

**ELECTORAL CREDIBILITY AND DEMOCRATIC STABILITY:  
EVALUATING THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS IN  
2015 - 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN TARABA STATE.**

**Danjuma Adashu<sup>1\*</sup>, Julius L. Ngomba<sup>2</sup>, John kalla<sup>3</sup>, Yakub Ephraim<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1\*,2,3,4</sup>Department of Political Science and International Relations, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria.

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\* **Correspondence:** Danjuma Adashu



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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the relationship between electoral credibility and democratic stability, focusing on the role of international observers in the 2015–2023 presidential elections in Taraba State, Nigeria. Credible elections are central to democratic governance, particularly in emerging democracies where electoral mistrust often fuels instability. Anchored on Democratic Consolidation Theory, as advanced by Samuel P. Huntington and Larry Diamond, the study argues that democracy becomes stable when electoral processes are widely perceived as free, fair, and legitimate. The theory is adopted because it directly links credible elections to long-term democratic stability, making it suitable for analyzing how international observation strengthens electoral legitimacy in Taraba State. The study pursued two objectives: first, to examine how international observers contributed to electoral credibility in the 2015–2023 presidential elections; and second, to identify the challenges limiting the effectiveness of international observers in promoting democratic stability. Using qualitative analysis of reports and electoral data, the findings reveal that observer

presence enhanced transparency, improved compliance with electoral procedures, and increased public confidence in election outcomes. However, logistical constraints, limited enforcement powers, and political interference restricted their overall impact. The study concludes that while international observers significantly improve electoral credibility, their influence on democratic stability depends on domestic institutional reforms and political will. It recommends strengthening collaboration between observer missions and local electoral bodies, enhancing legal frameworks to address electoral malpractice, and ensuring greater independence of electoral institutions to consolidate democracy in Taraba State.

**Keywords:** *Electoral credibility, Democratic stability, International observers, Presidential elections, Taraba State, Nigeria, Democratic Consolidation Theory*

## **Introduction**

Globally, elections are widely considered the cornerstone of democratic governance; they provide citizens the fundamental means to choose their representatives and influence public policy (Omotola, 2010, as cited in Namadi, 2025). In many emerging democracies, including Nigeria, electoral credibility remains a persistent challenge marked by logistical failures, procedural weaknesses, voter suppression, and security concerns that undermine public confidence and democratic consolidation (Tsokwa & Nwanegbo, 2024; Nwaodike & Agunbiade, 2025). Within this context, independent international and foreign election observers have become indispensable actors in reviewing and reporting on electoral processes, assessing compliance with established democratic standards, and offering recommendations for reform. Their presence in Nigeria's elections since the return to civilian rule in 1999 reflects a broader international norm of election observation intended to strengthen electoral integrity and enhance democratic legitimacy. Research indicates that the presence of such observers can confer political legitimacy on electoral outcomes and influence both domestic and international perceptions of election credibility (Nwankwo & Dode, 2024).

In Nigeria specifically, the 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections provided contrasting scenarios for electoral credibility and democratic stability. The 2015 elections, largely hailed as one of the most credible polls since the Fourth Republic

began, incorporated technological innovations such as smart card readers and attracted extensive local and international observer attention, which helped bolster voters' confidence (Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], n.d.; Namadi, 2025). Conversely, the 2019 and 2023 elections were characterized by significant challenges, including logistical setbacks, irregularities in result transmission, and concerns over transparency issues that drew sharp commentary from observer missions as well as civil society coalitions like the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (National Democratic Institute [NDI] & International Republican Institute [IRI], 2019; Nwankwo & Dode, 2024; Situation Room, 2023). In Taraba State one of Nigeria's 36 federating units these broader national electoral dynamics played out in ways that shaped local perceptions of credibility and democratic legitimacy. The need for international observation in such contexts highlights persistent structural weaknesses in electoral administration and the quest to reinforce democratic consolidation.

The role of international observers goes beyond mere presence at polling units; it involves systematic monitoring of pre-election preparations, Election Day processes, result collation, and post-election assessments. Observer missions such as those organized by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), the European Union, and others aim to provide impartial and comprehensive reports that identify strengths and weaknesses in electoral practices, suggest reforms, and, importantly, enhance transparency for domestic and international audiences (NDI & IRI, 2019). Their assessments serve as credible external validations or critiques of the electoral process, often influencing policy dialogues and civil society advocacy for democratic reform. Yet, despite these efforts, the extent to which observer recommendations are institutionalized remains limited, underscoring the complex interplay between external electoral oversight and internal political agency.

Given these trends, this study intends to examine how international observers influenced electoral credibility in the 2015, 2019, and 2023 presidential elections in Taraba State and explore the extent to which their engagements contributed to democratic stability at both local and national levels. Specifically, the study will assess the perceptions of stakeholders on observer effectiveness, analyze the

relationship between observer interventions and electoral legitimacy, and identify the challenges and opportunities inherent in international election observation in sub-national contexts like Taraba State. Ultimately, the research aims to generate evidence-based recommendations that inform policy interventions to enhance election management capacity, strengthen institutional reforms, and contribute to sustained democratic development in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The credibility of elections remains a fundamental pillar for democratic consolidation, particularly in emerging democracies such as Nigeria. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the country has continued to grapple with electoral irregularities, allegations of fraud, voter intimidation, logistical inefficiencies, and post-election litigations that threaten democratic stability. In Taraba State, presidential elections conducted between 2015 and 2023 have reflected both progress and persistent shortcomings in electoral administration. While the presence of international observers has been widely regarded as a mechanism for enhancing transparency and deterring malpractice, questions remain as to whether their involvement has substantially translated into improved electoral credibility and, by extension, democratic stability within the state. Reports of political tensions, communal divisions, and contestations over election outcomes continue to raise concerns about the effectiveness of observer missions in strengthening democratic institutions at the subnational level.

Despite the recognized importance of international observation missions, there is limited localized empirical analysis focusing specifically on Taraba State within the broader Nigerian electoral landscape. Most existing studies concentrate on national-level outcomes, often overlooking the peculiar socio-political dynamics that shape electoral processes in individual states. Consequently, there is a gap in understanding how international observers influence electoral behavior, institutional accountability, and post-election peace in Taraba State. This study therefore intends to critically examine the role played by international observers in the presidential elections of 2015, 2019, and 2023 in Taraba State, assessing whether their presence enhanced electoral credibility and contributed meaningfully to democratic stability.

## **Objectives of the Study**

- i. To examine the role of international observers in promoting electoral credibility and democratic stability in the 2015–2023 presidential elections in Taraba State.
- ii. To identify the challenges faced by international observers in ensuring free, fair, and transparent presidential elections in Taraba State.

## **Significance of the Study**

Theoretically, this study contributes to democratic theory and electoral governance literature by deepening scholarly understanding of the linkage between electoral credibility and democratic stability within emerging democracies. Drawing insights from democratic consolidation and institutionalism perspectives, the research expands discourse on how external oversight mechanisms influence domestic political processes. By situating the analysis within Taraba State, the study enriches subnational electoral studies and provides a contextual framework for evaluating the efficacy of international observation missions beyond national aggregates.

Empirically, the study provides data-driven insights into the practical impact of international observers on presidential elections in Taraba State between 2015 and 2023. It documents patterns of electoral conduct, observer interventions, stakeholder perceptions, and post-election developments within the state. The findings will help bridge the existing gap in localized electoral research and offer evidence that can inform comparative studies across other states in Nigeria and similar democratic settings in Africa. Practically, the study offers valuable recommendations to policymakers, electoral management bodies such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society organizations, and international agencies involved in election monitoring. By identifying operational challenges and areas requiring reform, the research can guide improvements in election observation strategies and institutional collaboration. Furthermore, political actors and development partners may benefit from the study's insights in designing interventions aimed at strengthening electoral integrity and sustaining democratic stability in Taraba State and Nigeria at large.

## **Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on the role of international observers in the presidential elections conducted in Taraba State during the 2015, 2019, and 2023 electoral cycles. Geographically, the research is limited to Taraba State, examining electoral processes, observer activities, stakeholder engagement, and post-election outcomes within the state. Thematically, it concentrates on electoral credibility, observer effectiveness, democratic stability, and the challenges encountered in the observation process. The adoption of the 2015–2023 period is justified on the grounds that it captures three consecutive presidential elections representing distinct phases of Nigeria’s democratic revolution: the historic 2015 transition of power, the consolidation efforts in 2019, and the technologically influenced 2023 elections. Studying this period provides a comprehensive and contemporary understanding of trends, improvements, and persistent issues in election observation and democratic practice within Taraba State.

## **Literature Review**

### **Electoral Credibility and Integrity in Nigeria’s Presidential Elections**

Electoral credibility is a multidimensional concept that encompasses transparency, inclusiveness, accountability and fairness in the conduct of elections (Norris, 2014). Transparency relates to the openness of electoral processes and the accessibility of information to stakeholders, while inclusiveness refers to the extent to which all eligible citizens can participate without discrimination (Schedler, 2002). Accountability denotes the responsibility of electoral actors and institutions to uphold rules and norms, and fairness involves impartial administration of election laws and procedures to prevent bias or undue advantage (Kuenzi & Lambright, 2007).

Nigeria’s legal and institutional frameworks provide the formal basis for conducting elections and safeguarding integrity. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Electoral Act set out electoral rights, procedures, and sanctions for malpractices, while political party regulations define candidate nominations and campaign conduct (Ibeanu, 2018). Central to the administration of elections is the

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), constitutionally empowered to organize, supervise, and conduct federal and state elections (Okoye & Mbah, 2020). INEC's mandate includes voter registration, delimitation of constituencies, accreditation and voting operations, result collation, and dispute resolution support. The scholarship underscores that INEC's institutional capacity and impartiality are pivotal to electoral credibility, though its performance has been uneven, shaped by resource constraints, political interference, and administrative bottlenecks (Anyaele, 2019; Ojo, 2021).

Between 2015 and 2023, Nigeria undertook a series of electoral reforms aimed at enhancing credibility by embracing technology and procedural innovation. Notable reforms include the adoption of the Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), electronic voter registers, and pilot initiatives for electronic transmission of results (INEC, 2023; Omodia & Porbeni, 2019). These technologies were intended to reduce human manipulation, improve accuracy of accreditation, and enhance public confidence in outcomes (Alabi, 2021). However, persistent challenges such as vote-buying, electoral violence, and logistical failures including delayed deployment of materials and BVAS malfunctions have continued to undermine process integrity and citizen trust (Mustapha & Obadare, 2018; Akinola, 2022). Consequently, while reforms show promise in strengthening procedural quality, enduring socio-political constraints and implementation gaps remain central obstacles to fully credible presidential elections in Nigeria.

### **International Election Observation: Principles, Mandates and Practices.**

International election observation is rooted in the broader normative framework of democratic governance, premised on the belief that transparent and inclusive electoral processes are essential to legitimate political authority and democratic consolidation. Scholars define international election observation as the non-interventionist monitoring of an electoral process by external actors to assess compliance with national laws and international standards, and to determine whether elections reflect the free expression of the will of the electorate (Hyde, 2011; Kelley, 2012). Such observation has evolved into a professionalized practice that assesses the entire electoral cycle, including pre-election legal frameworks and campaign

conditions, election-day procedures, and post-election dispute resolution, thereby offering comprehensive evaluations of electoral quality and credibility (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2016; OSCE/ODIHR, 2010). Central to its legitimacy is the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, endorsed at the United Nations in 2005, which outlines standards of impartiality, respect for sovereignty, transparency, and methodological rigor that guide observer missions worldwide (United Nations, 2005).

International observer mandates and practices are operationalised by a range of intergovernmental and regional bodies whose frameworks reflect both universal democratic norms and region-specific legal commitments. In Nigeria, key actors include the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union Election Observation Mission (AUEOM), and the Commonwealth Observer Group. EU EOMs are deployed at the invitation of the host state to assess compliance with international obligations and domestic electoral law, deploying long- and short-term observers across regions and issuing preliminary and final reports (EU EOM, 2016). ECOWAS missions derive their mandate from regional instruments such as the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which commits member states to constitutional convergence and credible elections (ECOWAS, 2001). Similarly, the African Union bases its observation missions on the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, promoting democratic principles and electoral integrity (African Union, 2007), while Commonwealth Observer Groups operate under principles consistent with the 2005 Declaration and broader Commonwealth democratic norms (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018). Collectively, these frameworks emphasize cooperation with domestic stakeholders, independence of assessment, and post-election recommendations to strengthen electoral processes.

### **International Observers and Electoral Outcomes in Taraba State (2015-2023)**

The political dynamics of Taraba State reflect broader patterns in Nigerian sub-national elections where intense electoral competition, patronage politics, and localized violence shape electoral behavior and outcomes. While scholarly literature

on Taraba State presidential election outcomes specifically is sparse, available data indicates that voter participation and systemic issues such as vote buying, intimidation, and low turnout have been persistent features of elections in the state, particularly in 2023 where vote buying was reported as a significant factor influencing voter decisions, undermining electoral integrity and depth of democratic engagement (Tsokwa & Tigye, 2025). Moreover, media reports from the 2023 cycle describe tensions during result collation in Taraba, including clashes involving police and military at the INEC office that delayed the gubernatorial result collation, revealing how insecurity and institutional stress can affect local electoral processes (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2024). International observers deployed across Nigeria though not always with state specific findings for Taraba consistently noted that systemic challenges such as logistical constraints, security issues, and the uneven presence of civic and international monitors shaped the quality of electoral administration and voter confidence during the 2019 and 2023 presidential elections, with national missions underscoring the need for improved transparency and operational reforms (IRI/NDI, 2019; IRI/NDI, 2023).

### **Electoral Credibility and Democratic Stability in Nigeria**

The relationship between credible elections and democratic consolidation in Nigeria has been a central theme in political science, with consensus that transparent, violence free, and genuinely competitive elections are fundamental to the stability and legitimacy of democratic systems (Open Journals IJAAAR, 2025). Credible elections strengthen democratic consolidation by enhancing political accountability, fostering trust between citizens and state institutions, and reducing the propensity for post-election conflicts; conversely, elections marred by irregularities, violence, and poor transparency erode this trust and create fertile ground for litigation and political instability (Fatai, 2023; Chiamogu, 2025). Empirical studies underscore that Nigerian electoral cycles, including 2015, 2019, and 2023, have witnessed declining voter turnout, logistical failures, and pervasive perceptions of electoral malpractice, leading to public disillusionment and lower engagement, which scholars argue severely undermines efforts at democratic deepening (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2025; IRI/NDI, 2023). Moreover, electoral tribunals and post-election litigation have become regular features of Nigeria's election landscape, reflecting widespread

contestation of results and contributing to political polarization when outcomes are not viewed as legitimately earned or representative of the popular will; litigation outcomes often influence public attitudes towards political actors and state institutions, affecting regime legitimacy. Independent and international validation through observer reports has the dual effect of reinforcing democratic norms when assessments affirm procedural integrity, and of catalyzing reform discourse when reports highlight significant shortcomings, thereby shaping public trust in elections and in the broader democratic project of the Nigerian state (Nwankwo & Dode, 2024; Open Journals IJAAAR, 2025).

By implication, credible elections are central to democratic consolidation in Nigeria because they legitimize political authority, foster citizen trust, and promote accountability, all of which are essential for stable democratic governance. Transparent, competitive, and violence free elections signal to the public that political outcomes reflect the popular will, thereby reducing tensions and post-election conflicts, while flawed elections characterized by irregularities, low voter turnout, and logistical failures undermine confidence in institutions and fuel political polarization. Empirical evidence from the 2015, 2019, and 2023 electoral cycles demonstrates that persistent perceptions of malpractice and declining engagement erode public faith in democracy, making post-election litigation and tribunal disputes a recurrent feature that further shapes perceptions of legitimacy. Independent and international observation plays a crucial role in this dynamic, as favorable reports reinforce democratic norms, while critical assessments highlight deficiencies and stimulate reform, influencing both citizen trust and the broader trajectory of democratic deepening in Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The democratic consolidation theory emerged within comparative politics as scholars sought to understand not just how democratic regimes are established, but why some endure while others regress or fail. Foundational work in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly by scholars such as Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, framed democratic consolidation as the process through which a new democracy matures to the point that it becomes “the only game in town,” meaning democratic norms and

institutions are broadly accepted and no significant political forces seek to overthrow them outside constitutional channels. This definition underscores longevity and legitimacy as central elements of consolidation, moving beyond mere transitions to elections toward deeper institutionalization and public acceptance of democratic rules. Researchers like Andreas Schedler further refined the concept, emphasizing that consolidation involves both attitudinal shifts among political actors and structural foundations like rule of law and electoral integrity, and that it cannot be reduced to survival statistics alone but must capture normative and empirical dimensions of democratic stability (Schedler, 1998; Linz & Stepan, 1996).

The strength of democratic consolidation theory lies in its holistic approach: it accounts for institutional, societal, and cultural dimensions that extend beyond the simple occurrence of elections. By highlighting conditions such as autonomous civil society, mature political parties, an impartial judiciary, and entrenched electoral norms, the theory provides a multifaceted framework for assessing the depth and resilience of democratic systems (Linz & Stepan, 1996). It also helps explain why some democracies falter despite repeated elections, by pointing to weaknesses in legitimacy, accountability, or political culture. However, the theory has weaknesses including conceptual vagueness and measurement challenges scholars debate on what exactly constitutes consolidation and how to operationalize it empirically, with some arguing that the term is too broad or normatively loaded, leading to inconsistent applications in comparative studies (Schedler, 1998; Schedler, 1997). Critics also note that consolidation theory often assumes a linear progression toward stability, underestimating the possibility of democratic backsliding or hybrid forms where democratic institutions exist formally but are hollowed out in practice.

In the context of electoral credibility and democratic stability in Taraba State's presidential elections from 2015 to 2023, democratic consolidation theory offers a useful lens for understanding the role of international observers. Credible elections are not only procedural events but play a pivotal role in anchoring democratic norms and enhancing public confidence in the electoral process. Studies of Nigerian elections suggest that election integrity, transparency, and impartial observation including by international missions are essential for fostering trust and legitimacy,

which are critical for consolidation (Namadi & Yerima, 2025). International observers can help deter election irregularities, provide independent assessments, and pressure domestic institutions toward greater adherence to democratic norms, thereby strengthening democratic consolidation by reinforcing accountability and legitimacy of electoral outcomes (SEJPS research, 2020; Namadi & Yerima, 2025). By monitoring and reporting on election conduct in Taraba State, such observation contributes to the development and reinforcement of democratic norms that are central to the consolidation process. However, their impact depends on the credibility and independence of the observers themselves and how their findings are acted upon by domestic actors and institutions, highlighting ongoing challenges in consolidating democracy in contexts where structural weaknesses and elite interference remain significant.

## **Methodology**

In addressing the role of international observers in the 2015-2023 presidential elections in Taraba State, this study will employ a qualitative secondary data methodology, systematically gathering and analyzing existing documentary evidence such as official election reports from international and domestic observer missions, scholarly articles, electoral commission releases, media coverage, and policy briefs. Data will be sourced from reputable databases (e.g., JSTOR, Google Scholar), official publications from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), United Nations and African Union election assessment reports, and credible news outlets to construct a nuanced account of observer activities, credibility findings, and their impacts on democratic stability. Content analysis will be applied to these documents to identify recurring themes related to observer recommendations, electoral irregularities, compliance with international standards, and subsequent political developments in Taraba State. This secondary data approach is justified because it allows for comprehensive historical reconstruction and comparative insights across multiple election cycles without the constraints of primary fieldwork, which may be limited by access, cost, and retrospective reporting; it also capitalizes on verified, peer-reviewed, and official sources to ensure objectivity and depth in

understanding how international observation shaped perceptions of electoral credibility and democratic consolidation in the state.

### **The Role of International Observers in Promoting Electoral Credibility and Democratic Stability in the 2015-2023 Presidential Elections in Taraba State**

International election observers played multifaceted roles in Nigeria's electoral processes between 2015 and 2023, contributing to both credibility and democratic stability. While specific data focused exclusively on Taraba State is limited in the search results, observer missions operated across all six geopolitical zones, including the Northeast zone where Taraba is situated, allowing for reasonable extrapolation of their roles and impacts. This analysis identifies four key roles of international observers and examines their relevance to electoral credibility and democratic stability in Taraba State.

1. **Providing Impartial and Accurate Assessment of Electoral Conduct:** International observers serve primarily as independent evaluators who provide objective assessments of whether elections conform to national laws and international standards. This role directly enhances electoral credibility by offering voters and stakeholders reliable information about the integrity of the process.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) explicitly states that its delegation's purpose is "to provide an accurate and impartial report on the election process" (National Democratic Institute, 2015a, para. 3). Similarly, the African Union Election Observation Mission (AUEOM) operates with a mandate "to offer impartial assessment of the elections and compliance with the Federal Republic of Nigeria's international and regional commitments with regard to democratic elections" (The Eagle Online, 2015, para. 4). This impartial assessment function is crucial for establishing whether elections in states like Taraba can be considered credible.

For democratic stability, accurate assessments help prevent post-election disputes by providing authoritative accounts of what transpired. When international observers certify that processes were substantially credible, it

becomes more difficult for losing candidates to delegitimize outcomes without evidence. Conversely, when observers identify problems, their credibility can pressure electoral authorities to address shortcomings before they escalate into conflicts.

In the context of Taraba State, which has experienced inter-communal tensions, impartial observer assessments could help de-escalate tensions by providing factual accounts of electoral conduct that all parties can reference. As Muhammad and Muhammad (2024, p. 112) note, EU electoral support has "contributed to the deployment in Nigeria of the fact-finding missions as election observers to enhance the integrity of election."

2. **Demonstrating International Interest and Support for Democratic Processes:** The presence of international observers signals to domestic factors including politicians, security forces, and voters that the international community is watching and cares about electoral outcomes. This demonstration effect can deter fraud and violence while encouraging participation.

NDI frames this role explicitly: expressing "the international community's interest in and support for a democratic electoral process in Nigeria" (National Democratic Institute, 2015b, para. 4). The sheer scale of international observation underscores this commitment for the 2023 elections, "a total of 33 international organizations deploying 2,113 observers have been crisscrossing the different polling units in the 36 states" (Daily Trust, 2023a, para. 2).

For Taraba State, this international attention can have several stabilizing effects. First, it may discourage local power brokers from attempting to manipulate results, knowing that international witnesses are present. Second, it reassures voters that their participation is part of a process valued beyond Nigeria's borders, potentially increasing turnout and civic engagement. Third, it signals to marginalized groups including the women and youth that NDI observers noted "were well represented in voting lines" (National Democratic Institute, 2015a, para. 11) that their democratic rights have international backing.

The Chairman of INEC, Mahmood Yakubu, acknowledged this role, noting that observers' reports are "exploited for better conduct of future elections in the country" (Cameroon Tribune, 2023, para. 18), indicating that international interest translates into practical improvements over time.

3. Identifying Irregularities and Recommending Electoral Reforms: Perhaps the most concrete contribution of international observers is their systematic documentation of electoral problems and formulation of actionable recommendations. This role enhances both immediate credibility by exposing irregularities and long-term stability by pushing for systemic improvements.

The European Union Observation Mission has been particularly thorough in this regard. Following the 2019 elections, the EU released a comprehensive final report containing "30 landmark recommendations on the way forward," addressing issues such as "widespread and systemic weaknesses in the country's electoral landscape" and specifically noting that "INEC did not deploy a server for collation of results" (Daily Trust, 2019, para. 3). The report called for "strengthening of INEC's procedures for the collation of results in order to improve integrity and confidence in electoral outcomes" (Daily Trust, 2019, para. 5).

For Taraba State, which may face particular challenges related to its location and demographic composition, such recommendations can help tailor electoral improvements to local conditions. The 2019 EU observers noted that "systematic problems evident in the 2019 electoral process showed the need for an inclusive national discussion on reform for greater electoral integrity and participation" (Daily Trust, 2019, para. 11). Such discussions would necessarily include state-level perspectives, including those from Taraba.

4. Supporting and Collaborating with Domestic Observation Efforts: International observers do not operate in isolation but rather strengthen domestic observation capacity through collaboration and partnership. This capacity-building role enhances the sustainability of electoral credibility by developing local expertise and institutions.

NDI's collaboration with Nigerian civil society exemplifies this approach. The Institute works "closely with a coalition of over 400 Nigerian civil society groups – the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) – that deployed more than 4,000 citizen observers on election day" (National Democratic Institute, 2015a, para. 15). This partnership enabled TMG to use "parallel vote tabulation (PVT) methodology or 'Quick Count' to systematically observe opening, voting and counting processes at a representative random sample of 1,507 polling stations in all 774 local government areas" (National Democratic Institute, 2015a, para. 16). Many Nigerians stated that "the PVT methodology enhanced confidence in the electoral process as it would allow TMG to verify official results" (National Democratic Institute, 2015a, para. 16).

For Taraba State, strengthening domestic observation capacity is particularly important for democratic stability. Local observers understand community dynamics, can operate continuously beyond election periods, and are more sustainable than international missions that depart after voting. When international observers validate domestic observation methodologies and findings, they enhance the credibility of local voices in the electoral process.

### **Challenges Faced by International Observers in Ensuring Free, Fair, and Transparent Presidential Elections in Taraba State from 2015-2023**

International observers face significant challenges in ensuring electoral integrity in Taraba State, ranging from technological failures and insecurity to weak enforcement mechanisms. Below is an analysis of these challenges with verifiable academic and media sources.

1. **Technological Failures and Result Transmission Glitches:** One of the primary challenges is the reliance on fragile technology for result transmission. During the 2023 general elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) failed to upload presidential election results to its Result Viewing Portal (IREV) due to "a glitch," even though results from simultaneous National Assembly elections were uploaded. This inconsistency created suspicion and eroded public confidence, making it difficult for observers to

verify the integrity of the process in real time (Adegoke, 2025). For international observers, such technical failures obscure the transparency of the collation process and hinder their ability to certify results as credible.

2. **Insecurity and Electoral Violence:** Security remains a significant concern in Taraba State, which directly impacts observer access and voter participation. During the Karim-Lamido 1 State Constituency by-election in 2025, there were incidents of ballot paper snatching, including an alleged attempt by a sitting lawmaker. Although security agencies responded effectively in that instance (Daily Post Nigeria, 2025a), the broader context of banditry and criminal activities in Taraba poses a risk to the free expression of voters. International observers often face restrictions on movement in volatile areas, limiting their coverage and ability to assess the process comprehensively (The Guardian Nigeria, 2025a).
3. **Impunity and Electoral Offences:** The lack of accountability for electoral offences undermines the deterrent effect of observer presence. A study on the 2019 general elections revealed that despite the presence of observer groups, "diverse election irregularities and compromise were found not to reflect on the outcome," leading to criticism and cynicism (Ojo, 2024, p. 38). The European Union has specifically noted that "impunity for offences remains widespread," including violence, intimidation, and vote buying, with prosecution rates remaining very low (Arise News, 2025). For Taraba, this means that even when international observers document malpractices, the lack of legal follow-through renders their findings ceremonial rather than corrective.
4. **Limited Observer Coverage and Superficial Assessments:** International observer missions often suffer from logistical constraints that prevent deep coverage. Research indicates that foreign observers face "limited observer coverage" and tend to place "an overemphasis on election day" rather than examining the entire electoral cycle, including voter registration and campaign periods (Udom, 2025, p. 112). In a state like Taraba, which has diverse and remote communities, this superficial coverage means that irregularities in rural

polling units may go unnoticed, skewing the overall assessment of the election's freeness and fairness.

5. **Political Interference and Lack of Institutional Independence:** The independence of electoral bodies is frequently compromised by political pressure. In Taraba, tensions have arisen where the State Independent Electoral Commission (TSIEC) was accused by opposition parties of collusion with the ruling party to exclude candidates from local government elections (Daily Post Nigeria, 2025b). At the national level, the process of appointing the INEC Chairperson has been flagged as a critical issue; observers argue that a lack of transparency in appointments undermines public confidence in the Commission's neutrality (The Guardian Nigeria, 2026). Without guaranteed institutional independence, international observers cannot assure that the electoral playing field is level.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The analysis reveals a fundamental paradox at the heart of international election observation in Taraba State: observers are highly effective at diagnosing the symptoms of electoral dysfunction but are largely powerless to cure the disease itself. The five identified roles providing impartial assessment, demonstrating international interest, identifying irregularities, supporting domestic observers, and deterring violence collectively create a robust framework for evaluating electoral credibility. As seen in the work of the NDI, EU, and AU missions, these roles provide an invaluable, authoritative account of the electoral process, offering a factual baseline that can, in theory, de-escalate post-election tensions and guide reforms. The presence of international observers acts as a critical accountability mechanism, shining a spotlight on malpractices like the "weaponisation of the election" and the denial of access to collation centres, which were documented in the 2019 and 2023 elections. For a state like Taraba, with its history of inter-communal tensions, this impartial monitoring is crucial for providing all parties with a shared set of facts, thereby reducing the potential for conflict rooted in misinformation or disputed narratives.

However, the profound and persistent challenges outlined demonstrate that observation alone is insufficient to guarantee democratic stability. The effectiveness of the observers' roles is systematically undermined by the very environment they are trying to improve. The technological failures of the IREV portal in 2023, the pervasive insecurity that limits observer access and the "widespread impunity" for electoral offences directly negate the observers' ability to provide a comprehensive and reassuring assessment. The analysis starkly shows a broken feedback loop: international observers meticulously document irregularities and formulate actionable recommendations, as the EU did with its 30 recommendations in 2019 and 23 in 2023, yet the political will to implement these reforms is almost entirely absent. When the EU notes that only one of 23 recommendations was fully implemented, it confirms that the observer role risks becoming a performative exercise. Consequently, while observers can deter some misconduct on Election Day, they cannot resolve the deeper structural issues such as the compromised independence of electoral bodies or the refusal to prosecute offenders that perpetuate a cycle of flawed elections in Taraba and across Nigeria.

## **Conclusion**

The study's findings lead to the inescapable conclusion that international election observation in Taraba State operates within a fundamental and debilitating contradiction: it is a highly competent mechanism for diagnosing democratic ailments that it is structurally and politically incapable of treating. While observers from bodies like the EU and NDI excel at providing impartial assessments, deterring visible violence, and constructing an authoritative factual record roles that are indispensable for de-escalating immediate tensions and establishing a baseline for accountability their profound utility stops at the point of enforcement. The meticulous documentation of irregularities and the formulation of comprehensive recommendations are rendered performative by the entrenched political dynamics of the state and nation. The "broken feedback loop" is the critical pathology here; the consistent refusal of political actors to implement reforms, the pervasive impunity for electoral offences, and the systemic failures of institutions like INEC directly negate the observers' work. In essence, international observers serve as expert physicians in

a field hospital that lacks the authority to prescribe medicine or perform surgery, forever treating symptoms while the disease of democratic decay, rooted in a lack of political will, continues its course unchecked in Taraba.

## **Recommendations**

This work recommends among other things to following:

- i. **Strengthening the Electoral Cycle Approach through Targeted Institutional Capacity Building:** To build on the role of international observers in enhancing credibility, it is recommended that observer missions shift from a purely election-day monitoring focus to a comprehensive "electoral cycle" approach in Taraba State. International bodies should partner with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to provide targeted technical assistance and capacity-building programs during the inter-election period.
- ii. **Establishing a Proactive Framework for Enhanced Security and Access Protocols:** To mitigate the significant challenges of insecurity and restricted access which often hinder observers in Taraba State it is recommended that a formalized Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) be established between international observer missions, security agencies, and state authorities prior to the election cycle.

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