

Involvement of Academicians in Election Rigging in Nigeria

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The involvement of academicians in Nigeria elections was aimed at sanitizing the Nigeria electoral system, unfortunately, the reverse has become the case. As long as Nigeria academicians continue to get involvement in the conduct of elections in Nigeria, the selection process of the leadership of Nigeria universities will continue to be hijacked by the Nigeria political cultures. Election is one of the most important instruments through which citizens exercise their democratic rights and choose those who will represent them in government. In a democracy, elections are expected to be free, fair, transparent and credible. However, Nigeria's democratic experience has been repeatedly undermined by electoral malpractice, including vote buying, manipulation of results, intimidation of voters, ballot box snatching, falsification of figures and the unlawful influence of electoral officials. One disturbing dimension of this problem is the alleged involvement of some Nigerian academicians in electoral manipulation. This development is particularly troubling because academics are traditionally regarded as custodians of knowledge, truth, intellectual integrity and moral leadership in society.

The involvement of university academics in Nigeria's electoral process was largely intended to improve the credibility of elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), particularly from the 2015 elections, increasingly relied on university lecturers, professors and vice-chancellors as ad-hoc election officials, including returning and collation officers. The rationale was that academics possessed the intellectual capacity, professional independence and ethical standards necessary to handle sensitive electoral responsibilities. Research has also found that the involvement of university academics and members of the National Youth Service Corps was introduced partly to sanitize the electoral system and that their participation could enhance electoral credibility. Unfortunately, the expectation that academics would remain above political manipulation has not always been fulfilled. Allegations surrounding the 2019 and 2023 elections generated serious questions about the conduct of some academics who participated in electoral administration. Reports and public debates alleged that some university officials compromised their responsibilities or became

susceptible to political pressure.

These allegations should not, however, be interpreted as an indictment of the entire Nigerian academic community. The vast majority of lecturers and professors who participate in elections may perform their duties honestly and professionally. Indeed, criticism of alleged misconduct by a few should not erase the contributions of academics who have served the electoral process with integrity. The seriousness of the issue is reflected in INEC's own recognition of the need for neutrality among university personnel deployed for elections. Ahead of the 2023 general elections, INEC stated that university lecturers selected as collation and returning officers were required to swear an oath of neutrality. The Commission also indicated that persons with obvious political affiliations or political lineage, as well as those previously convicted of electoral malpractice, should not be deployed. This requirement



demonstrates that academic credentials alone cannot guarantee integrity. Professional ethics, political neutrality and personal character are equally important. Several factors can explain why some academics may become vulnerable to electoral manipulation. The first is the pervasive influence of money and political patronage in Nigerian politics. Politicians who are desperate to win elections may attempt to influence electoral personnel through financial inducements, promises of appointments or other benefits. Academics are not completely insulated from these pressures. A study of university lecturers' perceptions of electoral malpractice identified disregard for electoral laws and vote buying among the factors associated with electoral malpractice. *The second factor is political affiliation. Some academics are active members or sympathizers of political parties*

There is nothing inherently wrong with an academic participating in politics, since citizens have political rights. The problem arises when political loyalty is allowed to override professional responsibility, especially when an academic is appointed to perform a supposedly neutral electoral duty. A person who has strong partisan interests may find it difficult to maintain the independence expected of a returning or collation officer. The third factor is institutional vulnerability. Nigerian universities operate within a broader political environment in which government appointments, funding, promotions and administrative decisions can sometimes be influenced by political considerations. Consequently, academics may face pressures from political actors or government officials. A scholarly examination of academics and election administration in Nigeria concluded that the challenges confronting university academics are connected to the wider political environment and that no segment of Nigerian society is completely insulated from the power associated with politics.

Another important factor is the weakening of ethical standards within some aspects of Nigerian public life. Universities are expected to serve as the conscience of society, but academics are also citizens who operate within the same social and economic environment as everyone else. When corruption, patronage and impunity become normalized in the wider society, the university community cannot automatically remain immune. The solution, therefore, is not simply to condemn academics but to strengthen institutional mechanisms that reward integrity and punish misconduct. The alleged involvement of academics in election rigging has serious consequences for Nigerian democracy. First, it damages public confidence in elections. If citizens believe that professors and university officials responsible for protecting election results can be compromised, confidence in the entire electoral process is weakened. Secondly, it damages the reputation of Nigerian universities. The university is traditionally regarded as an institution where truth and evidence should prevail over political influence. When academics are accused of manipulating election results, the moral authority of the university is diminished. Thirdly, electoral manipulation by educated professionals can be more damaging than ordinary political malpractice because academics possess the knowledge and institutional credibility required to facilitate or conceal irregularities. Their expertise can potentially be misused to give an appearance of legitimacy to an illegitimate electoral outcome. This is why the involvement of academics in electoral administration must be accompanied by strict accountability and effective monitoring.

Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between allegations, proven cases and general perceptions. It would be unfair and academically irresponsible to label Nigerian academics collectively as election riggers. There have been prominent academics who have contributed positively to Nigeria's electoral development. The academic community has also produced individuals who have served in electoral institutions with considerable

commitment to democratic values. The controversy surrounding academics and elections should therefore be treated as a question of institutional integrity rather than an excuse for condemning the entire university system. The way forward requires a comprehensive reform of the electoral system. First, INEC should strengthen the screening and selection process for academics appointed as returning and collation officers. Political affiliations, previous electoral conduct and potential conflicts of interest should be carefully examined before appointments are made. Secondly, election officials should receive intensive training on electoral law, ethics, neutrality and the consequences of manipulating election results.

Fourthly, there should be stronger monitoring of returning and collation officers. Election results should not depend excessively on the personal integrity of a single individual. Transparent documentation, effective technological safeguards, multiple levels of verification and accessible audit trails should make it difficult for any individual to alter results without detection. Fourthly, electoral offences involving academics should be investigated and prosecuted where sufficient evidence exists. Academic status or professional reputation should not provide immunity from the law. At the same time, accusations must be supported by credible evidence, and every accused person must be given due process. INEC itself has previously demonstrated that electoral misconduct can involve officials and has taken disciplinary measures in cases arising from investigations into alleged corruption during elections.

Finally, Nigerian universities must strengthen their ethical culture. Universities should incorporate civic responsibility, democratic ethics and professional integrity more firmly into academic and administrative life. Academic freedom should never be confused with freedom to manipulate public institutions. Professors and lecturers who accept electoral responsibilities must understand that they are serving the nation and not any political party or candidate.

In conclusion, election rigging remains one of the major threats to Nigeria's democratic development, and the alleged involvement of some academics in electoral malpractice is particularly disturbing because of the moral authority traditionally associated with the university community. Academics were invited into election administration because society believed that their education, independence and professional integrity would strengthen electoral credibility. Where individuals betray that trust, they not only undermine democracy but also damage the reputation of the Nigerian university system. However, the misconduct of a few should not be used to condemn the entire academic community. The appropriate response is stronger screening, continuous training, transparent electoral procedures, independent monitoring, effective prosecution and renewed commitment to professional ethics. Nigerian academics must recognize that the true measure of scholarship is not only the production of knowledge but also the courage to defend truth, justice and democratic values when those principles are under threat. Until then, there was indeed a country!