice-president and National Assembly members (senators and representatives) were elected on 25 February and the governors and State Houses of Assembly members (senators and representatives) were elected three weeks later on 18 March.[24] In the last seven elections, the votes were almost always postponed, often at the last minute. In 2019, the elections were postponed a few hours before the polls opened (Ogundipe 2019). In the lead up to the 2023 elections, both President Buhari and INEC Chairman Mahmood Yakubu, repeatedly stated that the 2023 elections would be held as scheduled (Okonoboh 2023). The presidential and national assembly elections were held as scheduled, but the gubernatorial and state houses of assembly elections were delayed by a week due to logistical challenges facing INEC.

Nigeria has many political parties (which are often changing), but it is primarily dominated by two parties: the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Only the APC and PDP have held the presidency and majorities in the National Assembly (NASS).

To win the presidential election, a candidate must receive the highest number of votes in the election and at least 25% of votes cast in each of at least two-thirds of all the states in Nigeria (INEC 2023). This is to ensure that a candidate seeks the votes of Nigerians across the country, not just in their region or around major urban areas. If this threshold was not met, a run-off election would be held within 21 days. The candidates selected for the run-off would be: a) the candidate who received the most overall votes (regardless of whether they meet the 2/3rds rule); and b) of the remaining candidates, the one who had a majority of votes in the highest number of states. To date, Nigeria has never had a run-off election for president. Prior to 2023, there had never been a serious challenger to the two-party dominant system. In 2023, this changed with Peter Obi's campaign with the Labour Party.

Meet the Candidates

Historically, the race for president has been between the APC and PDP. The PDP dominated national, state, and local politics from 1999 to 2015 when the APC took the country by storm in the country's first peaceful transition of power between the parties. APC would then dominate politics from 2015 through 2023. In 2023, the race was seen as a contest between three main candidates: Bola Tinubu (APC); Atiku Abubakar (PDP); and the dark horse, Peter Obi (Labour Party). As previously discussed, political parties in Nigeria are often more defined by the leaders of those parties than their leaders. This was evident in 2023 as well. The candidates' political platforms were each quite similar – each making promises to improve the country's economy, fight insecurity, and address rampant corruption (Krippahl 2023). However, given each of the candidates' personal histories, these campaign promises resonated differently among voters.

Bola Tinubu – All Progressives Congress

Bola Tinubu, born in 1952, was a familiar face in Nigerian politics. Tinubu was a democratic activist turned politician turned billionaire businessman. During the military dictatorship of the 1990s, Tinubu campaigned for the return to democratic governance and co-founded the Alliance for Democracy, one of the major political parties fielding candidates in 1999. He served as the governor of Lagos state from 1999 to 2007, when Lagos attracted significant foreign investment and grew massively—what has become known as "the Lagos Model" (Roelofs 2016, 2023). In 2023, Tinubu controversially launched a bid for the presidency on an all-Muslim ticket with former governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima (Ibrahim 2022). Historically, as previously discussed, presidential tickets were expected to balance religious identity (Christianity and Islam) and geography (north and south) of the candidates (so-called "balanced tickets"). However, Tinubu bucked this tradition saying he chose the person he thought most capable for his running mate.

Tinubu was seen as one of Nigeria's infamous political 'godfathers' pulling the strings for certain individuals to get party nominations and using his immense wealth to finance their campaigns (AFP 2023a; Orjinmo 2023). In addition to founding and financing the Alliance for Democracy, Tinubu also helped to establish the APC party, a coalition of political parties in the lead-up to the 2015 elections. He was seen as having hand-selected his gubernatorial successors in Lagos and credits himself as one of the reasons that Buhari was elected in 2015 and 2019 (Daniel 2022).

During campaign events for the 2023 election, Tinubu repeatedly said that "it's my turn" to serve as president because it was the Yoruba's turn to hold the presidency and "in Yorubaland, it's my tenure" (It is my turn to be president – Tinubu 2022). This echoed the informal rule around power rotation, but it also left some voters feeling that he was approaching the presidency from a sense of entitlement, not necessarily public service.

As with many politicians, allegations of corruption and questions over the source of his wealth have plagued Tinubu. He stated that the source of his wealth was real estate that he inherited.[25] In the past, he also said that he became an "instant millionaire" while working as an auditor at Deloitte and Touche (Tinubu 2022).

Tinubu was described by some as a shrewd political operator. Dapo Thomas, a political science lecturer at Lagos University, described Tinubu as "a very aggressive, very solid political machine" (AFP 2023a). While he may have been a solid political machine, there were major questions over how willing he was to engage with voters. In the 2023 campaign season, Tinubu shrugged off many of the public requests for debates and interviews, rarely engaging in an unscripted public event with voters. Tinubu ran on his reputation, his broad stroke policies, and not his engagement with voters.

Atiku Abubakar – People's Democratic Party

Born in 1946, making him the oldest main candidate, Atiku Abubakar (Atiku) was also a very familiar face in Nigerian politics. A Muslim from Adamawa State, Atiku was a civil servant in the 70s and 80s before becoming a businessman. In the 1990s, he entered politics and served as vice president under Olusegun Obasanjo from 1999 to 2007. For many Nigerians, however, he stood out because 2023 was his sixth presidential campaign since 1999, including one attempt at contesting with the APC party. During his time as vice president, Atiku oversaw the privatization of hundreds of government-owned enterprises (GOEs). Privatization of unprofitable GOEs, such as Nigeria's underperforming oil refineries, continued to be part of his political platform (Anichukwueze 2022). Some argued that Atiku and his friends made millions on the side, something that has not been proven, but his immense wealth has left people speculating (AFP 2023b). Atiku's running mate was Ifeanyi Arthur Okowa, a Christian from oil-producing Delta State.

After securing the PDP nomination, Atiku faced intense infighting within his party, especially from other presidential hopefuls. A group of his biggest critics became known as the G5. Led by Nyseom Wike, then governor of PDP stronghold Rivers State, refused to publicly support Atiku citing concerns over the party leadership. At one point, Wike even barred Atiku from holding a campaign rally in Rivers State (Edozie 2023). Wike and the G5 said they would announce on election day who they would support and more importantly, who they would ask their constituents to support in the election (Oyero 2023). Wike allegedly appointed 200,000 polling unit aides to ensure his supporters voted for who he would choose on election day (Akinkuotu 2023). The APC and PDP both attempted to court the support of the G5, interestingly meeting in hotels in London to do so (Kumolu and Akinrefon 2022). However, when election day came, Wike never publicly announced support for a specific candidate, though surprising results from Rivers indicated that he may have been supporting Tinubu (discussed later in the paper).

While Atiku had the political recognition and an immense fortune to support his campaign, many Nigerians doubted whether he could win the election, especially as Peter Obi was likely to pull southern votes that may have otherwise gone to Atiku.

Peter Obi – Labour Party

Peter Obi is the candidate that shook up Nigeria's two-party system and captured the hopes of millions of Nigerians. Born in 1962 and a Christian from Anambra state, Obi was a wealthy businessman and former governor of Anambra state. Obi tried to use his record as governor to demonstrate his commitment to accountability and ending endemic corruption. A common campaign slogan at his rallies was, "it's time to take your country back," referring to elite politicians who had pilfered the state. He framed himself as the anti-establishment candidate and mobilized a large number of young supporters.

Obi originally planned to contest to be the PDP's presidential candidate, but left the party three days before the presidential primary, saying "developments within our [the PDP] party make it practically impossible to continue participating and making such constructive contributions" (Ajibola 2022). Others said Obi left the PDP because he refused to participate in buying votes to secure the PDP nomination for president (Onyekakeyah 2022; Krippahl 2023). In reality, few could match the resources of the immensely wealthy Atiku. Interestingly, Obi was Atiku Abubakar's running mate in the 2019 election under the PDP banner and no stranger to how the game was played (Ogundipe 2019).

After becoming the Labour Party's candidate for president, Obi gained followers from across the country, some of which self-described as Obi-dients. Obi described his voters saying people are supporting him because they saw "failed governance but looking very eager and willing to see a new Nigeria" (Gabriel and Sodeinde 2023). As a third-party candidate who gained support across the country, Obi's campaign upended historical voting patterns as well as the two major party's campaign playbooks (Hassan, Adamolekun, and Dizolele 2023).

While Obi consistently topped the polls, he faced an uphill battle to win the election. He was more popular in the south than the north, and the Labour Party did not have the nationwide voter mobilization structures that PDP and APC had. One Nigerian I spoke with said, "yes Obi may be popular, but at the end of the day, at the local level, it is the party that will deliver for voters, not the candidate." Many Nigerians I spoke with saw Obi as the best candidate but were unsure if they would vote for him, in part because they were not sure if he could win.

Youth Rising: "We Woke Up"

One of the striking elements of the 2023 election was the historic number of young people registered to vote. Of the 93,469,008 registered voters, more than 37 million were between the ages of 18-34 (INEC 2023). This meant that more young people were registered to vote in the 2023 election than the total number of Nigerians that voted in the 2019 general election (28.6 million votes were cast in 2019). However, election observers noted that the number of voters on the voter roll may have been inflated (IRI/NDI 2023; Yiaga Africa 2023a).

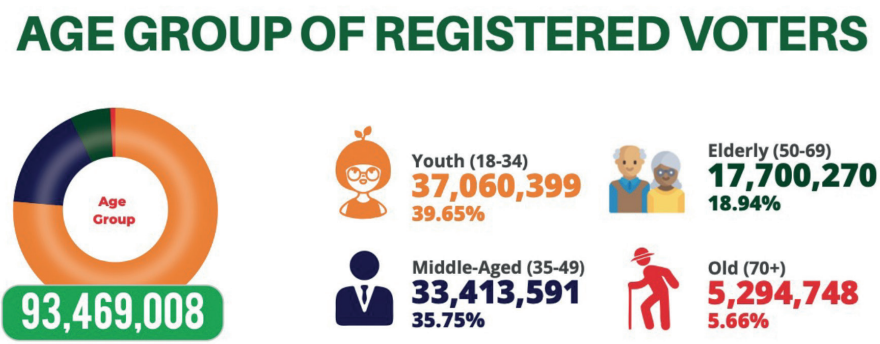

Figure source: (Indepedent National Electoral Commission (INEC) 2023, 15).

The historic number of young people who registered to vote was believed to have been driven by a combination of high youth unemployment, a lack of opportunities, frustrations over poor and at times brutal governance, and the perception that their government did not represent young people. Some of this could be traced back to the EndSARS protests in 2020 when millions of Nigerians, especially young people, took to the streets to protest police brutality, and later to protest issues of corruption, poor governance, and broader injustices. As Damilola Agbalajobi wrote in 2020, the protests were the "result of pent-up anger over the dehumanizing policies of government, maladministration, injustice, hunger as well as high energy and fuel prices" (Agbalajobi 2020). As one Nigerian protest participant told me about the impact of the EndSARS protests:

> *"There were so many people that woke up. Before, we didn't care about politics because it was so hopeless. Young people were thinking only of ways to leave or how to ignore the bullshit. Young people weren't thinking about voting. People weren't thinking in terms of 'how can we survive this?' For the younger generation at least, this changed our perspective, and I don't think people will go back to before."* [26]

At the time, it seemed that her analysis would hold true. Instead of turning away, young people showed that they may be engaging with the political system by not only registering to vote, but by running for office, getting involved with civil society groups, and pushing for electoral reform (such as the Not Too Young to Run Bill),[27] a level of civic involvement that may have been helped by the fact that the largest demographic of voters are students (26 million). This is significant considering that public universities were on strike over better pay for almost two-thirds of 2022, leaving students even more frustrated and unoccupied (Reuters 2022). Election Day may have been an initial test of youth involvement in politics, but by no measure did it seem that young Nigerians were willing to go back to sleep.

Reforms, Misfires, and Hunger

The 2023 elections were not only a test of democratic participation and competition but also a test of whether the electoral system could withstand election rigging strategies and election violence that had plagued previous elections. In advance of the election, the National Assembly passed the Electoral Act of 2022.[28] Among its provisions, it legalized the use of technology to accredit voters and electronically transmit votes (Yiaga Africa 2023c). Specifically, it instituted two key reforms – the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Election Results Viewing Portal (IReV). The BVAS system would verify voters' identities by a double verification of their fingerprint and photo. The IReV system was intended to facilitate the live upload of election results in a way that would allow voters to follow along in real time, theoretically providing greater transparency of the results. INEC poll workers would submit the digital tally of votes and upload a photo of the collated votes summary. By ensuring biometric verification of voters and electronic transmission of votes cast, the act attempted to mitigate election rigging strategies of ballot box stuffing or snatching. On one hand, this gave many Nigerians greater confidence that the ballot they cast on election day may actually be counted the way they cast it. However, as even the activists who advocated for the reforms stated, the Electoral Act contained complexities and gaps that left it open to capture and manipulation (Yiaga Africa 2023a). Indeed, in the pre-election period, observers noted evidence of INEC staff tampering with voter registration, the appointment of questionably partisan individuals as Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs) who would oversee vote collation, and the mobilization of party supporters as ad-hoc INEC officials to staff the polling units on election day (Yiaga 2023b).

On balance, the electoral reforms had the potential to increase transparency or to favour manipulation techniques that required greater technical expertise to carry out, were less visible to the broader public (in contrast to ballot box snatching), and gave the incumbents significant influence in shaping the quality or manipulation of the outcome.

While the Electoral Act had the potential to address some election manipulation strategies, others were still at play – most significantly election violence and vote buying. Vote buying, meaning offering money or goods in exchange for an individual to vote for a specific candidate, is a common election manipulation tactic in Nigerian elections. Votes have historically been bought for anywhere from $1-2 USD or for food or small goods (e.g., bags of rice, t-shirts, wrappers, etc.). More than 78% of Nigerian voters do not agree that they should sell their vote, but given the challenging economic conditions, threats of violence, and scepticism on whether their vote will be truly counted, many see vote buying as an understandable behaviour (Hoffmann and Patel 2022).

Nigerian elections are notorious for being immune to campaign spending limits and have little transparency on where funds come from or how they are used (Yiaga Africa 2023a). Allegedly, partially motivated by the desire to cut down on vote buying in the 2023 election, the Central Bank of Nigeria announced in October 2022 that it was redesigning the currency and would require all Nigerian currency to be changed out at banks (Daily Trust 2022). The logic was that by requiring the currency to recirculate through the banks, the banks would be able to flag large cash withdrawals and therefore trace which politicians held significant amounts of cash. On the other hand, this could have also been a scheme by those with influence over the Governor of the Central Bank to target candidates it did not support. In essence, this could have been a manipulation tool in the guise of a technocratic reform—the weaponization of anticorruption efforts (e.g., Adebanwi and Obadare 2011b). On this point, the waters are extremely muddy. What is clearer, however, is what followed. The currency swap was heavily manipulated, chaotic, and culminated in what Jibrin Ibrahim called an "invented crisis" (Ibrahim 2023b).

The Central Bank's announcement set off a run on foreign currencies. Those who held significant amounts of Naira were scrambling to convert it to another currency so they could keep their cash while staying off the Central Bank's radar. This run on foreign currencies cut the value of the Naira in half on the black market.[29] While Nigeria was planning to have the new currency produced abroad, as it had historically done, Buhari mandated that the new currency should be produced locally. This created delays, shortages, and a series of extensions of the deadline by which everyone had to change out their currency. Because of its inability to rapidly produce the volume of currency needed, the bank installed limits on what individuals and businesses could withdraw each day. In essence, there simply wasn't enough cash to go around. Bank closures and massive crowds waiting outside banks became the norm.

For an economy that was primarily based on cash transactions, the effect was devastating. Average citizens did not have enough cash to be able to buy their normal food and goods for daily living. This coincided with a fuel shortage and in the midst of historic inflation on food (21%) (NBS 2023). As interviewees repeatedly told me, "people are hungry,"[30] both in the literal sense as well as a hunger for money. As Hassan (2023) pointed out at the time, instead of reducing vote buying, the currency reforms seemed likely to make it easier to buy votes because people were desperate for cash. As will be discussed in later sections, evidence suggests that this may have been the case.

It is not clear to what extent the currency swap actually cut down on the amount of cash held by candidates and political actors involved in the election. It is, however, clear that the elite were largely insulated from the pains of the currency swap and still able to amass cash for the election. Those with connections were able to get early access to currency, circumvent the limits the government imposed, or simply rely on foreign currencies and bank accounts. Once again, the political market showed its ability to adapt, maintaining business as usual, while the broader population bore the costs.

Cash & Violence: A Candidate's Handbook on Electoral Competition

This section focuses on the ways in which money and violence were used in Nigeria's elections. These are the twin currencies of the political marketplace, though each comes with understood rules about how each should be used, and the limits on what is acceptable.

Courting Votes: Godfathers, Brokers, and Vote Buying

As discussed throughout, the path to power in Nigeria is through the ballot box, but whose name is on the ballot and how the ballots are cast is another thing entirely. A closer examination of how someone becomes a candidate and succeeds in an election demonstrates the necessity of a political budget and explains how certain shadow actors gain significant influence over the electoral process and officeholders. This section traces the path from candidacy to the election day ballot box.

The first formal milestone for an aspiring candidate is to purchase the candidacy forms from their chosen political party. These forms are exorbitantly expensive. For those hoping to be a presidential candidate for the PDP or APC in 2023, the forms cost approximately N40 million ($96,000 USD) and N100 million ($214,000 USD), respectively (COG 2024).[31] This was more than the four-year salary of the president (Nweje 2022; Yusuf 2022). As Odinkalu noted, the APC's form cost 3,333 times Nigeria's minimum wage, meaning that a worker earning minimum wage would need to work 277.7 years just to afford the APC presidential form (Nweje 2022). When asked why the forms were so expensive, the APC National Chairman said that it was because of the importance of the office of the presidency (Maishanu 2022b). These costs were just to enter the race as a candidate. Next came the costs of securing the nomination of the party—the primaries.

Except for insider reports, there is very little transparency into how the party primaries were actually conducted for any office. Election observers noted that in 2023, of the four major parties – APC, PDP, New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), and Social Democratic Party (SDP) – only the SDP was transparent about how the primaries would be conducted, and allowed their processes to be observed (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 31). Most of the parties provided little information about how the primaries would be conducted, how the primary delegates were selected or who they would be, or the register of party members.

In addition, most parties also refused to allow civil society groups and most media outlets to observe the primaries (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 31). The reports that did emerge from the primaries, however, told a similar story about the role of money.

Party primaries are often described as a competition in buying delegates, or as one Nigerian journalist called them, "dollar bazaar[s]" (Adepegba 2022).[32] At the presidential level, Tinubu is alleged to have spent between $10,000 and $25,000 USD per delegate vote during the APC presidential primary (Hassan 2022). Similarly, at the PDP presidential primary, candidates allegedly offered between $10,000 to $20,000 USD to each delegate. There were a total of 811 delegates at the PDP presidential primary, meaning that the total bribes paid likely amounted to millions of dollars for each candidate. While candidates like Atiku are extremely wealthy and could self-finance these bribes, others' own pockets are not nearly as deep. Those in office, however, have access to state resources. Governor Wike of oil-rich Rivers State is alleged to have spent almost $50 million (N20 billion) of state funds in his failed bid for the PDP presidential candidacy, allegations which he denied (Adepegba 2022). Vote buying in the lead up to the PDP primary is allegedly why Peter Obi left the party. It is worth noting that the EFCC observed the PDP presidential primary, but security agents present were allegedly paid off to only appear to be on the lookout for vote buying, but not actually look for it (Premium Times 2022).

Vote buying happens at primaries for election positions across the board. For example, in Plateau State, some PDP gubernatorial candidates are reported to have spent more than $167,000 USD trying to buy the support of delegates.[33] Not only is this an expensive affair, but for the delegates, it is a lucrative one. At the same PDP gubernatorial primary in Plateau State, some individual delegates are alleged to have collected almost $4,000 in bribes. At the PDP presidential primary, some delegates allegedly took home as much as $50,000 (Sahara Reporters 2022). This far outpaces the less than $365 USD (N137,430) that almost half of the population lives on in a year (NBS 2022).[34] As Chidi Odinkalu said, "party delegates are, in Nigerian parlance, chopping from all sides of the mouth. The presidency is under the auctioneer's hammer" (Nweje 2022).

Election day repeats this competition in vote buying, but the costs are very different.[35] In the words of one interviewee, delegates and brokers were the expensive ones. Voters were relatively cheap.[36] Votes could be bought for anywhere from N500 – N2,000 (approx. $0.75-3.00 USD), or for food or goods (e.g., wrappers, bags of rice, a plate of food) handed out close to a polling centre (Adeyemi 2023; CDD 2023; Ogunbiyi 2018; Onouha and Okafor 2020). For young men, the price may be a bottle of beer. For a state like Plateau with 2.7 million registered voters, election day may have been cheaper than the primary. Indeed, on election day, there were reports of vote buying with voters receiving monetary bribes, as well as wrappers, food, and alcoholic drinks in exchange for their vote (Business Day 2023; CDD 2023). One group of election monitors noted that vote buying was less visible compared to previous elections, but more creative in using food and goods in lieu of cash (CDD 2023).

Collectively, the cumulative cost of one's candidacy, from the beginning of the race to the end, is exorbitant. This is where the previously mentioned "Godfathers" provide a key resource—political finance. Godfathers are individuals who leverage their wealth and influence behind the scenes to select candidates and help them succeed in elections (Albert 2005). In exchange, candidates often promise their godfathers favours, contracts, or influence once they are in office. In essence, candidates take campaign loans for all of the expenses they encounter—licit and not—and repay these loans once they are in office using state resources. Those in office may turn to the resources they control to finance the costs of their campaigns. This is not only common prebendal practice within Nigeria, but has become seen as a right of office holders (R. A. Joseph 1987).

What was striking about the 2023 election was that a renowned godfather—Bola Tinubu—was running for president rather than sitting in the shadows. As previously discussed, Tinubu was one of the wealthiest men in Nigeria, and was seen as a kingmaker within the APC.[37] Tinubu credited himself as the reason that Buhari was elected in 2015.[38] Tinubu was also seen as having hand-picked and bankrolled his successor for governor in Lagos and has since been influential in backing candidates for the APC. For example, the day before the presidential election in 2019, reports emerged of armoured trucks leaving one of Tinubu's houses. When asked about them, Tinubu said:

> "Is that my money or government money? . . . I'm on my own, and I'm committed to my party, so even if I have money to spend in my premises, what's your headache? Excuse me, if I don't represent any agency of government and I have money to spend, if I have money, if I like, I give it to the people for free of charge as long as not to buy votes" (Tinubu on Channels TV 2019).

In essence, Tinubu argued that since it was his own wealth, he should be allowed to do whatever he wanted with it as long as he was not attempting to buy votes. Without more information, it is impossible to determine exactly what the money was being used for or if it was election-related, but it is striking that when given the opportunity to explain it, Tinubu did not deny that he was giving people money by the literal truckload days before the election. He just denied that it was being used to buy votes.[39] As one interviewee I spoke with explained, the line between buying a vote and "thanking" a voter for their support was often a grey one.[40] Examples from Tinubu's 2023 campaign only deepened suspicions on how he was using his wealth to influence the outcome of the election. In the course of Tinubu's 2023 campaign, his son, an organizer on the campaign, tweeted out an image of a campaign meeting. In the background of the photo was a whiteboard showing what appeared to be agenda items. Halfway down the list was "monetary inducements" (Adeiye 2022). The photo was quickly taken down, though not before it set rumours ablaze about Tinubu's campaign strategy.

Given the poor economic situation in the country combined with the extreme shortage of cash, it is likely that vote buying was one of the main strategies used by candidates hoping to influence the electoral outcome. As previously discussed, people were hungry, both in the literal sense and in the need for money. Many believed this made votes cheaper to buy.

On election day, election observers reported vote buying in 10% of observed polling units, but given that vote buying is often done away from the polling units, the use of digital payments, and the fact that observers were present at less than 2,000 of Nigeria's 176,846 polling units, I argue the actual rate of vote buying is likely to be much higher. Research suggests that in such environments, the presence of election observers may simply shift which polls are targeted by election manipulation tactics like vote buying (Asunka et al. 2019). In the lead up to the election, there was certainly evidence of suspicious funds moving around the country. N32.4 million (approx. $70,000 USD) allegedly meant for vote buying in Lagos was seized the week of the presidential election (EFCC 2023).The day before the election, Chinyere Igwe, a PDP House of Assembly member representing Rivers State was arrested near the Rivers State INEC headquarters with almost $500,000 USD (in dollars) – not only a significant amount of money but even more so because it was extremely difficult to get USD at the time because of the run on foreign currencies and restrictions in what the banks were giving out (Peltier 2023; Rivers Police 2023). Igwe was allegedly arrested in possession of a list of how the money was to be distributed, but this list was never made public (Opurum 2023).

While there is substantial evidence on how money can help a candidate win an election, this should not overshadow what the Nigerian people actually think about vote buying and monied politics. As previously discussed, more than 78% of Nigerians do not agree that people should sell their votes, but see it as an understandable behaviour given the poor economy, electoral threats, and scepticism that their vote will even be counted (Hoffmann and Patel 2022; Bratton 2008). There is a substantial appetite in Nigeria for elections based on policy platforms, not money—but in the context of sustained poverty, a bleak economic outlook, and widespread insecurity—money solves problems.[41]

Call the Boys: The Role of Violence

The second currency used in electoral competition is violence. Since 2015, candidates have been asked to sign pledges that they are committed to conducting their campaign without violence or hate speech.[42] However, in 2023, violence actually increased after the candidates signed the pledges, coinciding the with official beginning of the campaigns (IRI/NDI 2023, 24). The prevalence of violence in the lead up to election day was so significant that the National Peace Committee asked the candidates to re-sign the pledges just days before the election (Okeregbe 2023).

In practice, however, candidates treated these pledges as "box-ticking exercises" which gave them political cover while their aides and associates continued to hire political thugs and engage in hate speech (IRI/NDI 2023, 24).

Between 1 January 2022 and 21 April 2023, ACLED recorded more than 4,890 incidents of electoral violence which claimed more than 13,000 lives (ACLED 2023). While levels of violence mirrored those of the 2019 election, it included some worrying trends—notably in how voters were targeted in the lead up to the election (Carboni and Serwat 2023). In the 2023 election cycle, unarmed citizens were the target of approximately 80% of the violent events prior to election day (Carboni and Serwat 2023). The majority of electoral violence incidents were attributed to APC, the ruling party and concentrated in the South South and South East geopolitical regions of Nigeria.[43] Historically, these regions have been PDP strongholds, but in 2023, this pattern was being challenged both by Peter Obi (LP) (whose home state is in the South East), and the G5 governors who seemingly threw their weight behind the APC. On election day, violence disrupted the electoral process in at least 22 states and the FCT, more than twice the number of states affected by violent disruptions in 2019 (IRI/NDI 2023, 35).

There are three broad types of violence used during the Nigerian elections: violence against candidates, violence against voters, and violence against the electoral process – each has a different goal. Common across the types of violence, however, is that the violence is often carried out by young men hired for those purposes (also called political thugs), and non-state armed groups. In contrast to the high costs of the primaries, the cost of election violence can be quite low, especially for one-off incidents. This can range from a few thousand naira (approx. $2-5 USD), goods, or drugs or alcohol, though the cost of hiring more organized armed groups is believed to be higher.

Some of the most well-known non-state armed groups – such as Boko Haram and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) – were at one time hired by candidates to instigate violence during elections (LeVan 2019, 203; Onuoha 2014, 166; Albert 2005; Watts 2012). Watts argues that in the Niger Delta, many of the militant groups were "often the products, not the creation, of state-supported electoral thuggery" (emphasis in original) (Watts 2012, 545).

These groups were armed by politicians and local godfathers and hired using funds from the political parties and local state (Watts 2012, 545). Yet as history shows, these now armed and funded groups do not simply disappear after election day. Instead, many continue to compete for support from the politicians they helped win office—a dynamic that foments insecurity, criminality, and continually fractures any semblance of a state monopoly on violence.

Violence against candidates can take many forms. This includes violence to disrupt rallies, intimidate or kill opponents, demonstrate that they are not welcome in specific jurisdictions, and so on. For example, the PDP presidential campaign was repeatedly attacked in Rivers, a contentious state in which the governor, Nyseum Wike, was feuding with Atiku after Wike did not win the PDP nomination for president. Notably, the 2023 election cycle included 16 documented assassinations and 15 attempted assassinations of political candidates and party leaders (IRI/NDI 2023, 86–89).

Violence against the electoral process is violence against the state institutions and employees. This includes burning down INEC offices, destroying voting materials, and the like. This can disrupt the voting process and be a warning sign of what will happen to voters on election day. In 2023, INEC recorded 51 cases across 15 states of arson and vandalism against INEC facilities and materials (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 28). Notably, many of these incidents against INEC were concentrated in the South East and South South zones, especially in Imo, Enugu, and Anambra.[44]

The last is category is violence against voters. This is about discouraging voters from supporting a particular candidate, or from more broadly voting at all. This is a form of voter suppression and intimidation. When voters have doubts that their vote would even be counted, why would they risk facing violence? Even in the absence of physical violence, the threat of violence has been shown to have a significant effect on decreasing the likelihood that a voter goes to the polls (Bratton 2008). In the 2023 election, approximately 60% of the 4,890 violent incidents targeted civilians (ACLED 2023). This is believed to have contributed to the low voter turnout, especially in populous states like Kano, Rivers, and Lagos (IRI/NDI 2023, 23).

Election Day and the Aftermath

Election day was characterized by excitement, trepidation, and disappointment. On the surface, it was full of surprises and contradictions. Historic voter registration translated into a historically low voter turnout. The predicted winner came in third. Technology that was supposed to ensure transparency caused many to doubt the results. Logistical failures appeared intentional. Violence, while down from the 2011 levels, still affected almost half of the states across the country. Collectively, these issues cast a shadow over the veracity of the results. For many familiar with the Nigerian elections—it was politics almost as usual.

The first signs of challenges emerged as the polls were opening—or supposed to open. Across the country, widespread logistical challenges caused polls to open late. Notably, many of the late openings occurred in the South East and South South geopolitical zones where Obi's campaign was expected to do well (Yiaga Africa 2023a). However, even Kashim Shettima, APC vice presidential candidate, had issues voting in his home state of Borno because the polls were still not open by 10:00am (Ejekwonyilo 2023). Since early 2022, civil society groups had raised concerns over institutional capture at the national and state level election commissions leading to fears over how these independent bodies would become politicized (Iroanusi 2022). They alleged that many of the individuals nominated by President Buhari and confirmed by the Senate as Resident Electoral Commissioners were partisan, and therefore unfit to hold positions as election officials (Iroanusi 2022). Evidence suggests these fears were justified. Yiaga Africa, the lead organization for a coalition of election observers deployed before and during the election, wrote that "some Resident Electoral Commissioners, collation and returning offices sabotaged the elections through non-implementation of the logistics plan for the election misapplication of guidelines on results management, and manipulation of election results at the collation level" (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 11).

Across the country, security agencies, party supporters, and political thugs descended on the polls attempting to manipulate the outcome. Thugs attacked collation centres and party agents interrupted vote collation in Rivers, Abia, Delta, Ebonyi, Gombe, and Enugu. Overall, violence disrupted voting or vote collation in at least 22 states and the FCT. This was twice the level of violent disruptions seen in 2019 (IRI/NDI 2023, 35). In sum, voter disenfranchisement and suppression had intensified in comparison to previous elections (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 10).

Partway through the day, the IReV system that was supposed to increase transparency in the voting collation process went dark and for hours, INEC offered no explanation. While the BVAS and IReV systems were used in more than 105 elections prior to the 2023 general election, none of these elections were at the scale of the 2023 election (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 24). A limited stress test of the BVAS and IReV systems was done in January, two months prior to the election, but it was on a much smaller scale than the system would be used for on election day (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 33). The system crash, combined with silence from INEC, fuelled fears that the vote was being manipulated. As of 9:00am the next day, only 14% of presidential results forms were uploaded to IReV (IRI/NDI 2023, 36). The day after the election, it was discovered that INEC had been uploading the presidential results to an alternate portal before posting them to the IReV. When asked to explain why, INEC offered "delayed and conflicting explanations as to why this was done, at first denying the existence of an alternate portal, then citing technical glitches, and later citing cyber-attacks" (IRI/NDI 2023, 36). This only exacerbated speculation that the election results were being manipulated.

In contrast to the polls that showed Obi would win the election, Tinubu was declared the winner at around 1:00am on 1 March with 8,794,726 votes. However, at the time of the announcement, only 70% of the results posted to IReV, and it was not clear which states Tinubu had won with at least 25% of the vote (a constitutional requirement). Results would continually be added but as of 26 March 2024, 9,403 presidential result sheets were still missing from the IReV portal. As more information became available about the election tallies, some notable discrepancies emerged in Rivers and Imo States.

Figure 2: Map of 2023 Presidential Election Results

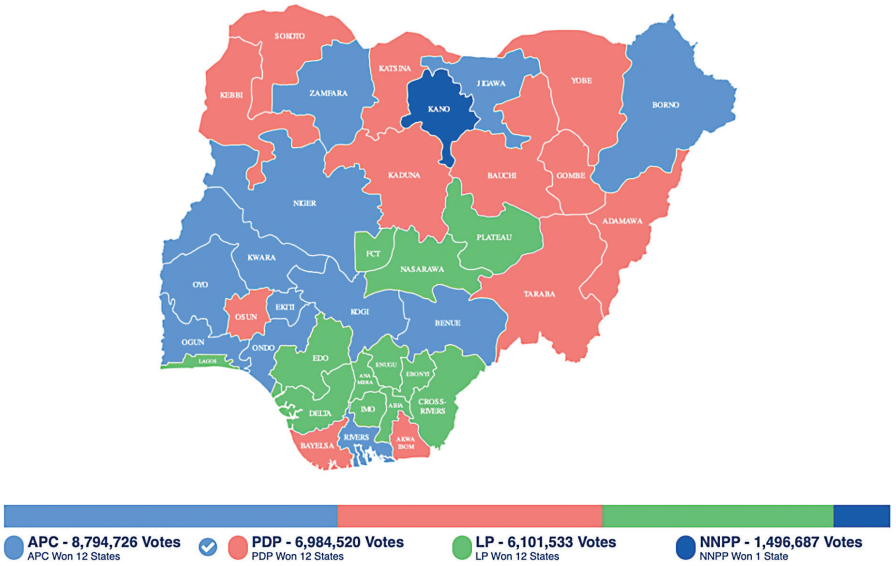

Figure 1: 2023 Presidential Election Results. Source (Civichive 2023).

Table 1: 2023 Presidential Election Results

Party	Total Votes	Predicted Overall Vote	Percentage of Overall Vote	Number of States Won
APC	8,798,726 votes	23%	37%	12
PDP	6,984,520 votes	27%	29%	12
LP	6,101,533 votes	38%	25%	12
NNPP	1,496,687 votes	6%	6%	1

Source: (Civichive 2023)

Yiaga Africa, the civil society organization leading the domestic coalition of election observers, noted that while the overall election results were in line with their parallel voter tabulation (PVT), the results in Rivers and Imo state were not (Yiaga Africa 2023a). As shown in the table below, the APC and LP party returns for both Rivers State and Imo were outside the margin of error of results predicted by the PVT, raising concerns that the final tallies may have been manipulated in the collation process. While observers noted concerns over the results from these two states, they did not believe the results changed the overall result of the election.

Table 2: Comparison of Official INEC Results compared to Yiaga Africa Parallel Voter Tabulation (PVT)

Rivers State					
Party	INEC	PVT* Estimate	PVT Est. Range	PVT Est Margin of Error (MoE)	Official results within PVT Range
APC	44.2%	21.7%	16.7 - 26.7%	+/- 5%	No
PDP	33.4%	50.8%	40.2 – 61.4%	+/- 10.6%	No
LP	16.9%	21.8%	15.3 – 28.3%	+/- 6.5%	Yes
Imo State					
Party	INEC	PVT* Estimate	PVT Est. Range	PVT Est Margin of Error (MoE)	Official results within PVT Range
APC	14.2%	5.1	+/- 2.3	2.8 – 7.4%	No
PDP	77.1%	88.1%	+/- 3.8%	84.3 – 91.9%	No
LP	6.5%	5.7%	+/- 2.3%	3.4 – 8.0%	Yes

Source: (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 36–37).

Overall, the results were contested by both the Atiku's and Obi's campaigns. They alleged that Tinubu had failed to get 25% of the vote in Abuja and that the electoral commission failed to electronically transmit the results thereby undermining their authenticity (Eboh 2023). However, after ten months of legal battles, on 26 October 2023 the Nigerian Supreme Court upheld Tinubu's election win (Eboh 2023).

While Tinubu may have been elected president, he was elected with the support of less than 10% of Nigeria's overall electorate in an election marred by a significant breakdown in transparency and high levels of voter suppression and electoral violence (Hassan and Vines 2023). While election monitors observed vote buying in only 10% of polling units, given the poor economic conditions and sophistication of vote buying schemes, I suspect the actual rate was substantially higher.

While the 2023 elections had one of the largest coalitions of election monitors in the country with more than 4,816 monitors, this covered only a fraction of the polling units. Yiaga Africa, one of the largest election monitoring efforts, deployed monitors to 1,507 polling units and 822 vote collation centres. However, this covers less than one percent of Nigeria's 176,606 polling units (INEC 2023; Yiaga Africa 2023a). While the monitors do give greater transparency to what occurred at these polling units, research suggests that the presence of election observers may displace election manipulation to other polling units where monitors are not present (Asunka et al. 2019; Bratton 2008). In addition, as Yiaga noted in their final election report, the Process and Results Verification for Transparency (PRVT)[45] strategy used can provide insights into the integrity of the polls and vote collation, but it cannot determine if people voted based on money offered to them or threats made against them (Yiaga Africa 2023a, 21). In sum, we know a lot about certain polling units, but questions still loom about what played out at the polling units where election monitors were not present.

Conclusion: The Reality of Electoral Reform and Competition in Political Markets

For many, the 2023 presidential election cycle in Nigeria is summed up by the title of Yiaga's election report—"dashed hopes" (Yiaga Africa 2023a). While a record number of Nigerians registered to vote, only a fraction actually did, likely a consequence of the logistical delays, voter disenfranchisement, voter suppression, and doubts that votes were being accurately counted. In the end, the 2023 election had the lowest voter turnout in the last 20 years with only 26.7% of voters actually casting ballots (a nine percent decline from 2019). Out of a country of over 220 million, approximately nine million people (four percent of the population) delivered an electoral majority. Despite the energy and hope that the electoral reforms and Peter Obi's campaign generated, for many, the election outcome was politics as usual. While the balance of the 2023 elections may be politics as usual, it does raise several implications and remaining questions for electoral competition and reform within Nigeria that likely speak to other political marketplaces. These points are discussed in the following sections.

Elections: The Market Days of Political Marketplaces

Elections are the market days of electoral political marketplaces. While competition is constant throughout the political calendar, elections (primary and general) are the most important periods of competition. They demarcate a unique opportunity to compete, rearrange alliances, and renegotiate deals in ways that are not possible outside of election periods. This is when up-and-coming candidates attempt to enter the market, godfathers search for candidates that can offer promising future returns, and powerbrokers put themselves back on the market to test the market price of their loyalty. This is also when the cumulative attempts of civil society and average voters to reshape the market are tested. Coming out on top in the election provides sustained access to state resources and the power of the office to protect your hold over it (or as a tool that can be weaponized against allies). There is no prize for coming in second or third.

The importance of market days is especially true in countries like Nigeria which have cemented elections (and democratic processes more broadly) as the only legitimate[46] avenues to political power while also agreeing that certain marketplace tactics can be used to contest and/or weaponize them. These are the marketplace rules about how money and violence can be used in elections.

Market days embody some of the most destructive elements of political marketplace competition—the monied politics, short-sighted political thuggery, instability of coalitions overshadowed by the continual threats of defection, and the zero-sum calculations that some actors make in the pursuit of power. Elections can (re)ignite ethnoreligious tensions, undo the trust and cooperation that civil society actors have worked to rebuild in conflict-affected communities, and weaponize trusted leaders as influence brokers for hire.

At the same time, elections are a moment of possibility in the marketplace. In complex, multitiered marketplaces like Nigeria, where alliances and bargaining chips are constantly shifting, even the most influential actors do not have the ability to singlehandedly shape or control the system. Political control is extremely fractured and contested. The marketplace rules, goods sold, prices, actors and firms in the market, and critically, how average consumers engage in the market are all the cumulative sum of the moving parts of the system—the democratic and the predatory. This creates both hurdles and opportunities for democratic activists. This is when actors can seek to redefine political competition by imposing new rules and changing the cost of voter support. In the language of the market, this is instituting regulations on a predatory market, and using coalitions of consumers to boycott the products of especially destructive firms. As the 2023 elections demonstrate, however, no reform is necessarily well-intentioned or without manipulation.

Cash and violence are the main types of currency in the marketplace, but simply being the wealthiest or most capable of violence does not guarantee success. Success also requires political acumen. Acumen is needed to know which deals to pursue, how to best negotiate them, build relationships with the powerbrokers, and above all, to understand the dynamics of the marketplace and the shifting prices of loyalty.

In sum, elections embody the most destructive aspects of marketplace competition, but because they play out in a fractured political environment, they also entail opportunities to reshape it. The trajectory of political spending, the role of violence, reforms, and civic movements are all contested and raise major questions about the future. Each of these is discussed in the following sections.

The Cost of Competition: Is there a breaking or tipping point?

The cost of candidacy in a Nigerian election is exorbitant and rising. From the candidacy forms and the primaries better known as "money bazaars", to paying off the power brokers and the costs of election day, the price of competition is steep. One of the major questions that remains is how much longer candidates will be able to sustain the current monied model of competition, and if there is a breaking point, what will they turn to next?

The current model of monied politics is based on a couple of conditions. The first is that oil-dependent state resources make up one of the largest sources of political budgets. Incumbents often use their control over government budgets to finance their campaign. Those without the power of incumbency may rely on financing from godfathers, financing which they are expected to repay in the form of government contracts and influence once in office. In either case, the state budget is one of the core sources of political budgets—whether in real time, or as a future payment. Access to a portion of it—an officeholder's "share of the national cake"—is also the prize of winning office.

The current oil dependent revenue-generating model of the government, however, is running on life support with a bleak prognosis. In 2020, when the price of oil dropped dramatically triggering a major deficit, Nigeria took on massive loans to maintain and then expand government spending levels. While the price of oil rebounded in 2021 and boomed in 2022, Nigeria largely missed out on the rebound. Oil theft and attacks on pipelines kept production well-below its OPEC quota, and its fuel subsidy imposed massive costs on the government. Government revenues were arguably worse off after the 2022 oil boom. While political actors have shown a dogged ability to amass political budgets through boom-and-bust cycles, there is a critical question of how long these practices can continue against the future decline of oil revenues (Miller 2023). While domestic and international loans may temporarily prop up the government's budgets as oil revenues decline, Nigeria is increasingly using the majority of its revenues to service its debt and may be dancing towards insolvency (PWC 2024). In this sense, the market may be ripe for disruption or headed towards a cliff.

The worrying implicit question is if buying their way through an election becomes unaffordable, will actors attempt to use more violence in an attempt to lower costs? Or as in the case of South Sudan, if Nigeria's kleptocratic system goes bust, will it devolve into war (De Waal 2014)? Violence and cash are not fully interchangeable currencies in the marketplace, but violence has shown to be a tactic used to eliminate opponents, intimidate both opponents and voters, and suppress voter turnout. While violence has been on an overall downward trajectory since 2011, seemingly indicating a preference for cash over violence, this trend is by no means guaranteed.

There is another trajectory to consider – is there a tipping point at which it becomes cheaper to provide public goods rather than compete with political budgets? As Kew (2010) has argued, the rising importance of monied politics (in comparison to the historic importance of ethnicity) may create a scenario in which it is cheaper for politicians to provide public goods (e.g., roads, hospitals, schools) than to attempt to buy their way through an election. This is what the literature on the breakdown of clientelism largely suggests (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes 2013). This theoretical trajectory becomes even more salient when you consider the likelihood of declining future political budgets against a backdrop of increasing civic organizing and a burgeoning youth generation that is extremely frustrated with the nature of the political system.

The Role & Threat of Violence

While violence has been a feature of Nigerian elections, it highlights two key intertwined questions: what types of violence are acceptable and against whom? For democratic activists, this implies a third – what would delegitimate the use of violence in elections and the political system more broadly?

The 2023 election was characterized by violence against voters, candidates, and the electoral process itself. While the actual level of violence (deaths and injuries) was down from levels seen in 2011, there are worrying patterns that emerge from the data. Violence interrupted the voting or vote collation process in 22 states across the country, almost double the number compared to the 2019 presidential election. In addition, election observers noted widespread threats of violence in the pre-election period as well as on election day. While the evidence is inconclusive, it suggests that the threats of violence may have played a key role in suppressing voter registration (including picking up voter cards) and turnout.

Overall, the paper raises more questions than it provides answers on the role of violence in political marketplaces. The 2023 election, however, suggests that there are specific logics, as well as limits in how violence can be used. Better understanding the role of violence in a political marketplace is a key area for future research to better understand these logics, limits, and potential leverage points to decrease its use in political competition.[47]

Contesting Electoral Reforms in a Transactional Political System

Taken together, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), INEC Election Results Viewing Portal (IReV), and currency swap raise important questions about the reality of technocratic electoral reforms in political marketplace contexts, how they may (intentionally or not) shift the locus of manipulation to benefit incumbents, and the difficulty of reading election quality amidst muddy waters.

On one hand, the BVAS and IReV systems provided an opportunity to increase the transparency of the voting process and mitigate rigging strategies like ballot box stuffing. In theory, a political party would not be able to use unclaimed PVCs to inflate the votes cast for a particular candidate. However, as with any reform, what matters is how it is implemented. As the 2023 election showed, how the systems were used, or in some cases not used, raises barriers to some rigging strategies, but creates opportunity for others.

The BVAS and IReV systems may have mitigated certain types of election rigging strategies (e.g., ballot box stuffing), it made the integrity of other parts of the election process more important. In a sense, for actors interested in manipulating the results, it shifted the tactics that could be employed. However, even for those interested in manipulating the results, it was not an even playing field. Manipulating the BVAS or IReV system required technical expertise (e.g., hacking), or formal positions overseeing the system—the INEC employees themselves. On balance, these reforms have the potential to increase transparency and the rigor of the electoral system, but if they are manipulated, it would be easier for the incumbent versus the opposition to do so because the incumbent is the one with influence on how INEC is staffed and resourced.

Technocratic reforms did reshape the 2023 electoral process, but political marketplaces are dynamic and also adapted to the introduction of the reforms. Campaigns found ways to circumvent currency restrictions and buy votes. Politicized INEC workers found ways to delay processes and frustrate voters. All of this underscores the need for reforms to be an ongoing process. As Thabo Mbeki, former President of the Republic of South Africa and Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group, wrote in his introduction to their report on the 2023 election, "electoral reform is an unending process, requiring stakeholders to build on past successes and rectify weaknesses." In the context of political marketplaces, the weaknesses are the shortcomings of the electoral reforms (e.g., gaps, oversights, loopholes), as well as the aspects that marketplace actors exploit to play the same transactional game using different tools and levers.

A Remaining Question: What will come of the 'Obidients'?

While Peter Obi did not win the 2023 election, it is remarkable how close he came to winning. Obi won 27% of the official vote, compared to Tinubu's 37%, and Atiku's 29%. This means that even if incumbent parties attempted to manipulate any results favouring Obi—something there is evidence of in Rivers and Imo states—he still emerged with 27% of the vote. Obi also won 12 states, the same number as Atiku and Tinubu. Obi even won Tinubu's heavily contested home state of Lagos—a victory whose importance is hard to overstate. For the first time in the Fourth Republic, the race for president was a competition between three parties. In the days before the election, Peter Obi was the predicted winner. Obi's campaign amounted to one of the most significant challenges not only to the dominant two-party system, but to the transactional politics in Nigeria. The real story here is not just about Obi, but about the voters supporting him and the questions it raises about emerging civic coalitions.

Almost 90% of Nigerians were frustrated with the direction of the country (Galileo, Mbaegbu, and Duntoye 2023). Sixty-three percent of the population (approximately 133 million) were considered multidimensionally poor, making Nigeria the country with one of the largest populations living in poverty in the world (NBS 2022).

Nigerians registered to vote in record numbers. More young people registered to vote in 2023 than the total number of Nigerians that voted in the 2019 election (INEC 2023).

The question is how to turn the registration into voter turnout. It is not insignificant that the largest group of election observers was directed by Yiaga Africa, a Nigerian youth-led organization. Moreover, their work on getting Nigerians, especially young people, involved in politics is only building momentum.

This is not to argue that the tide has turned, but that there are crosscurrents worth recognizing. Transactional politics may be the dominant political logic in Nigeria, but activists and average voters across the country are rejecting and organizing to oppose it. As Mbeki thoughtfully observed, "Nigeria's vibrant political landscape and engaged civil society remain its greatest strengths" (Commonwealth Group 2024, xi). This is surely true. With youth who "woke up" during the EndSARS protests, those that registered to vote for the first time, and those who engaged with civic organizations to push for free, fair, and issue-based elections—dynamics counter to the political marketplace's transactional politics are certainly at play.

For democratic activists within Nigeria, the question becomes how to sustain the level of voter engagement to push for greater electoral reform and future issue-based campaigns. For democratic activists and donors outside Nigeria, the question becomes how to support these groups in ways that domestic actors actually want and that they believe will help sustain their work over the long term. As Mbeki and others have noted with all of the caveats about the difficulty of strengthening democracy in this context, Nigeria's civil society remains one of the most promising drivers of change in the political system.

Time For a New Dance?

Nigerian politics have historically shown an incredible ability to keep "dancing on the brink" – somehow never going over the edge of the cliff, but also not pulling back from it (Campbell 2013). Against a backdrop of rising political costs, declining revenues to support it, and increasing opposition to transactional politics, the question remains how long this dance can go on and whether it is ripe for disruption. The 2023 elections were not the democratic milestone that many hoped for, but in taking a closer look at the crosscurrents at play, one can understand how they attempted to challenge the dominance of transactional politics. Nigeria's political marketplace is a complex, dynamic, and fractured system. This creates both challenges and opportunities to transform it. Hopefully, this paper has shed some light on where some of each exist.

Endnotes

[1] The African Union Constitutive Act declares that unconstitutional changes are illegitimate and any government that comes from an unconstitutional channel will be suspended from the African Union. This comes from Articles 4(p) and 31 of the African Union's Constitutive Act.

[2] Neopatrimonialism is a type of hybrid regime in which patterns of patrimonialism—personal rule—co-exist with, and suffuse, rational-legal institutions (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997, 62).

[3] For a detailed examination of political budgets, see (Miller 2024).

[4] In 2015, in the midst of a global downturn for the price of oil, Nigerian government oil revenues dropped to 47%. For a discussion of these dynamics, see (Burns and Olly 2023; Miller 2023).

[5] As of 2020, Nigeria had one of the lowest levels of internally-generated revenue in the world (IMF 2020).

[6] During the oil bust of the 1980s and 1990s, PM actors began to look for non-oil related schemes to generate funds. For a discussion of this period, see (Ellis 2016).

[7] Section 308 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution provides an immunity shield for executive officeholders while they are in office. For a discussion of this clause, see (Okeke and Okeke 2015).

[8] This also echoes findings from Bleck and Van de Walle (2018) about how the ruling class in many countries across Sub-Saharan Africa has stayed relatively static since the 1990s.

[9] It is also common for governors to be entitled to significant financial benefits after leaving office that can include a full salary, provision of housing, and vehicles. For contemporary examples, see (Abdallah et al. 2016; Daily Trust 2023). These packages do have some semblance to the post-office benefits for former executive officeholders around the world, though in countries like the United States, former executives are not entitled to some of these benefits if they go on to hold other public offices (see U.S. National Archives 2016).

[10] For example, Plateau State Governor Joshua Dariye (1999–2004; 2004–2007) went on to represent Plateau's Southern Senatorial Zone from 2011 to 2019. Similarly, Plateau State Governor Jonah Jang (2008–2015) immediately followed his tenure as governor with a term a representing the Plateau North Senatorial Zone (2015–2019).

[11] Nigeria's 36 states and federally-controlled territory (Abuja) are organized into six geopolitical zones: North East, North Central, North West, South West, South South, and South East.

[12] Author interviews with male PDP Local Ward Coordinator (Int. 225), female civil society leader (Int. 216), female peacebuilding practitioner (Ints. 213 and 214), male peacebuilding practitioners (212), and focus group discussion with a women's development organization (FGD 7). Jos. October – November 2022.

[13] Author interview with male PDP Local Ward Coordinator (Int. 225). November 2022.

[14] The few women who have served as governor did so because they were serving as deputy governor and the governor they were serving under was impeached. For a broader discussion of the gendered dynamics of Nigerian politics, see (Iruke 2024).

[15] Dahiru was initially announced the winner by a Residential Electoral Commissioner while vote collation was ongoing, but the electoral commission later rescinded that, announcing Fintiri as the winner. In her court appeals, Dahiru alleged that there was voter fraud in more than 14,000 polling units across the state, but the Supreme Court dismissed her case as lacking merit (Premium Times 2024).

[16] Levan (2019) argues that policy issues did increasingly matter in the 2015 election, however it is unclear to what extent this due to the credibility of each candidates' claim to certain policy agendas (i.e. security and economic stability), and to what extent this is due to the political party that each was part of.

[17] During British colonialism, the British attempted to control and govern Nigeria through "Indirect Rule", often co-opting and manipulating existing hierarchical leadership structures and imposing them where they did not exist (Falola and Heaton 2008).

[18] While democratically-elected local governments were created in 1976, it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s when elections would become common in actually selecting the leaders of the local governments (Akpomera and Omoyibo 2014; Page and Wando 2022, 40–45).

[19] This opening vignette is based on the author's ethnographic observations on the day of the APC rally in Jos. The observations on the environment are based on in-person observations. The observations of the rally speeches are based on Channels TV live televised coverage of the rally. The reports of rumors of bribes are based on author conversations with Jos residents and news coverage of the events.

[20] Keke is the local name for rickshaws. Okadas is the local term for motorcycle taxis.

[21] Governors in attendance included Abdulrahhman Abdulrasaq (Kwara), Abdullahi Ganduja (Kano), Nasir El-Rufai (Kaduna), Abubakar Sani-Bello (Niger), Yahaya Bello (Kogi), Abubakar Badaru (Jigawa), Prof. Ben Ayade (Cross River), Atiku Bagudu (Kebbi), and Abdullahi Sule (Nasarawa). For more details, see (Akinwale 2022).

[22] For a description of Potempkin villages, see (Cheeseman and Klaas 2019, 182–206).

[23] While there are tens of political parties in Nigeria, and many put forth a presidential ticket, in practice, the PDP and APC dominate to the extent that most elections are seen as a competition between the two parties. However, this does vary based on location where parties such as the ANPP have greater strength in the north.

[24] The State-level elections were scheduled for 11 March but were delayed by INEC a week to ensure the BVAS and IReV systems were ready.

[25] While Tinubu claims his wealth is legitimate, there are reports that his wealth originally stems from corrupt dealings from a firm contracted to collect taxes on behalf of the Lagos State Government when Tinubu was governor (Clowes 2022; Hassan 2022; Majeed 2022; Tinubu 2022).

[26] Author interview with female youth protest participant (Int. 108) in August 2021.

[27] For a discussion of Not Too Young to Run and its impact on the 2023 elections, see (Itodo 2023) and Yiaga Africa's work more broadly: https://yiaga.org/tag/not-too-young-to-run/.

[28] The Electoral Act (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2022) is available at: https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Electoral-Act-2022.pdf.

[29] This was an ethnographic observation from the author while in Nigeria that has also been widely reported on (see Daily Trust 2022).

[30] Author interviews with local government officials (Int. 225; FGD 4), peacebuilding practitioners Ints. 211, 212, 229; FGD 2,3, and 4), political party officials (Ints. 225, 226), womens' groups (FGD 7), civil society activists (FGD 2), and representatives of traditional rulers (FGD 2). Jos and Abuja. October through December 2022.

[31] The N100 million includes the N30 expression of interest form and the N70 million nomination form. The APC costs for other positions includes: N50 for governorship aspirants, N20 million for senators, N10 million for House of Representatives, and N2 million for State House of Assembly aspirants (Maishanu 2022b).

[32] Author interviews with former candidates and campaign staff (Int. 201 and 225), and peacebuilding practitioner (Int. 211). Jos, Nigeria. October and November 2022.

[33] Bribes for individual delegates ranged from $558-900. Author interview with local political party coordinator (Int. 225). Jos, Nigeria. November 2022.

[34] It is worth noting that one PDP delegate, Tanko Sabo, has been celebrated for sharing the bribes he received at multiple PDP primaries with people in his home constituency of Sanga Local Government in Kaduna. See (Maishanu 2022a).

[35] There is a rich discussion in the literature around the efficacy of vote buying, especially in contexts with ballot secrecy (e.g., Bratton 2008; Mares and Young 2016). Evidence in Nigeria, however, suggests that while vote buying may not be a guaranteed return, it is still widely used and party brokers have employed a variety of creative and illegal means in the attempt to verify who a voter casts their ballot for (see Onouha and Okafor 2020).

[36] Author interview with local political party coordinator (Int. 225). Nigeria. November 2022.

[37] While Tinubu claims his wealth is legitimate, there are reports that his wealth originally stems from corrupt dealings from a firm contracted to collect taxes on behalf of the Lagos State Government when Tinubu was governor (Tinubu 2022; Clowes 2022; Hassan 2022).

[38] At a campaign rally ahead of the APC primary, Tinubu is quoted as saying: "If not me that led the war front, Buhari would not have emerged. He contested first, second and third times, but lost. He even said on television that he would not contest again. But I went to his home in Katsina, I told him you would contest and win, but 'you would not joke with Yoruba matters. . .Since he has emerged, I have not been appointed minister. I didn't get a contract. This time, it's the Yoruba's turn and in Yorubaland, it's my tenure." (It is my turn to be president – Tinubu 2022).

[39] The organizing secretary of the APC in Lagos later said that Tinubu was joking that the trucks were full of money saying that they were associated with a business deal, not the elections (Adeuyi 2023).

[40] Author interview with local political party organizer (Int. 225). Jos, Nigeria. November 2022.

[41] Also see LeVan (2019) for an argument of the salience of policy platforms in the 2015 elections.

[42] It is worth noting that the National Peace Committee includes influential leaders such as General Abdulsalami Abubakar, Bishop Matthew Kukah, and the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Saad Abubakar III.

[43] Nigeria has six geopolitical zones – North West, North Central, North East, South East, South South, and South West. The South South zone includes Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River states. The South East Zone includes Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi states.

[44] For a examples of attacks against the voting process in the lead up to election day, see (IRI/NDI 2023, 89–92).

[45] The PRVT was formally known as the Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) strategy.

[46] The African Union Constitutive Act declares that unconstitutional changes are illegitimate and any government that comes from an unconstitutional channel will be suspended from the African Union. This comes from Articles 4(p) and 31 of the African Union's Constitutive Act.

[47] While not discussed in the context of this paper, a useful starting point for this research is Agiboa et al.'s (2018) insightful analyses of the role of violence in elections across Africa.

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