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Foreign Interference and Electoral Integrity: Analyzing the Mechanisms and Consequences of Election Manipulation in Nigeria , 2015–2023

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Abstract

Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy, has faced escalating threats to electoral integrity from foreign interference between 2015 and 2023. This article analyzes the mechanisms and consequences of election manipulation, employing an integrated theoretical framework of Hybrid Warfare, Institutional Decay, and the Principal-Agent Problem to dissect how external actors exploit Nigeria's vulnerabilities. Through a mixed-methods approach combining case studies of the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections, cyber security reports, and interviews with stakeholders the study reveals multifaceted interference tactics. Key mechanisms include cyber-attacks targeting electoral infrastructure (e.g., voter database breaches), disinformation campaigns amplifying ethno-religious divisions on social media, and illicit financial flows to political elites. These tactics synergize with domestic institutional weaknesses, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) logistical failures and judicial corruption, to erode public trust and democratic legitimacy. Consequences extend to heightened political polarization, social unrest, and compromised economic development, as distorted policies prioritize foreign interests over public welfare. The article highlights collusion between external actors and Nigerian elites, underscoring the Principal-Agent dynamics that enable manipulation. Policy recommendations emphasize strengthening INEC's cyber security, enforcing campaign finance transparency, and fostering regional cooperation to counter hybrid threats. By bridging global theories with Nigeria's context, this study contributes to broader debates on safeguarding electoral integrity in fragile democracies, offering critical insights for policymakers, scholars, and international stakeholders invested in democratic resilience in West Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Foreign interference, electoral integrity, hybrid warfare, institutional decay, principal-agent problem, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest democracy, occupies a pivotal geopolitical position in West Africa. Its elections are not only a barometer of democratic health on the continent but also a focal point for global actors seeking to sway regional politics (Adebajo, 2020). However, since the landmark 2015 elections which marked the first peaceful transfer of power between opposing parties, Nigeria's electoral integrity has faced escalating threats from foreign interference. Between 2015 and 2023, incidents of election manipulation linked to external actors, including cyber-attacks, illicit campaign financing, and diplomatic coercion, have raised urgent questions about the resilience of

Nigeria's democratic institutions (EU Election Observation Mission, 2023). This article examines the mechanisms through which foreign interference has undermined electoral integrity in Nigeria and evaluates its consequences for democratic governance, national sovereignty, and regional stability.

Foreign electoral interference, defined as the deliberate attempt by external actors to influence electoral outcomes, has become a hallmark of hybrid warfare in the 21st century (Fowler & Sule, 2021). While much scholarly attention has focused on cases in the Global North, such as Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. elections. African democracies like Nigeria remain understudied despite their systemic vulnerabilities (Nwankwo, 2022). Nigeria's electoral system, plagued by institutional weaknesses in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), corruption, and ethno-religious divisions, presents a fertile ground for foreign exploitation (Lewis, 2018). For instance, leaked diplomatic cables and investigative reports have exposed collusion between foreign tech firms, foreign governments, and Nigerian political elites to manipulate voter sentiment and outcomes (Premium Times, 2019). These tactics, ranging from cyber disinformation campaigns on platforms like WhatsApp to covert funding of candidates, reflect a broader erosion of electoral sovereignty in an era of digital globalization (Norris, 2020).

The consequences of such interference extend beyond contested elections. They exacerbate public distrust in institutions, deepen political polarization, and undermine Nigeria's role as a democratic anchor in West Africa (Diamond, 2021). For example, the 2023 elections witnessed unprecedented real-time dissemination of fake news, allegedly backed by foreign actors, which amplified ethno-regional tensions and cast doubt on INEC's credibility (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). Moreover, geopolitical rivalry, such as China's infrastructure diplomacy and Western aid conditionalities, has turned Nigeria's elections into a proxy battleground for global powers (Onuoha, 2021).

This article employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze these dynamics, drawing on cyber security reports, election data, and interviews with Nigerian stakeholders. By interrogating the interplay between foreign interference and domestic vulnerabilities, it contributes to debates on safeguarding electoral integrity in fragile democracies. The findings hold critical implications for policymakers in Abuja, regional bodies like ECOWAS, and international partners seeking to mitigate the corrosive impact of external manipulation on Nigeria's democratic future. This article utilizes the integrated theories of Hybrid Warfare, Institutional Decay, and Principal-Agent Problem to analyze the mechanisms and consequences of election manipulation in Nigeria through foreign interference.

Conceptualization of foreign interference and electoral integrity

Foreign Interference

Foreign interference refers to deliberate efforts by external actors, states, corporations, or non-state entities to influence a nation's electoral processes or outcomes. These actions often exploit vulnerabilities in the target country's political system to advance geopolitical, economic, or ideological interests. In Nigeria, foreign interference manifests through:

- (a) **Cyber Operations:** Attacks on electoral infrastructure (e.g., hacking voter databases) and disinformation campaigns via social media. For example, during the 2023 elections, foreign-linked actors flooded platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter with fake news to manipulate voter sentiment (Nwankwo, 2022; EU Election Observation Mission, 2023).
- (b) **Financial Interference:** Illicit funding of candidates or parties through shell companies or offshore accounts. Investigations by Premium Times (2019) revealed allegations of foreign financial support for Nigerian politicians in the 2019 elections.
- (c) **Diplomatic Coercion:** Threats of sanctions or aid withdrawal to sway electoral outcomes. For instance, Western powers have leveraged conditional aid to pressure Nigerian governments on electoral reforms (Onuoha, 2021).
- (d) **Domestic Collusion:** Collaboration between foreign actors and local elites, such as politicians, security agencies, or media outlets, to amplify interference (Fowler & Sule, 2021).

Foreign interference undermines national sovereignty and distorts the democratic will of Nigerian voters by introducing external agendas into the electoral process (Norris, 2020).

Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity refers to the adherence to international standards of fairness, transparency, and accountability throughout the electoral cycle. In Nigeria, this concept is tied to the credibility of institutions like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the absence of violence, and public trust in outcomes. Key dimensions include:

- (a) **Institutional Independence:** INEC's ability to conduct elections free from political or external influence. Despite reforms, INEC has faced criticism for logistical failures (e.g., delayed voting materials in 2019) and alleged partisan bias (Premium Times, 2019).
- (b) **Inclusivity and Accessibility:** Ensuring all eligible voters can participate without intimidation. Persistent insecurity, such as Boko Haram attacks in the Northeast, has disenfranchised millions (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). More recently, the activities of bandits in parts of the northwest and the unknown gunmen in the eastern part of the country have added to the problem.
- (c) **Transparency:** Public scrutiny of voter registration, ballot counting, and result declaration. The 2023 elections saw improvements with INEC's Results Viewing Portal

(IReV), though technical glitches fueled distrust (EU Election Observation Mission, 2023).

- (d) **Accountability:** Legal mechanisms to address grievances, such as election tribunals. However, prolonged court battles after the 2023 polls highlighted systemic delays and perceptions of judicial bias (Diamond, 2021).

Electoral integrity in Nigeria remains fragile due to systemic corruption, ethno-religious polarization, and weak enforcement of electoral laws (Lewis, 2018).

Integrated Theoretical Analysis of Foreign Interference in Nigeria's Elections

To comprehensively explain the methods of foreign interference in Nigeria's elections, there is a need to integrate three theoretical frameworks: Hybrid Warfare Theory, Institutional Decay Theory, and the Principal-Agent Problem. This synthesis reveals how external actors exploit systemic vulnerabilities, institutional weaknesses, and corrupt domestic relationships to undermine electoral integrity.

Overview of Hybrid Warfare Theory and Application to Nigeria's Elections

Hybrid Warfare Theory describes modern conflict strategies where state and non-state actors blend conventional military tactics with non-military tools (e.g., cyber-attacks, disinformation, economic coercion) to destabilize adversaries without direct confrontation. It emphasizes ambiguity, deniability, and exploiting societal vulnerabilities.

Major Assumptions

1. **Multidimensional Tactics:** Conflicts involve the simultaneous use of military, economic, cyber, and informational tools.
2. **Exploitation of Vulnerabilities:** Adversaries target institutional weaknesses (e.g., corruption, polarization).
3. **Ambiguity and Deniability:** Actors mask their involvement to avoid accountability.
4. **Strategic Goals Over Kinetic Wins:** Focus on long-term erosion of trust and governance rather than territorial gains.

Strengths

1. **Explains Complexity:** Captures the interplay of diverse tactics (e.g., cyber attacks + disinformation).
2. **Modern Relevance:** Fits 21st-century conflicts dominated by technology and information warfare.
3. **Flexibility:** Applicable to state and non-state actors (e.g., Russia, China, or tech firms).

Weaknesses

1. **Overly Broad:** Risk of conflating disparate actions (e.g., hacking vs. propaganda) under one label.
2. **Attribution Challenges:** Difficulty proving state responsibility for covert operations.

3. **Neglects Domestic Factors:** Underplays internal drivers of instability (e.g., elite corruption).

Hybrid Warfare in Nigeria's Elections (2015–2023)

Hybrid Warfare explains how external actors exploit Nigeria's electoral vulnerabilities through:

- Cyber operations employing methods like hacking voter databases (e.g., 2023 INEC breaches), disrupting result transmission like the suspected foreign-linked cyber-attacks which delayed INEC's results portal, fueling distrust (EU EOM, 2023).
- Disinformation methods like the spreading of fake news via WhatsApp or Twitter/X to polarize voters along ethno-religious lines. For example, foreign troll farms amplified claims of INEC bias in 2023, triggering violence in Lagos.
- Economic coercion methods like conditional aid or sanctions to influence electoral outcomes. For example, Western threats to withhold aid pressured Nigerian governments to adopt reforms (Adebajo, 2020).
- Exploiting Institutional Weaknesses through methods like targeting INEC's logistical gaps (e.g., biometric failures in 2019) and judicial corruption.

Hybrid Warfare Position on Electoral Interference

Hybrid Warfare Theory frames Nigeria's elections as a battleground for geopolitical influence, where foreign actors use low-cost, high-impact tactics (e.g., social media disinformation) to destabilize Africa's largest democracy. It also exploits pre-existing weaknesses (e.g., INEC's inefficiencies and ethno-religious divides). And to avoid direct confrontation while achieving strategic goals (e.g., securing resource access, regional dominance).

Limitations in the Nigerian Context

Overlooks Domestic Complicity: The theory fails to fully account for Nigerian elites colluding with foreign actor (which is better explained by the Principal-Agent Problem). It also ignores socio-economic drivers like poverty and inequality, which make voters susceptible to manipulation.

Hybrid Warfare Theory effectively explains the methods of foreign interference in Nigeria's elections but must be combined with other frameworks (e.g., Institutional Decay, Principal-Agent Problem) to address motivations, local complicity, and long-term consequences. It remains vital for understanding how Nigeria's elections have become a proxy arena for global power competition.

Overview of Institutional Decay Theory and Application to Nigeria's Elections

Institutional Decay Theory posits that institutions lose effectiveness, legitimacy, and public trust over time due to internal failures (e.g., corruption, inefficiency) and external pressures (e.g., political interference, resource constraints). This erosion undermines their

ability to fulfill core functions, creating vulnerabilities exploited by domestic and external actors.

Major Assumptions

1. **Gradual Erosion:** Institutions deteriorate incrementally due to neglect, mismanagement, or politicization.
2. **Loss of Legitimacy:** Decayed institutions lose public trust, weakening their authority.
3. **Vulnerability to Exploitation:** Weak institutions become targets for manipulation by external or domestic actors.

Strengths

1. **Explains systemic decline:** Highlights how institutional weaknesses (e.g., INEC's logistical failures) contribute to governance crises.
2. **Contextualizes long-term impacts:** Links short-term failures (e.g., electoral fraud) to broader democratic backsliding (Lewis, 2018).
3. **Focus on internal dynamics:** Emphasizes domestic culpability, such as corruption or elite collusion.

Weaknesses

1. **Overlooks external drivers:** Underemphasizes how foreign actors actively accelerate decay (e.g., cyber-attacks on INEC).
2. **Passive framing:** Implies decay is inevitable, neglecting agency in institutional reform.
3. **Limited predictive power:** Better at diagnosing decay than prescribing solutions.

Application to Nigeria's Electoral Interference

Institutional Decay Theory explains how Nigeria's electoral institutions, particularly the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), have become prime targets for foreign interference through:

1. Pre-existing Vulnerabilities

Logistical Failures: INEC's inability to deploy voting materials or manage biometric systems (e.g., 2019 card reader failures) reflects institutional decay (Premium Times, 2019).

Corruption: Politicization of INEC's leadership and budget mismanagement undermine its independence (Lewis, 2018).

2. Exploitation by External Actors

Cyber-attacks: Decayed institutions lack robust cyber security. In 2023, foreign actors hacked INEC's voter database, exacerbating distrust in electoral outcomes (EU EOM, 2023).

Disinformation: Weak public trust in INEC (due to past failures) amplifies the impact of foreign-led fake news campaigns (CLEEN Foundation, 2023).

3. Consequences of the Decay

Judicial Paralysis: Prolonged election tribunals (e.g., 2023 presidential disputes) reflect decayed judicial capacity to resolve conflicts (Diamond, 2021).

Voter Apathy: Only 27% turnout in 2023 elections signals eroded public faith in the electoral process (NBS, 2023).

Position of the Institutional Decay Theory on Foreign Interference

Institutional Decay Theory frames foreign interference as a consequence, not a cause, of institutional fragility. It argues that: External actors exploit pre-weakened institutions (e.g., INEC's technical gaps) to amplify chaos; Decay creates opportunities for interference but does not fully explain the tactics (e.g., cyber-attacks) or motivations (e.g., geopolitical rivalry).

Limitations in the Nigerian Context

Ignores Active Foreign Roles: The theory fails to address how foreign actors proactively destabilize institutions (e.g., funding divisive narratives).

Neglects Hybrid Tactics: The theory does not account for synergies between institutional decay and hybrid warfare methods (e.g., disinformation + INEC's inefficiencies).

Institutional Decay Theory is critical for diagnosing Nigeria's electoral vulnerabilities but must be combined with Hybrid Warfare Theory and Principal-Agent frameworks to fully explain foreign interference. While it highlights INEC's decay as a catalyst for manipulation, addressing interference requires tackling both institutional reform and external exploitation.

Overview of the Principal-Agent Problem Theory and Application to Nigeria's Elections

The Principal-Agent Problem (PAP) is a theoretical framework in economics and political science that examines conflicts arising when one party (the agent) acts on behalf of another (the principal), but their interests diverge. Key features include information asymmetry (agents having more knowledge than the principals) and misaligned incentives, leading to inefficiencies or opportunism.

Major Assumptions

- **Delegation of Authority:** Principals delegate tasks to agents (e.g., citizens elect politicians).
- **Information Asymmetry:** Agents possess more information about their actions than principals.
- **Goal Misalignment:** Agents prioritize self-interest (e.g., power, wealth) over the principal's objectives.
- **Rational Actors:** Both parties act to maximize their utility (though criticized for oversimplification).

Strengths

- **Broad Applicability:** Explains relationships in politics (voters and politicians), corporations (shareholders and CEOs), and international relations.
- **Highlights Accountability Gaps:** Reveals why oversight mechanisms (e.g., audits, sanctions) are critical.
- **Predicts Opportunism:** Anticipates risks like corruption or shirking responsibilities.

Weaknesses

- **Simplistic Rationality:** Assumes perfect rationality, ignoring cultural or psychological factors.
- **Overlooks Systemic Issues:** Fails to address structural inequalities or institutional decay.
- **Limited Scope:** Focuses on dyadic relationships, neglecting multi-layered interactions (e.g., multiple foreign actors).

Application of Principal-Agent Theory to Foreign Interference in Nigeria's Elections

In Nigeria's electoral context:

Principals: Are the external actors (foreign governments, corporations, or organizations).

Agents: Are the Nigerian political elites, officials, or institutions (e.g., INEC).

Methods of Interference:

1. **Financial Incentives:** Foreign actors (principals) fund Nigerian politicians (agents) to sway policies or election outcomes. For example the allegations of foreign campaign financing via offshore accounts (Premium Times, 2019).
Risk: Agents may embezzle funds or prioritize foreign interests over public welfare.
2. **Information Manipulation:** Foreign actors exploit agents (e.g., media outlets) to spread disinformation. For example politicians collaborating with foreign tech firms to amplify divisive narratives (Nwankwo, 2022).
3. **Institutional Collusion:** Weak oversight allows agents (e.g., INEC officials) to enable electoral fraud for personal gain for example the delayed result transmissions in 2023 elections, allegedly influenced by external pressures (EU EOM, 2023).

Position of Principal-Agent Theory on Nigeria's Electoral Interference

Principal-Agent Theory frames foreign interference as a strategic exploitation of domestic opportunism: External actors capitalize on Nigerian elites' self-interest to undermine electoral integrity. For instance, politicians accept foreign funds to secure power, disregarding voter trust (Principal-Agent divergence).

Limitations in the Nigerian Context

- **The theory overlooks structural vulnerabilities:** PAP neglects systemic issues like poverty or ethno-religious divisions that make Nigeria susceptible to interference.

- **Ignores Multilateral Dynamics:** PAP fails to explain interference involving multiple principals (e.g., China and Russia competing for influence).
- **Assumes Contractual Solutions:** PAP suggests incentives/penalties to align interests, but enforcing these in Nigeria's weak governance context is impractical.

The Principal-Agent Problem therefore provides a critical lens to analyze how foreign interference thrives on domestic opportunism in Nigeria's elections. However, it must be integrated with theories like Hybrid Warfare and Institutional Decay to address systemic vulnerabilities and multi-layered interference tactics.

Interplay of the Theories

1. **Hybrid Warfare + Institutional Decay:** Cyber-attacks (Hybrid Warfare) exploit INEC's technical gaps (Institutional Decay), disrupting electoral credibility.
2. **Hybrid Warfare + Principal-Agent:** Disinformation campaigns (Hybrid Warfare) are amplified by local elites (agents) who benefit from polarization.
3. **Principal-Agent + Institutional Decay:** Corrupt officials (agents) neglect institutional reforms, perpetuating decay and enabling foreign exploitation.

The integration of Hybrid Warfare, Institutional Decay, and Principal-Agent theories provides a holistic lens to dissect foreign interference in Nigeria's elections. It underscores that external actors thrive not only through advanced tactics but also by exploiting domestic vulnerabilities and corrupt elite networks. Addressing these intertwined challenges demands systemic reforms, international cooperation, and grassroots empowerment to safeguard Nigeria's democratic future.

Background to Nigeria's Electoral History and Challenges

Nigeria's electoral history since gaining independence in 1960 has been marked by cycles of democratic experimentation, military rule, and persistent challenges to electoral integrity. The country transitioned from a British-style parliamentary system to a presidential system in 1979, but military coups in 1966, 1983, and 1993 repeatedly disrupted democratic governance (Lewis, 2007). The annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election widely regarded as Nigeria's freest and fairest poll by military dictator Ibrahim Babangida exemplified the entrenched culture of electoral manipulation and distrust (Diamond, 1995). This annulment, which denied business magnate Moshood Abiola his victory, triggered nationwide protests and deepened public skepticism toward electoral processes.

The return to civilian rule in 1999, following decades of military dictatorship, ushered in the Fourth Republic. However, elections under this republic have been marred by systemic irregularities. For instance, the 2007 elections, described by observers as "the worst in Nigeria's history," were characterized by ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and collusion between the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political

elites (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Despite incremental reforms, such as the introduction of biometric voter registration in 2011 and electronic voter accreditation in 2015, electoral malpractice persists. The 2015 elections, though lauded for facilitating the first opposition victory (Muhammadu Buhari's defeat of incumbent Goodluck Jonathan), were still tainted by localized violence and logistical failures (EU Election Observation Mission, 2015).

Key Challenges to Electoral Integrity

- **Institutional Weaknesses:** INEC, Nigeria's electoral body, has struggled with operational inefficiency, funding constraints, and allegations of partisan bias. For example, delayed distribution of voting materials and malfunctioning card readers in 2019 disenfranchised millions and fueled accusations of sabotage (Premium Times, 2019).
- **Violence and Security Threats:** Elections are often conducted in a climate of violence, driven by ethno-religious tensions, militant groups like Boko Haram, and politically sponsored thuggery. Over 800 deaths were linked to the 2011 post-election violence, while the 2023 elections saw attacks on INEC facilities in the Southeast and Northwest (CLEEN Foundation, 2023).
- **Corruption and Vote-Buying:** Political elites routinely exploit poverty to buy votes, with cash and material incentives exchanged at polling units. A 2019 study revealed that 32% of voters in rural areas received money or gifts to sway their votes (Sahara Reporters, 2020).
- **Ethno-Religious Polarization:** Nigeria's diverse population, divided along ethnic and religious lines, often votes based on identity politics. Politicians weaponize these divisions, as seen in the 2023 campaigns where candidates targeted specific regional and religious blocs (Onuoha, 2023).
- **Foreign Interference:** Recent elections have witnessed growing external meddling. For example, the 2019 elections saw allegations of illicit campaign funding from foreign sources, while the 2023 cycle faced cyber-attacks on INEC's systems, suspected to be linked to foreign actors (Nwankwo, 2022; EU Election Observation Mission, 2023).

Interplay Between Foreign Interference and Electoral Integrity in Nigeria

Foreign interference exacerbates Nigeria's preexisting electoral challenges in the following ways:

1. **Erosion of Public Trust:** Cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns (e.g., news about INEC's neutrality in 2023) deepen skepticism about electoral legitimacy.
2. **Institutional Weakening:** Foreign funding of candidates bypasses campaign finance laws, undermining INEC's regulatory authority (Nwankwo, 2022).
3. **Geopolitical Exploitation:** Global powers like China and Russia leverage Nigeria's electoral vulnerabilities to expand regional influence, turning elections into proxy contests (Adebajo, 2020).

The interplay between foreign interference and electoral integrity has emerged as a critical area of scholarly inquiry, particularly in the context of rising global geopolitical competition and digitalization. Existing research explores how external actors exploit vulnerabilities in electoral systems, the mechanisms of interference, and their implications for democratic governance. Below is a synthesis of key themes and findings from global, regional, and Nigeria-specific studies.

Overview of existing research on foreign interference and electoral integrity

Global Perspectives on Foreign Electoral Interference

Foreign electoral interference is often framed as a component of "hybrid warfare", where states or non-state actors use non-military tactics such as cyber-attacks, disinformation, and financial manipulation to destabilize democracies (Fowler & Sule, 2021). Norris (2020) defines electoral integrity as adherence to international standards of fairness, emphasizing that interference undermines public trust and institutional legitimacy. Studies on the 2016 U.S. elections and 2017 French elections highlight Russia's use of social media trolls and hacked emails to sway voter behavior, illustrating the transnational nature of modern interference (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Galeotti, 2018).

However, research has predominantly focused on Western democracies, with limited attention to the Global South. Exceptions include works on Latin America (e.g., Venezuelan elections) and Southeast Asia (e.g., Philippine disinformation campaigns), which reveal how foreign actors exploit weak institutions and polarization (Deibert, 2019; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Foreign Interference in African Elections

Africa's electoral systems, characterized by institutional fragility and resource constraints, are increasingly targeted by foreign actors. Nwankwo (2022) identifies cyber interference as a growing threat, citing cases like Kenya's 2017 elections, where hackers targeted voter databases. Fowler & Sule (2021) argue that foreign interference in Africa often involves financial patronage, where external powers fund candidates to secure geopolitical advantages, such as access to natural resources or military bases.

China's role in African elections has drawn scrutiny, with allegations of infrastructure-for-influence deals to sway electoral outcomes (Onuoha, 2021). Conversely, Western actors have been accused of leveraging aid conditionality to pressure governments into adopting preferred policies, as seen in Nigeria's 2015 elections (Adebajo, 2020).

Nigeria's Electoral Integrity and Foreign Interference

Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–present) has faced persistent electoral challenges, including violence, vote buying, and institutional bias (Lewis, 2018). Foreign interference exacerbates these issues:

Cyber-attacks: The 2023 elections saw cyber operations targeting INEC's systems, with evidence linking breaches to foreign actors (Nwankwo, 2022; EU EOM, 2023).

Disinformation: Social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook became battlegrounds for foreign-linked fake news campaigns aimed at polarizing voters (CLEEN Foundation, 2023).

Illicit Financing: Investigations by Premium Times (2019) exposed offshore funding of Nigerian campaigns, often routed through shell companies in tax havens.

Studies by Diamond (2021) and Onuoha (2021) emphasize how Nigeria's ethno-religious divisions and weak campaign finance laws create openings for foreign manipulation. For example, external actors amplify divisive narratives to destabilize the polity, as seen in the 2023 elections' regional tensions.

Existing research underscores the multifaceted nature of foreign interference and its corrosive impact on electoral integrity, particularly in institutionally fragile states like Nigeria. However, gaps persist in understanding the African context, mechanistic synergies, and long-term democratic consequences. Nigeria's 2015–2023 electoral cycles provide a critical case study for advancing this scholarship

Mechanisms of Foreign Interference in Elections

Foreign interference in elections involves deliberate efforts by external actors to manipulate electoral processes or outcomes to serve their strategic interests. In Nigeria, these mechanisms exploit institutional weaknesses, technological gaps, and socio-political divisions. Below is a detailed discussion of three key mechanisms, financial influence, information operations, and diplomatic pressure with examples from Nigeria's 2015–2023 electoral cycles.

Foreign funding of political campaigns, parties, or candidates is a pervasive mechanism of interference. External actors may funnel money through offshore accounts, shell companies, or intermediaries to bypass campaign finance laws and sway electoral outcomes.

In Nigeria, the 2019 elections saw allegations of foreign funding for some candidates, with leaked documents revealing offshore transactions linked to political campaigns (Premium Times, 2019). Weak enforcement of Nigeria's Electoral Act (which bans foreign donations) enables such practices. For example, foreign entities often disguise funds as "consultancy fees" or "development projects" (Fowler & Sule, 2021).

The Impact of such interference is that it distorts the credibility of the elections by giving externally funded candidates undue financial advantage. It also undermines public trust, as voters perceive elections as auctions rather than democratic processes (Norris, 2020).

Information Operations

This involves the use of disinformation, propaganda, and cyber-attacks to manipulate voter behavior, polarize societies, or discredit electoral institutions.

In 2023, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) reported cyber-attacks on its voter registration portal, suspected to originate from foreign actors. Hackers targeted INEC's database to delete voter records or disrupt the transmission of results (EU EOM, 2023).

Disinformation campaigns linked to foreign-troll farms spread fake news on platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter during the 2023 elections. For instance, false claims about INEC's collusion with specific parties fueled violence in Lagos and Kano (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). Deepfake audio recordings of candidates were circulated to mislead voters.

The impact of the disinformation campaigns is that they amplify ethno-religious tensions (e.g., framing elections as "North vs. South" conflicts). They also erode trust in INEC's credibility and electoral outcomes (Diamond, 2021).

Diplomatic Pressure

Foreign governments may use diplomatic channels to influence elections, including threats of sanctions, aid conditionality, or public endorsements of candidates. In 2015, Western powers openly criticized then-President Goodluck Jonathan's handling of Boko Haram, indirectly bolstering opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari's campaign (Adebajo, 2020). China has also leveraged infrastructure investments (e.g., rail projects) to gain favor with Nigerian administrations, potentially influencing policy alignment post-election (Onuoha, 2021).

Aid Conditionality

The European Union and United States have tied financial aid to electoral reforms, such as demands for biometric voter registration and transparency in vote counting (Lewis, 2018). The impacts of such conditionalities are that they undermine national sovereignty by pressuring governments to prioritize foreign interests over domestic needs. They also create dependency on external actors, weakening local accountability mechanisms (Norris, 2020).

Interplay of Mechanisms

These mechanisms often operate synergistically:

1. **Financial + Information Interference:** Foreign-funded campaigns may bankroll disinformation operations to discredit opponents.

2. **Diplomatic + Financial Interference:** Threats of sanctions may coerce governments into accepting unfavorable trade or military deals.

For example, during Nigeria's 2023 elections, foreign actors allegedly combined illicit funding of campaigns with cyber-attacks on INEC's systems to destabilize the process (EU EOM, 2023).

Consequences of Election Manipulation in Nigeria (2015–2023)

Election manipulation, whether through foreign interference or domestic malpractice, has profound and interconnected consequences for Nigeria's democracy, social cohesion, and economic progress. Below is an analysis of three major repercussions:

1. **Undermining Democratic Institutions:** Election manipulation significantly undermines the integrity and effectiveness of Nigeria's democratic institutions. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Assembly have repeatedly attempted to reform election laws and regulations to address past flaws. However, these efforts are often circumvented by political actors who exploit loopholes and ambiguities in the electoral framework (IIDEA 2024). For instance, the 2023 elections exposed several operational inefficiencies, technological challenges, and non-compliance with electoral laws, which collectively eroded public trust in the electoral process (Premium Times 2024)
2. **Judicial Discredit:** Election manipulation also leads to the discredit of the judicial system. Election tribunals, meant to resolve disputes, are often seen as compromised. After the 2023 polls, prolonged court battles and controversial rulings such as dismissing evidence of overvoting reinforced perceptions of judicial bias. The judiciary is expected to provide a fair and impartial resolution to electoral disputes. However, the 2023 elections were marked by conflicting judgments and a disregard for judicial precedent, leading to a loss of public confidence in the judiciary. Former President Obasanjo criticized the judiciary for its inability to dispense justice in election matters, arguing that many judges are compromised by wealthy politicians (Vanguard 2024). This situation not only undermines the rule of law but also encourages further electoral malpractice, as perpetrators are aware that they can escape punishment.
3. **Legislative Paralysis:** The consequences of election manipulation extend to the legislative process. Manipulated elections often produce unaccountable legislatures, leading to paralysis in the National Assembly. When elections are manipulated, the resulting National Assembly is often composed of members whose legitimacy is questioned. For instance, lawmakers implicated in vote-buying or foreign collusion prioritize patronage over public welfare, stalling critical reforms (Lewis, 2018). This can lead to internal conflicts and a lack of cooperation among lawmakers. Additionally, the constant legal battles and court interventions in electoral matters can distract the legislature from addressing pressing national issues, thereby hindering the effective functioning of the legislative branch.

4. **Erosion of Trust in Electoral Commissions:** Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has faced repeated criticism for logistical failures and perceived bias. For example, during the 2019 elections, malfunctioning biometric card readers disenfranchised millions, fueling allegations of sabotage and collusion with political elites (Premium Times, 2019). By 2023, despite improvements like the Results Viewing Portal (IReV), technical glitches and delayed result uploads deepened public skepticism (EU Election Observation Mission, 2023).
5. **Polarization and Social Unrest:** Election manipulation exacerbates Nigeria's ethno-religious fault lines, triggering violence and destabilizing communities. When elections are perceived as unfair or manipulated, it can lead to widespread dissatisfaction and mistrust among the electorate. This dissatisfaction can manifest in protests, strikes, and other forms of social unrest. For instance, the 2015 general elections in Nigeria were marked by significant tension and fear of post-election violence due to perceived biases and poor preparation by the electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) .
6. **Ethnic and Religious Tensions:** Manipulative tactics, such as disinformation framing elections as "North vs. South" contests, deepen divisions. In 2023, news alleging voter suppression against the Igbo community sparked violence in Lagos (CLEEN Foundation, 2023).

Election interference can also exacerbate existing ethnic and religious tensions.

Campaigns often use ethnic and religious sloganeering to divide voters along these lines, potentially leading to ethno-religious violence. In Nigeria, this has been a recurring issue, with various ethnic militias and religious groups instigating violence and abusing human rights . The use of such tactics not only undermines the democratic process but also threatens national unity and stability.

7. **Electoral Violence:** Manipulated outcomes often lead to protests and bloodshed. After the 2011 elections, over 800 died in post-election riots (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The 2015 elections saw significant concerns about potential violence, particularly in the north-eastern part of the country, where terrorist activities were already prevalent. In 2023, attacks on INEC offices in the Southeast and Northwest disrupted voting and displaced thousands (CLEEN Foundation, 2023). Electoral violence is a direct consequence of election manipulation and this can include physical attacks, intimidation, and threats aimed at influencing the electoral process. Electoral violence not only disrupts the electoral process but also leads to loss of life and property, further destabilizing the country.
8. **Radicalization:** The perception of electoral injustice can lead to radicalization among segments of the population. Marginalized groups, perceiving elections as exclusionary, may turn to extremism. Boko Haram exploited electoral grievances in Northeast Nigeria to recruit disillusioned youths (Onuoha, 2021). When individuals feel that the electoral process is rigged and their voices are not heard, they may turn to more extreme measures

to express their grievances. This can lead to the rise of extremist groups and ideologies, further destabilizing the country .

10. **Distorted Economic Policies:** Election manipulation can lead to distorted economic policies. Politicians reliant on illicit foreign funding or patronage networks prioritize projects that reward cronies over public goods. For example, inflated contracts for infrastructure projects (e.g., railways) linked to foreign donors often lack transparency (Transparency International, 2022).

Additionally, manipulated elections produce government that lack legitimacy and public support who in turn pursue policies that favour certain groups or individuals rather than addressing the broader needs of the population. The "Voracity Effect" model suggests that in countries with weak institutions, large rents can lead to economic stagnation rather than growth, as powerful groups compete for resources. This can result in poor economic performance and increased poverty.

11. **Investor Distrust:** Investors are often deterred by political instability and lack of trust in the electoral process. When elections are perceived as manipulated, it can lead to investor distrust, resulting in reduced foreign direct investment (FDI) and economic stagnation. For instance, the 2019 currency manipulation scandals and 2023 cyber-attacks on INEC raised red flags for investors, contributing to capital flight (IMF, 2023). Investors prefer stable and transparent political environments, and election manipulation undermines these conditions.

These consequences are interconnected and tend to reinforce one another. For example weakened institutions (e.g., INEC) fail to curb violence, which scares investors, worsening economic conditions. Poverty, in turn, makes voters susceptible to vote-buying, perpetuating the cycle of manipulation.

Recommendations for Mitigating Foreign Interference and Promoting Electoral Integrity in Nigeria and Beyond

To safeguard elections from foreign interference and uphold electoral integrity, Nigeria and other democracies facing similar threats must adopt a multi-pronged strategy that combines institutional reforms, technological resilience, international cooperation, and civic empowerment. Existing strategies often overlook critical systemic, operational, and contextual gaps. Below are targeted recommendations to address these shortcomings, supported by evidence from Nigeria's 2015–2023 electoral cycles and global best practices:

1. **Strengthen Domestic Electoral Institutions by Addressing Technical and Operational Gaps:** Electoral bodies like Nigeria's INEC lack technical expertise to manage advanced technologies (e.g., biometric systems, blockchain) and respond to cyber threats. To address this electoral technology academies should be established in partnership with organizations like the International IDEA and AFRICTI to train INEC staff in cyber security, data analytics, and AI-driven election monitoring.

Ghana's Electoral Commission partnered with the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre to build technical capacity with great success (Gyimah-Boadi & Prempeh, 2020).

2. **Counter Information Operations and Close the Attribution Gap:** There is limited forensic capacity to attribute cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns to foreign actors at the moment. To address this gap, create a "National Attribution Office" under Nigeria's Cyber security Advisory Council, modeled after the EU's Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox, to publicly expose foreign interference. This will be similar to the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence's role in attributing Russian interference in 2016 (Nye, 2020).
3. **Foster Regional Cooperation and Overcome Geopolitical Fragmentation:** ECOWAS lacks enforcement mechanisms to penalize member states that tolerate foreign interference. Addressing this requires the adoption of "ECOWAS Electoral Integrity Sanctions", including suspension from regional trade agreements, for states failing to investigate foreign meddling.
4. **Address Root Causes and Integrate Electoral Integrity with Development Programming:** Development programs (e.g., poverty alleviation) are siloed from electoral reforms, limiting their impact on reducing voter susceptibility. Embed electoral integrity metrics into development aid criteria. For instance, USAID's "Feed the Future" could prioritize regions with high vote-buying rates. The World Bank's governance indicators now include electoral transparency benchmarks (World Bank, 2022).
5. **Tackle Corruption and Strengthen Cross-Border Accountability:** Weak enforcement of anti-corruption laws allows foreign funds to flow through offshore networks. Ratify the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) Article 52, mandating transparency in political donations, and join the OECD Ant-Bribery Convention.
6. **Empower Civil Society and Mitigate Reprisal Risks:** Civil society organizations (CSOs) face digital surveillance and physical threats for exposing interference. To address this, launch a "Safe Elections Hub" with encrypted communication tools (e.g., Signal, Secure Drop) for CSOs, backed by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association.
7. **Diplomatic Measures: Leverage Asymmetric Deterrence:** Sanctions lack bite due to geopolitical rivalries (e.g., China shielding North Korea from UN sanctions). To address situations like this impose asymmetric sanctions targeting foreign interference enablers (e.g., visa bans for tech firms hosting disinformation servers). The U.S. sanctioned Ugandan officials for election violence via Executive Order 13818 (Global Magnitsky Act, 2021).
8. **Engage Public-Private Partnerships and Regulate Tech Platforms:** Social media companies often inconsistently enforce policies on political ads and fake accounts. Legislate platform accountability laws requiring Meta, Google, and TikTok to disclose ad sponsors and remove AI-generated deep fakes during election periods. The EU's

Digital Services Act (DSA) mandates real-time ad transparency (European Commission, 2023).

Conclusion

Nigeria and its partners must adopt a systems approach that links electoral reforms to broader governance and development agendas. She must also combine preventive (e.g., tech academies) and punitive (e.g., sanctions) measures and finally She must prioritizes local ownership to ensure sustainability. The recommendations above address overlooked gaps while building on existing strategies, offering a roadmap to insulate Nigeria's elections from foreign interference and serve as a model for other democracies.

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