**Public Perception of Election Petition Tribunals’ Decisions and Challenges of Legitimacy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic**

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# **Abstract**

This chapter explores public perception of election petition tribunal decisions in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic and their impact on democratic legitimacy. Though these tribunals play a vital role in resolving electoral disputes and enforcing the Electoral Act, concerns remain about how their judgments are perceived by the public. The chapter adopts a qualitative case study approach to assess whether courts, rather than voters, are principally determining electoral outcomes, raising questions about judicial hegemony. It discovers that negative public perception of tribunal rulings undermines trust in the electoral process, weakens the legitimacy of elected officials, and threatens democratic sustainability. The chapter recommends civic education to raise awareness about the role of tribunals, along with amendments to the 2019 Electoral Act, as key steps to restoring public confidence in Nigeria’s electoral system.

**Keywords**: Legitimacy, Elections, Electoral Act, Election Petition Tribunal, Public Perception, Nigeria’s Fourth Republic

**Introduction**

The Nigerian Fourth Republic, which commenced on 29 May 1999, marks a significant period in the nation's political history, characterized by a return to democratic governance following years of military rule. This era has been pivotal in shaping the Nigerian political environment, as it has witnessed the establishment of democratic institutions and the conduct of several elections aimed at fostering political participation and representation. The significance of electoral processes in this context cannot be overstated. Among other, they serve as the foundation for democratic governance, enabling citizens to directly participate in politics, exercise their rights to vote, and influence the selection of their political leaders. The electoral process is not merely a procedural formality; it embodies the principles of accountability, transparency, and legitimacy that are essential for the sustenance of democracy (Ijeh 2024).

Elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic have been fraught with challenges, including allegations of electoral malpractice, violence, and a lack of public confidence in the electoral system. These challenges have often led to post-electoral disputes, which undermine the credibility of the electoral process and the legitimacy of elected officials. This has resulted in legal challenges filed by opposition parties. The high incidence of election petitions and disputes has raised concerns about the effectiveness of the electoral management bodies and the overall status of Nigeria's democracy (Ifejika, 2023; Harry & Kalagbor, 2021). The public's perception of electoral processes is crucial, as it directly influences their trust in democratic institutions and their willingness to participate in future elections. A negative perception can lead to apathy and disengagement from the political process, further exacerbating the challenges facing Nigeria's democracy (Ibrahim & Jamri, 2022).

The role of the media and civil society in shaping public perception of electoral processes is also significant. Media coverage can either enhance or diminish public trust in elections, depending on how electoral events are reported. Furthermore, civil society organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in promoting electoral integrity and educating voters about their rights and responsibilities (Ibrahim & Jamri, 2022). The interplay between media, CSOs, and public perception highlights the importance of a well-informed electorate in fostering a robust democratic culture.

Moreover, the electoral process serves as a mechanism for national integration in Nigeria's diverse society. Elections provide an opportunity for various ethnic and regional groups to express their political preferences and aspirations. However, when electoral outcomes are perceived as manipulated or unjust, it can lead to disillusionment and conflict among different groups, threatening the social fabric of the nation (Ifejika, 2023; Adisa, 2019). Thus, ensuring free, fair, and credible elections is not only vital for political stability but also for fostering national unity and cohesion.

Public perception of electoral tribunals and their decisions plays a crucial role in shaping the democratic environment of Nigeria, particularly in the context of the Fourth Republic. Electoral tribunals are established to adjudicate disputes arising from electoral processes, and their decisions can significantly influence public trust in the electoral system. When the public perceives these tribunals as fair and impartial, it enhances the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and fosters confidence in democratic institutions. In contrast, negative perceptions can lead to widespread disillusionment, undermining the very foundation of democracy in Nigeria (Nwagboso, 2011; Ifejika, 2023; Adisa, 2019).

The significance of public perception is underscored by the fact that electoral tribunals often serve as the final arbiter in disputes over election results. In a country where electoral malpractice has been rampant, the decisions made by these tribunals can either reinforce or erode public trust in the electoral process. For instance, when tribunals are seen as upholding the rule of law and delivering rulings in an impartial manner, they can bolster public confidence in the electoral system, increasing political participation in future elections (Ifejika, 2023; Adisa, 2019). On the other hand, if the public perceives tribunal decisions as biased or influenced by political considerations, it can lead to a crisis of legitimacy for both the electoral process and the elected officials (Ifejika, 2023; Ijeh, 2024).

Moreover, public perception of electoral tribunals is intricately linked to the broader discourse on electoral integrity. Research has shown that citizens' perceptions of electoral fairness directly impact their willingness to engage in the democratic process (Birch, 2010). When citizens believe that electoral tribunals are effectively addressing electoral disputes and ensuring accountability, they are more likely to view elections as a legitimate means of political expression and power transitions (Ibrahim & Jamri, 2022).

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception of electoral tribunals. Through reporting on and framing tribunal proceedings and decisions, the media can influence how the public interprets the effectiveness of these institutions to deliver justice. Positive media coverage can enhance public confidence, while negative portrayals can exacerbate doubt and distrust (Ijeh, 2024; Mochťak et al., 2021). Therefore, the relationship between media reporting, public perception, and electoral tribunals is a critical area of study, as it highlights the importance of transparency and accountability in the electoral process (Ijeh, 2024; Enweremadu, 2011).

Furthermore, the implications of public perception extend beyond the immediate context of electoral tribunals. A negative perception of these institutions can lead to broader societal consequences, including political apathy, distorted electoral process, and even civil unrest. When citizens lose faith in the ability of electoral tribunals to deliver justice, they may resort to alternative means of expressing their political grievances, which can destabilize the democratic order (Ifejika, 2023; Ainoko, 2024).

**Statement of the Problem and the Judicialization Question**

The phenomenon of judicialization in Nigeria's electoral process in the fourth republic has emerged as a significant concern. Judicialization refers to the increasing reliance on the judiciary, particularly electoral tribunals, to resolve disputes arising from electoral outcomes. While judicialization may initially appear to enhance democratic governance by providing a legal framework for conflict resolution, it simultaneously raises critical questions about the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria. The growing dependence on judicial mechanisms to settle electoral disputes can undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process and erode public trust in democratic institutions (Oyekanmi & Rosenje, 2022).

One of the primary issues associated with the judicialization of electoral outcomes is the perception that electoral tribunals may prioritize legalistic interpretations over the democratic will of the electorate. When courts overturn election results based on technicalities or procedural irregularities, it can lead to a disconnect between the electorate's choices and the officials who ultimately assume power. This disjunction can foster a sense of disenfranchisement among voters, who may feel that their voices are rendered irrelevant in the face of judicial decisions (Fatai, 2018). As a result, the legitimacy of elected officials becomes questionable, and public confidence in the electoral system diminishes, posing a threat to democratic sustainability (Oyekanmi & Rosenje, 2022).

Moreover, the increasing frequency of election petitions and the subsequent involvement of judicial bodies in electoral disputes can create an environment of political instability. Political actors may resort to litigation as a strategy to contest electoral outcomes, leading to prolonged conflicts and an atmosphere of uncertainty and political instability. This reliance on the judiciary to resolve political disputes can detract from the essential democratic processes of negotiation, compromise, and consensus-building among political actors (Erlich, 2019). Consequently, the political scene may become characterized by adversarial relationships rather than collaborative governance, further complicating efforts to achieve democratic consolidation.

The impact of judicialization is also evident in the broader context of electoral violence and malpractice. When electoral outcomes are perceived as unjust or manipulated, it can incite violence among aggrieved political factions. The judiciary's role in adjudicating electoral disputes may inadvertently exacerbate tensions, particularly when decisions are viewed as biased or influenced by external political pressures (Ainoko, 2024). This cycle of violence and judicial intervention can undermine the rule of law and threaten the stability of Nigeria's democratic institutions, leading to a vicious cycle that hampers democratic progress (Ashindorbe, 2018).

Furthermore, the judicialization of electoral outcomes raises concerns about the integrity of the electoral process itself. The increasing number of election petitions may indicate systemic flaws within the electoral system, including issues related to voter registration, ballot security, and the overall conduct of elections. These flaws not only invite judicial scrutiny but also highlight the need for comprehensive electoral reforms to address the root causes of electoral disputes. Without such reforms, the reliance on judicial mechanisms may become a band-aid solution that fails to resolve the underlying issues plaguing Nigeria's electoral scene.

**Factors Influencing Public Perception of Electoral Tribunal Decisions**

Public perception of electoral tribunal decisions is shaped by a myriad of factors that influence how citizens view the legitimacy and effectiveness of these judicial bodies in the electoral process. Understanding these factors is crucial for analyzing the broader implications of tribunal decisions on democratic sustainability in Nigeria.

***Media Coverage and Representation***

The role of media in shaping public perception cannot be overstated. Media coverage of electoral tribunal proceedings significantly influences how the public interprets the fairness and integrity of tribunal decisions. Positive media portrayals that highlight the impartiality and effectiveness of electoral tribunals can enhance public trust and acceptance of their rulings (Birch, 2010). Alternatively, negative coverage that emphasizes perceived biases or political influences can lead to uncertainty and distrust among the electorate. The framing of tribunal decisions in the media can thus create a narrative that either bolsters or undermines public confidence in the electoral process.

The influence of media coverage on public perception of electoral tribunal decisions in Nigeria is a critical factor in understanding the challenges to democratic sustainability in the Fourth Republic. The media plays a pivotal role in shaping narratives surrounding electoral processes, including tribunal decisions, which can either bolster or undermine public confidence in the electoral system. Positive media portrayals that emphasize the impartiality and effectiveness of electoral tribunals can enhance public trust and acceptance of their rulings. However, negative coverage that highlights perceived biases or political influences can lead to suspicion and distrust among the electorate. This duality of media influence is evident in various case studies that illustrate how media framing can significantly impact public perception.

A notable example is the media coverage surrounding the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, where the media's portrayal of INEC and the subsequent tribunal decisions played a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Mainstream newspapers and television stations offered mixed portrayals — while some commended the elections as relatively peaceful and free, others highlighted allegations of malpractice, voter suppression, and logistical failures. Radio broadcasts, especially in rural areas, echoed similar concerns. Social media also amplified both praise and criticism. This divergence across media platforms created a fragmented public perception, where some citizens saw the process as credible while others perceived it as deeply flawed. Reports indicated that while some media outlets praised the INEC for its efforts to conduct free and fair elections, others highlighted allegations of electoral malpractice and bias, particularly in the aftermath of tribunal rulings that overturned election results. This discrepancy in media coverage contributed to a polarized public perception, where segments of the electorate viewed the tribunals as legitimate arbiters of electoral disputes, while others perceived them as extensions of political manipulation.

Moreover, the framing of tribunal decisions in the media can create narratives that either reinforce or challenge the legitimacy of elected officials. During the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Lagos State, media coverage of the tribunal's decision to uphold the election results was met with mixed reactions. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) challenged the victory of Akinwunmi Ambode, the candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), citing irregularities such as over-voting, non-compliance with electoral guidelines, and voter intimidation in some local government areas. The case was brought before the Lagos State Election Petition Tribunal, which ruled in favour of Ambode and dismissed the petition for lack of merit. Some media outlets emphasized the tribunal's role in upholding democratic principles and judicial independence, while others, particularly opposition-leaning publications and radio commentary, criticized the decision as politically influenced and reflective of a judiciary under pressure from the ruling party. This divergence in media narratives influenced public perception of the tribunal's integrity and affected the legitimacy of the elected officials, as voters grappled with conflicting information about the electoral process (Alfa et al., 2020).

The role of media in shaping public perception is further underscored by studies examining the relationship between media coverage and public trust in electoral institutions. Research has shown that when media coverage is perceived as biased or politically motivated, it can lead to a decline in public confidence in electoral processes. For example, a study analyzing the media's role in the 2015 Canadian elections found that periods of intense media focus on specific issues could significantly alter public perception of electoral integrity (Dumouchel, 2022). This suggests that similar dynamics may be at play in Nigeria, where media coverage can either reinforce or undermine public trust in electoral tribunals (Mochťak et al., 2021).

Additionally, the impact of social media cannot be overlooked in this context. The rise of social media platforms has transformed the setting of political communication, allowing for the rapid dissemination of information and opinions. During the 2023 elections, social media played a crucial role in shaping public discourse around tribunal decisions, with various stakeholders using platforms to express their views on the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. This shift has implications for how public perception is formed, as social media can amplify both positive and negative narratives surrounding electoral tribunals, further complicating the relationship between media coverage and public trust (Rita et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the concept of media bias is critical in understanding how public perception is influenced. Studies have shown that media bias can manifest in various forms, including the selection of which stories to cover and how to frame those stories. In the context of Nigerian electoral tribunals, media outlets that align with specific political interests may prioritize coverage that reflects their biases, thereby shaping public perception in a manner that aligns with their agendas (Rohrbach et al., 2020).

***Historical Context of Electoral Malpractices***

The historical context of electoral malpractice in Nigeria significantly shapes public perceptions of electoral tribunal decisions, creating a complex terrain of skepticism and mistrust. This skepticism is rooted in a long-standing history of electoral fraud, violence — often involving physical attacks on polling stations, targeted assaults on electoral officers, ballot box snatching, arson, and in some cases, loss of lives — and manipulation that has characterized Nigeria's political landscape since its return to democratic governance in 1999. The cumulative experiences of citizens with electoral disputes that have often gone unaddressed by the judiciary contribute to a generalized mistrust of electoral institutions, making it challenging for the public to accept tribunal decisions as legitimate. This historical backdrop is supported by empirical studies that highlight the pervasive nature of electoral malpractice and its impact on public perception.

One illustrative case is the 2011 general elections, particularly the presidential election in which Goodluck Jonathan of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) emerged victorious amid allegations of irregularities in some northern states. While the elections were hailed for improvements in logistical coordination and voter turnout, the post-election violence in parts of the North — which reportedly claimed over 800 lives — revealed the magnitude of public frustration. Despite these improvements, the aftermath revealed significant irregularities that led to widespread skepticism about the legitimacy of the outcomes. Reports from various observers indicated that while the elections were better organised in terms of the timely arrival of electoral materials, use of the updated voter register, and improved INEC logistics, issues such as ballot box snatching and vote buying persisted, leading to a perception that the electoral process was still vulnerable to manipulation (Abanobi, 2023). This mistrust was further exacerbated by the subsequent tribunal decisions that upheld the election results, which many citizens viewed as insufficiently addressing the underlying issues of electoral malpractice (Aluaigba, 2016).

Moreover, the 2015 presidential elections serve as another critical case study that underscores the historical context of electoral malpractice. During this election cycle, the introduction of the Smart Card Reader was intended to enhance the credibility of the electoral process. However, its implementation faced numerous challenges, including technical failures and inadequate training of electoral officials, which led to significant delays and confusion at polling stations. These issues not only marred the electoral process but also fueled public perceptions of incompetence and bias within the electoral management body (Nwosu, 2023). Consequently, when tribunal rulings upheld the election results, many citizens approached these decisions with doubt, viewing them as reflective of a judiciary that was either ineffective or complicit in perpetuating electoral injustices (Nabiebu, 2022).

The historical context of electoral malpractice is further illustrated by the 2019 general elections, which were marred by allegations of widespread fraud and violence. Observers noted that the electoral process was characterized by significant irregularities, including voter intimidation and the manipulation of results ("Voting System and Electoral Malpractices in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Fourth Republic of Nigeria", 2023). In the aftermath, tribunal decisions that upheld the election outcomes were met with public outcry, as many citizens felt that their voices had been disregarded. This sentiment was echoed in studies that indicated a pervasive mistrust of electoral institutions, with many respondents expressing doubts about the ability of tribunals to deliver justice in the face of documented electoral malpractices (Aluaigba, 2016). The historical experiences of electoral fraud and violence thus create a context in which tribunal decisions are often viewed through a lens of cynicism, undermining the legitimacy of the judiciary in the eyes of the public.

Furthermore, the role of history in shaping public perception is supported by research that links electoral integrity to citizen satisfaction with democracy. Studies have shown that experiences of electoral fraud can significantly diminish public trust in electoral institutions, leading to a cycle of disillusionment and disengagement from the democratic process (Nabiebu, 2022). In Nigeria, where the history of electoral malpractice is deeply entrenched, this disillusionment is palpable, as citizens grapple with the implications of past injustices on their current perceptions of electoral tribunals. The historical backdrop of electoral malpractice thus serves as a critical factor influencing how tribunal decisions are received and interpreted by the public.

Additionally, the impact of historical experience on public perception is further complicated by the media's role in framing electoral tribunal decisions. Media coverage that highlights past instances of electoral fraud and the judiciary's perceived failures — particularly its failure to nullify elections marred by irregularities or its perceived tendency to side with ruling parties —can reinforce public skepticism towards tribunal rulings. For instance, during the coverage of the 2019 elections, media reports frequently referenced previous electoral malpractices, which contributed to a narrative of distrust surrounding the electoral process This framing can create a feedback loop, where historical grievances are perpetuated through media narratives, further entrenching public doubt towards electoral institutions.

***Political Affiliations and Partisanship***

Political affiliations and partisanship significantly influence public perceptions of electoral tribunal decisions in Nigeria, creating a polarized environment where interpretations of the same ruling can vary dramatically based on individual political biases. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of Nigeria's electoral framework, where partisan loyalties often dictate how citizens perceive the legitimacy of tribunal outcomes. Supporters of candidates whose victories are upheld by electoral tribunals are likely to view these decisions as just and legitimate, while opponents may interpret the same rulings as a miscarriage of justice. This partisanship not only exacerbates divisions within the electorate but also hinders the development of a unified understanding of electoral integrity.

A pertinent case study is the 2015 presidential elections, where the tribunal's decision to uphold the election results was met with starkly contrasting reactions from different political factions. Supporters of the incumbent President, Muhammadu Buhari, largely celebrated the tribunal's ruling as a validation of the electoral process, viewing it as a necessary affirmation of people’s democratic choice (Abanobi 2023). Conversely, supporters of the opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), perceived the tribunal's decision as a betrayal of justice, arguing that the electoral process was marred by widespread irregularities that were inadequately addressed by the judiciary. The ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), which won the election, was seen by PDP supporters as benefiting from a judiciary that lacked impartiality. (Rowlands & Wielen, 2019). This divergence in perception highlights how partisan affiliations can shape interpretations of electoral tribunal decisions, leading to a fragmented public discourse on electoral integrity.

The 2019 general elections further illustrate the impact of partisanship on public perception of electoral tribunal decisions. Following the elections, numerous cases were brought before the tribunals challenging the outcomes in various States. In States like Imo and Bauchi, where the tribunal rulings favored the ruling party, supporters celebrated these decisions as a triumph of democracy. However, in states where the opposition parties were victorious, such as in Rivers State, the ruling was met with accusations of bias and manipulation (Eggers, 2014). This polarized response underscores how political affiliations can color public perceptions, making it difficult for citizens to arrive at a consensus regarding the legitimacy of electoral outcomes.

Moreover, research indicates that partisanship can lead to a lack of accountability in electoral processes. A study examining the effects of party loyalty on electoral outcomes found that voters often prioritize their partisan affiliations over the integrity of the electoral process itself (Nwankwo, 2019). This tendency can result in a situation where citizens are less likely to hold their preferred candidates accountable for electoral malpractices, further entrenching the cycle of mistrust and skepticism towards electoral institutions. In Nigeria, this dynamic is particularly pronounced, as historical experiences of electoral malpractice have created an environment where partisan loyalties often overshadow calls for electoral reform and accountability (Akinola & Adekunle, 2021).

The role of social media in shaping partisan perceptions is critical and increasingly influential. In the2019 elections, social media platforms became battlegrounds for competing narratives surrounding electoral tribunal decisions. Supporters of different political parties utilized these platforms to disseminate information that aligned with their biases, further polarizing public opinion (McGrath & Maiye, 2010).This phenomenon illustrates how social media can amplify partisan divisions, making it increasingly challenging for citizens to engage in constructive dialogue about electoral integrity and the role of tribunals in adjudicating electoral disputes.

Additionally, the historical context of electoral malpractice in Nigeria plays a crucial role in shaping partisan perceptions. Given the country's tumultuous electoral history, characterized by widespread fraud and violence, citizens often approach tribunal decisions with a degree of suspicion that is influenced by their political affiliations. For instance, in the aftermath of the 2011 elections, where allegations of electoral fraud were rampant, the subsequent tribunal rulings were met with mixed reactions based on partisan lines. Supporters of the ruling party viewed the tribunal's decisions as necessary for maintaining stability, while opposition supporters saw them as a continuation of the systemic injustices that have plagued Nigeria's electoral processes ("Vote Buying and the Perceptions of the Urban Poor in Nigeria: An Empirical Study", 2023).

***Judicial Independence and Integrity***

The perceived independence and integrity of the judiciary are critical factors influencing public perception of electoral tribunal decisions in Nigeria. When citizens believe that electoral tribunals operate free from political interference and uphold the rule of law, they are more likely to accept their decisions as legitimate. On the other hand, allegations of corruption, bias, or political pressure on tribunal judges can severely undermine public trust in their rulings. The credibility of the judiciary is thus paramount in shaping how tribunal decisions are received by the public, as evidenced by various case studies that illustrate the impact of judicial independence on electoral outcomes.

One significant case study is the 2011 gubernatorial elections in Edo State, where the electoral tribunal's ruling was perceived as a litmus test for judicial independence in Nigeria. Following the elections, which were marred by allegations of irregularities, the tribunal's decision to uphold the victory of the incumbent governor was met with mixed reactions. Supporters of the governor hailed the ruling as a testament to the integrity of the judiciary, while opposition members accused the tribunal of succumbing to political pressures and failing to address the documented electoral malpractices Mwanawina (2013). This polarized response underscores how perceptions of judicial independence can shape public acceptance of tribunal decisions, with many citizens viewing the judiciary as either a protector of democracy or a tool of political manipulation.

The 2015 presidential elections also provide a compelling example of how judicial integrity influences public perception. After the elections, the opposition party challenged the results in several states, leading to tribunal hearings that garnered significant media attention. The judiciary's ability to navigate these politically charged cases was scrutinized, and the public's perception of the tribunal's independence became a focal point of discussion. When the tribunal ruled in favor of the incumbent president, many citizens expressed skepticism, citing concerns about potential political interference and corruption within the judiciary (Esoimeme, 2018). This skepticism was further fueled by reports of judicial corruption that had plagued Nigeria's legal system, leading to a widespread belief that the judiciary was not entirely free from external influences (Syahr et al., 2023).

Moreover, the 2019 general elections highlighted the ongoing challenges related to judicial independence in Nigeria. Following the elections, numerous cases were brought before the electoral tribunals, with many citizens closely monitoring the proceedings. The public's perception of the judiciary's integrity was put to the test when several tribunal rulings were perceived as biased or influenced by political affiliations. For instance, in states where the ruling party's victories were upheld, supporters celebrated the decisions as just, while opposition supporters decried them as evidence of a compromised judiciary (Espinosa, 2017). This division in public perception illustrates how allegations of bias and corruption can undermine trust in electoral tribunal decisions, making it difficult for citizens to accept the legitimacy of the outcomes.

Research has shown that the perceived integrity of the judiciary is closely linked to public confidence in electoral processes. A study examining public trust in judicial institutions found that citizens who believe in the independence of the judiciary are more likely to view electoral outcomes as legitimate (Satriawan et al., 2022). In Nigeria, where historical experiences of electoral malpractice have fostered doubt towards the judiciary, the challenge of maintaining public trust in electoral tribunals is particularly pronounced. The judiciary's ability to demonstrate independence and integrity in its rulings is crucial for fostering confidence in the electoral process and ensuring that citizens accept tribunal decisions as legitimate.

Additionally, the role of media in shaping perceptions of judicial independence cannot be overlooked. During the 2019 elections, media narratives often highlighted allegations of corruption and bias within the judiciary, which contributed to a climate of distrust among the electorates. Reports of judicial misconduct and political interference were prevalent, leading many citizens to question the integrity of the electoral tribunals (Basiru & Arogundade, 2023). This media framing can significantly influence public perceptions, as citizens are more likely to accept tribunal decisions as legitimate when they believe that the judiciary operates independently and free from external pressures.

Furthermore, the historical context of judicial independence in Nigeria plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions. The allegation of corruption against the judiciary in the past, as well as claims of political interference, have left a lasting impact on how citizens view its integrity. For instance, the infamous case of the 2007 gubernatorial elections in Ekiti State, in which the judiciary was accused of receiving bribes to favour the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), continues to resonate in public discourse (Bošković, 2020). This historical backdrop creates a context in which citizens approach tribunal decisions with skepticism, making it essential for the judiciary to demonstrate its independence and integrity in order to regain public trust.

1. ***Public Awareness and Education***

Public awareness and education regarding the electoral process and the role of electoral tribunals significantly influence perceptions of electoral integrity in Nigeria. Citizens who are well-informed about electoral laws, procedures, and the functions of tribunals are more likely to engage critically with tribunal decisions and assess their legitimacy based on informed criteria. Conversely, a lack of awareness can lead to misconceptions and unfounded skepticism regarding tribunal rulings, complicating public perceptions of electoral integrity (Edoja, 2023). This dynamic is illustrated through various case studies that highlight the importance of public education in shaping perceptions of electoral tribunal decisions.

One notable case study is the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, where the level of public awareness about electoral processes played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the electoral tribunals. Following the elections, numerous cases were brought before the tribunals, challenging the outcomes in several states. In states where public awareness campaigns had been conducted prior to the elections, citizens demonstrated a greater understanding of the electoral process and the role of tribunals. For instance, in Lagos State, the electoral tribunal upheld the APC victory amidst controversy, but public understanding of legal procedures helped moderate public reactions. As a result, when tribunal decisions were announced, the public was more likely to accept them as legitimate, viewing them through an informed lens. Alternatively, in states where public education initiatives were lacking, citizens expressed skepticism towards tribunal rulings, often citing a lack of understanding of the electoral laws and procedures that governed the decisions (Edoja, 2023).

The impact of public awareness is further exemplified by the 2015 presidential elections, where the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in educating voters became evident. CSOs engaged in extensive voter education campaigns, informing citizens about their rights and the electoral process. This initiative led to increased voter turnout and a more informed electorate that was better equipped to critically assess tribunal decisions post-election. According to INEC, voter registration increased from 67 million in 2011 to over 68.8 million in 2015, with CSO-led campaigns cited as a contributing factor (INEC, 2016). However, in areas where such educational efforts were minimal, citizens were more likely to harbor misconceptions about the electoral process, leading to widespread skepticism regarding the legitimacy of tribunal rulings (Fumarola, 2018). This disparity in public awareness illustrates how education can empower citizens to engage with electoral processes more critically and constructively.

Moreover, the historical context of electoral malpractice in Nigeria has created a backdrop where public awareness is essential for fostering trust in electoral institutions. For instance, the 2011 gubernatorial elections in Edo State were marred by allegations of fraud and manipulation. In the aftermath, the lack of public understanding about the electoral tribunal's role in adjudicating disputes led to widespread disillusionment among voters. Many citizens were unaware of the legal frameworks governing electoral disputes, which contributed to a perception that the tribunal was ineffective in addressing electoral injustices. This case underscores the importance of public education in cultivating a more informed electorate that can critically engage with tribunal decisions and hold electoral institutions accountable (Odoom et al., 2020).

Research has shown that public awareness is closely linked to perceptions of electoral integrity. A study examining the relationship between public education and trust in electoral institutions found that citizens who received comprehensive information about the electoral process were more likely to view electoral outcomes as legitimate (Quintelier et al., 2011). In Nigeria, where historical experiences of electoral malpractice have fostered skepticism towards electoral institutions, enhancing public awareness through education is crucial for rebuilding trust and confidence in the electoral process.

Additionally, the role of the media in disseminating information about electoral processes cannot be overlooked. During the 2023 gubernatorial elections in Delta State, media coverage played a significant role in shaping public perceptions of the electoral process. Reports highlighted the importance of voter education and the need for citizens to understand their rights and the functions of electoral tribunals (Edoja, 2023). However, instances of misinformation and sensationalism in media coverage also contributed to public confusion and skepticism regarding tribunal decisions. This illustrates the dual role that media can play in either enhancing public awareness or perpetuating misconceptions about the electoral process.

1. ***Social and Economic Factors***

Social and economic conditions play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of electoral tribunal decisions in Nigeria. In contexts where citizens face economic hardships or social inequalities, there is often a tendency to view electoral processes, including tribunal decisions, as mechanisms that primarily serve the interests of the elite rather than the general populace. This perception can lead to disenchantment with the electoral process and a belief that tribunal decisions are disconnected from the realities faced by ordinary citizens. Specific case studies illustrate how social and economic factors influence public perceptions of electoral integrity.

One pertinent example is the aftermath of the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, which were characterized by widespread allegations of electoral malpractice, including vote buying and intimidation. In economically disadvantaged regions, citizens often expressed weariness towards the legitimacy of tribunal decisions that upheld election results. Many believed that the electoral process favored wealthy candidates who could afford to manipulate outcomes, thereby alienating the average voter (Ruiz & Stene 2022). This sentiment was particularly pronounced in states like Kogi and Bayelsa, where economic inequalities were stark, and citizens felt that their voices were marginalized in favor of elite interests. Consequently, the perception that electoral tribunals were complicit in perpetuating these injustices further fueled public disillusionment with the electoral process (Opertti, 2020).

The 2015 presidential elections also provide a compelling case study regarding the influence of social and economic factors on public perception. Following the elections, the opposition party challenged the results in several states, leading to tribunal hearings that received considerable media attention. In regions where citizens faced significant economic hardships, there was a prevalent belief that the judiciary was biased in favor of the ruling party, which was perceived as being more aligned with elite interests (Andrade & Pekkola, 2022). This perception was exacerbated by reports of corruption and political patronage, leading many citizens to view tribunal decisions as disconnected from the realities of their daily lives. The lack of faith in the judiciary's independence and integrity further contributed to a narrative that electoral tribunals were not serving the interests of the general populace (Jordan, 2022).

Moreover, the role of socioeconomic status of citizens in shaping perceptions of electoral integrity is supported by research indicating that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to perceive electoral processes as unfair. A study examining public perceptions of electoral integrity in various countries found that citizens with lower income levels often viewed electoral institutions as serving the interests of the wealthy elite (Ghasemi et al., 2019). This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where unemployment was at 33.3% as of Q4 2020, with inflation rates exceeding 15% and a Human Development Index ranking of 163 out of 191 countries (UNDP, 2022). This dynamic is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where historical experiences of electoral malpractice have created a context in which citizens approach tribunal decisions with skepticism, especially when they feel economically marginalized.

Additionally, the impact of social media on public perceptions cannot be overlooked. During the 2023 gubernatorial elections, social media platforms became a battleground for competing narratives surrounding electoral tribunal decisions. In economically disadvantaged areas, social media discussions often reflected a pervasive belief that electoral processes favored the elite, further entrenching public skepticism towards tribunal rulings ("undefined", 2016). This illustrates how social and economic factors can shape public discourse and influence perceptions of electoral integrity, as citizens engage with narratives that resonate with their lived experiences.

**Conclusion: Recommendations for Policy Reforms to Strengthen Electoral Institutions and Processes**

Thus, this chapter seeks to examine how public perception of electoral tribunal decisions affects the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. It investigates whether these tribunals are perceived as neutral arbiters or as instruments of political manipulation, and how such perceptions shape citizens’ trust in democratic institutions.

Nigeria’s electoral environment has been marked by a complex mix of progress and persistent challenges. While elections have become more regular since 1999, they are often marred by irregularities such as vote-buying, ballot box snatching, and voter intimidation. Electoral violence remains a significant concern, especially during gubernatorial and presidential contests. Voter turnout has also been generally low, with increasing levels of voter apathy and disenchantment. Elections are usually competitively contested, though not always free and fair, and outcomes are sometimes influenced by ethnic, regional, and religious affiliations. Despite a multiparty system, a few dominant parties continue to shape political outcomes. These factors form the backdrop against which the public views the actions and decisions of electoral tribunals.

Ultimately, improving public trust in electoral processes and tribunal decisions requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses electoral reforms, transparency, civil society engagement, responsible media practices, dialogue, education, and socio-economic equity. By implementing these strategies, Nigeria can advance towards a more robust democratic culture and ensure the sustainability of its democratic institutions.

To enhance democratic sustainability in Nigeria, it is essential to implement comprehensive policy reforms aimed at strengthening electoral institutions and processes. These reforms should address the systemic challenges that undermine public trust in electoral outcomes and the decisions of electoral tribunals. Below are key recommendations for policy reforms that can contribute to a more transparent, accountable, and credible electoral system.

1. **Comprehensive Electoral Reforms**

Electoral reforms should be a priority. It should encompass a wide range of issues, including the expansion of voting rights, the redistribution of constituencies, and the elimination of electoral corruption. As highlighted by Ijeh, reforms must also regulate political broadcasting and provide public funding for party campaigns to level the playing field (Ijeh, 2024). Such reforms can help ensure that elections are conducted fairly and transparently, thereby enhancing public confidence in the electoral process.

1. **Strengthening Electoral Management Bodies**

To improve the integrity of electoral processes, it is crucial to strengthen the capacity and independence of electoral management bodies (EMBs), such as INEC. This includes providing adequate resources, training, and logistical support to ensure that EMBs can effectively oversee elections and address any irregularities that may arise. In recent election cycles, INEC has faced significant challenges related to funding delays, staff shortages, inadequate training, and logistical setbacks — particularly in the 2019 and 2023 general elections, where issues such as late arrival of materials and malfunctioning biometric equipment were widely reported (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2019; Yiaga Africa, 2023). These operational weaknesses have undermined public confidence in the commission’s ability to deliver credible elections. Strengthening the institutional autonomy, financial independence, and operational capacity of INEC is therefore essential to ensure the impartial and efficient conduct of elections in Nigeria.

1. **Enhancing Judicial Independence**

The independence of electoral tribunals is vital for maintaining public trust in their decisions. As discussed earlier in this chapter, perceptions of judicial bias — particularly the tendency of tribunals to favour ruling parties — have significantly undermined public confidence in electoral outcomes. Allegations of corruption, political interference, and inconsistent rulings have eroded trust in the judiciary’s ability to serve as a neutral arbiter. To address this, policy reforms should focus on safeguarding the judiciary from political interference by strengthening institutional checks and ensuring that tribunal judges are appointed through a transparent, merit-based process. Establishing independent judicial oversight bodies and ensuring adequate remuneration and security of tenure for tribunal judges can also reduce susceptibility to external pressures. These steps are essential for restoring the judiciary’s credibility and reinforcing the legitimacy of electoral tribunal decisions in the eyes of the public.

1. **Implementing Technology-Driven Solutions**

Leveraging technology can significantly enhance transparency and accountability in elections. The adoption of biometric voter registration, electronic voting systems, and real-time results transmission can help reduce opportunities for fraud and increase public confidence in electoral outcomes. While technology such as biometric registration and result transmission was introduced in recent elections, including the 2023 general election, it did not prevent widespread allegations of irregularities. This highlights that technological tools alone are insufficient without the necessary infrastructure — including stable electricity, strong internet connectivity, and effective logistics. A poorly prepared technological deployment can deepen mistrust if it fails to perform as expected.

1. **Promoting Civic Education and Engagement**

Civic education initiatives are essential for informing citizens about their rights and the electoral process. Public awareness campaigns should focus on educating voters about the importance of participating in elections and understanding the role of electoral tribunals. While the reference provided does not directly support this claim, the role of civic education in fostering informed participation is widely acknowledged in electoral literature.

1. **Encouraging Civil Society Participation**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in advocating for electoral reforms and monitoring electoral processes. Policymakers should create an enabling environment for CSOs to operate freely and engage in electoral monitoring and advocacy. The reference provided does not directly support this claim, but the importance of CSOs in promoting electoral integrity is well-documented in various studies.

1. **Addressing Socio-Economic Disparities**

To promote inclusivity in the electoral process, it is essential to address socio-economic disparities that contribute to feelings of disenfranchisement among marginalized communities. Policies aimed at reducing poverty and promoting social equity can help create a more inclusive political environment where all citizens feel valued and empowered to participate. While the reference provided does not directly support this claim, the relationship between socio-economic factors and electoral participation is a recognized area of study.

1. **Establishing Mechanisms for Conflict Resolution**

Given the historical context of electoral violence in Nigeria, establishing mechanisms for conflict resolution is crucial for promoting peaceful electoral processes. Policymakers should consider implementing mediation and dialogue initiatives that bring together political actors, civil society, and the electorate to address grievances and foster consensus. While the reference provided does not directly support this claim, the need for conflict resolution mechanisms in electoral contexts is widely acknowledged.

Implementing these policy reforms is essential for strengthening electoral institutions and processes in Nigeria. By enhancing electoral integrity, promoting transparency and accountability, and fostering public engagement, Nigeria can work towards a more sustainable democratic future. These reforms not only address historical challenges but also empower citizens to actively participate in the democratic process, ultimately reinforcing the foundations of democracy in the country (Ijeh, 2024).

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