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Foreign Aid and Democratic Stability in Nigeria

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Abstract

Although foreign aid has been widely used to support democratic processes in developing countries, its contribution to long-term democratic stability remains contested. This study examined the impact of foreign aid funding on democratic stability in Nigeria, with particular focus on the 2015 general election, which marked the country's first successful transfer of power between rival political parties. The study adopted a descriptive research design involving key stakeholders in Nigeria's electoral process, including officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission, civil society organizations, political parties, and donor agencies. A purposive sample of 15 respondents was selected, and data were collected through key informant interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that foreign aid funding significantly improved electoral administration, enhanced transparency, strengthened voter education, supported election monitoring, and reduced electoral violence, thereby contributing to democratic stability. However, the study also found that excessive dependence on foreign aid may weaken domestic ownership and limit long-term institutional sustainability. The study concludes that although foreign aid played a stabilizing role in Nigeria's 2015 general election, sustainable democratic stability requires stronger domestic financing, institutional capacity building, and continuous civic engagement.

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These findings contribute to debates on democracy assistance by highlighting both the short-term benefits and the structural limitations of foreign aid in democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Foreign Aid; Democratic Stability; Electoral Assistance; Democratic Consolidation; Nigeria

Introduction

Foreign aid has been an integral part of global diplomacy and international development efforts for decades. It refers to the transfer of resources from developed countries and international institutions to developing nations to foster development, alleviate poverty, promote good governance, and strengthen democratic institutions. As a global phenomenon, foreign aid has played a significant role in shaping political and economic landscapes in various regions (Brown, 2023). According to Lancaster (2017), aid has often served as a foreign policy instrument aimed at influencing recipient countries toward desired political outcomes, particularly democratic governance and stability.

Globally, foreign aid has contributed to democratic transitions and post-conflict recovery in many parts of Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. For instance, countries such as Poland, El Salvador, and Indonesia benefited from democracy promotion programs funded by Western nations and international organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the European Union (EU). These organisations provided technical assistance, election monitoring, voter education, and institutional strengthening, which significantly enhanced electoral integrity and promoted democratic consolidation in transitional societies (Carothers, 2019; Moyo, 2019).

In Africa, foreign aid has historically targeted not only economic development but also democratic stabilisation, particularly after the wave of democratisation that swept across the continent in the 1990s. Countries such as Ghana, Kenya, and Liberia have received substantial electoral assistance and governance support from bilateral and multilateral donors aimed at enhancing democratic consolidation (Brown, 2023). However, the effectiveness of such aid has varied widely depending on internal political dynamics, institutional capacities, and the willingness of ruling elites to embrace reforms.

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa and one of its largest economies, has been a strategic recipient of foreign aid due to its regional influence, economic potential, and fragile democratic history. Since its return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has received increasing support from development partners to improve governance, conduct credible elections, and strengthen democratic institutions. Development partners such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom, the European Union (EU), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) played significant roles in supporting electoral reforms, providing technical assistance, enhancing voter education, and funding election monitoring initiatives. The 2015 general election, in particular, stands out as a watershed moment in Nigeria's political history. It was the first time an incumbent president was defeated by the opposition, and the transition of power was relatively peaceful, a rare occurrence in Nigeria's electoral experience (Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], 2015; Bekoe, 2016; Omotola &Alumona, 2019).

Foreign aid played a significant role in shaping the outcome and credibility of the 2015 elections. Donor agencies, including the European Union, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Department for International Development (DFID), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID), invested in a wide range of democracy support initiatives. This included voter education, capacity building for the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), election monitoring, peacebuilding campaigns, and civil society engagement (USAID, 2015; DFID, 2015). The international community saw the 2015 election as a crucial test for Nigeria's democratic resilience and regional stability, thus committing substantial resources to ensure its success.

However, while many observers praised the role of foreign assistance in the peaceful conduct of the election, questions persist about the long-term impact of such aid on democratic stability. Some scholars have warned that over-reliance on foreign support could weaken domestic accountability mechanisms and promote superficial rather than substantive democratic practices (Knack, 2014). Furthermore, the sustainability of democratic gains achieved through externally driven processes remains uncertain, especially in contexts where internal institutions are weak and political elites are resistant to reform.

In the years following the 2015 elections, Nigeria has continued to grapple with electoral irregularities, judicial manipulation, voter apathy, and political violence, raising concerns about the depth of democratic consolidation (Ibrahim & Ibeanu, 2021). This paradox prompts critical reflection on the true contribution of foreign aid to Nigeria's democratic trajectory. Has foreign aid merely provided technical support for short-term electoral gains, or has it fostered deeper democratic values and institutional reforms?

Thus, this study is anchored on the need to critically examine the impact of foreign aid on democratic stability in Nigeria, with a particular focus on the 2015 general election. By assessing the nature, scope, and outcomes of aid interventions during this period, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the nexus between external assistance and internal democratic development in one of Africa's most pivotal democracies.

Statement of the Problem

Although foreign aid has been extensively deployed to strengthen democratic institutions in developing countries, its effectiveness in ensuring democratic stability remains highly contested. In Nigeria, development partners such as the European Union, USAID, DFID, and UNDP have provided sustained electoral and governance support, particularly during elections (Ibrahim & Ibeanu, 2021). While the 2015 general election is widely regarded as a landmark in Nigeria's democratic history due to its peaceful conduct and unprecedented transfer of power (Brown, 2023), the precise contribution of foreign electoral assistance to this outcome has not been sufficiently interrogated in existing scholarship.

Scholarly debates further suggest that donor-driven democracy promotion often prioritises short-term electoral credibility over long-term democratic consolidation. Carothers and de Gramont (2013) argue that foreign aid frequently focuses on election logistics rather than deeper institutional reforms and political accountability. This concern is reinforced by Nigeria's post-2015 electoral experience, as the 2019 and 2023 elections were characterised by voter apathy, electoral violence, and declining trust in democratic institutions (Omotola, 2019; Ibrahim & Ibeanu, 2021), raising doubts about the sustainability of the democratic gains recorded in 2015.

Moreover, limited empirical evidence exists on whether foreign aid enhances democratic ownership or entrenches dependency on external actors in contexts such as Nigeria. Critics contend that excessive reliance on donor assistance may weaken domestic

initiative and accountability in neopatrimonial states (Rakner & van de Walle, 2009). Consequently, the central problem addressed by this study is whether foreign electoral assistance in the 2015 general election merely facilitated a one-time democratic success or contributed to long-term democratic stability in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Foreign aid has long been recognised as a critical factor in shaping governance and democratic outcomes in African states. Burnell (2020) observed that donor interventions in Nigeria often extend beyond financial assistance to include capacity building for democratic institutions. He argued that external support played a dual role in Nigeria: stabilising fragile democratic processes while also creating dependency risks. Burnell concluded that the challenge for Nigeria lies in balancing foreign support with internal institutional strengthening to achieve sustainable democratic consolidation. This concern about balancing external influence with domestic ownership sets the stage for examining how specific aid-driven democracy promotion programs have unfolded in the Nigerian context.

Building on this tension, Carothers (2022) examined democracy promotion programs funded by Western partners and highlighted their impact on electoral transparency in Nigeria. According to him, aid packages directed towards electoral commissions, political parties, and civil society improved democratic resilience during Nigeria's Fourth Republic. However, Carothers emphasised that aid effectiveness depended heavily on Nigeria's political environment, where entrenched elite interests often limited transformative outcomes. This problem of elite resistance connects directly to broader debates about the influence of external aid on institutional credibility, as further articulated by Diamond (2019).

Diamond (2019) emphasised the strategic role of foreign donors in building electoral credibility in Nigeria, particularly through technical and financial support to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). He contended that aid not only enhanced the professionalism of electoral management but also improved public confidence in democratic institutions. Nonetheless, Diamond warned that excessive donor involvement risked provoking perceptions of external interference in Nigeria's sovereignty.

Gyimah-Boadi (2021) explored the role of external democratic assistance in Nigeria within the broader African context. He found that aid from the European Union and the United States contributed to improving electoral integrity, civil liberties, and checks on

executive power. In Nigeria specifically, these interventions helped mitigate political violence and supported credible elections, especially in 2015. His findings resonate with Bratton's (2016) argument that foreign assistance works most effectively when it strengthens civic participation, which in turn consolidates democracy from below.

In line with this perspective, Bratton (2016) argued that international aid targeted at civil society organisations enhanced democratic accountability in Nigeria by fostering citizen engagement. He noted that foreign-funded civic groups were crucial in voter education campaigns and in mobilising citizens to hold government accountable. According to Bratton, this external support fostered a more participatory political culture, thereby strengthening democratic resilience. Such civic empowerment also relied on an informed citizenry, a factor that Adebanwi (2016) linked to donor interventions in Nigeria's media sector.

Adebanwi (2016) analysed how foreign donors shaped Nigeria's democratic media landscape. He observed that training and funding for journalists by international partners improved media independence and investigative capacity. This, in turn, promoted electoral transparency and government accountability. Adebanwi argued that without foreign-backed media strengthening, Nigeria's democracy would have remained vulnerable to elite manipulation. The role of donors in bolstering the democratic environment was not limited to media, but also extended to security—an area examined by Ojo (2017).

Ojo (2017) examined the impact of foreign aid on electoral security in Nigeria. He noted that donor-supported initiatives, such as training security forces on election management and human rights, reduced the incidence of electoral violence. According to Ojo, foreign interventions were pivotal in mitigating security threats to democracy, particularly in volatile regions such as the Niger Delta and the Northeast. These findings align with Fagbadebo's (2017) observation that democratic stability also requires strong parliamentary oversight, another sphere significantly shaped by donor support.

Fagbadebo (2017) emphasised that foreign aid contributed significantly to parliamentary strengthening in Nigeria. He argued that training, technical assistance, and funding for the National Assembly enhanced legislative oversight of the executive, thereby deepening Nigeria's democratic culture. However, he warned that excessive reliance on foreign expertise could erode institutional independence. This tension between

empowerment and dependency is also visible in donor efforts aimed at Nigeria's youth population, as Musa (2018) documented.

Musa (2018) examined foreign donor involvement in youth political participation in Nigeria. He found that donor-funded programs targeting youth empowerment and voter mobilisation contributed to inclusiveness in the democratic process. Musa argued that such interventions helped counter elite domination and promoted democratic renewal by incorporating marginalised voices into governance. However, sustaining such inclusion required institutional reforms, which Omodia (2019) linked to donor-supported innovations in electoral processes.

Omodia (2019) argued that donor-funded electoral reforms improved Nigeria's democratic system by strengthening voter registration and electronic accreditation processes. According to him, international technical support was critical in addressing systemic irregularities that had plagued Nigeria's elections. He concluded that foreign aid was indispensable to sustaining electoral credibility in Nigeria.

Ezeani (2019) highlighted the role of international organisations in supporting anti-corruption initiatives that underpin democratic stability. He found that aid directed toward transparency agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) improved Nigeria's democratic environment by curbing political corruption. This, in turn, created a fairer playing field for democratic competition. The cumulative effect of these multiple donor interventions is captured in Chikwe's (2020) broader assessment.

Chikwe (2020) assessed the cumulative effects of foreign aid on Nigeria's democratic consolidation and argued that donor interventions provided the scaffolding for electoral reforms, civil society empowerment, and security sector professionalism. He concluded that while foreign aid has been indispensable for stabilising Nigeria's democracy, long-term consolidation ultimately depends on domestic political will and institutional resilience. Taken together, these scholarly perspectives underscore the paradox of foreign aid in Nigeria, while essential for stabilising democratic institutions, its sustainability depends on the country's capacity to internalise reforms and reduce structural dependency.

Theoretical Framework: Modernisation Theory

Modernisation Theory emerged in the post-World War II period as an explanatory framework for understanding how traditional societies transition into modern, industrialised states. Drawing from classical sociology and economics, the theory gained

prominence through the works of scholars such as Walt W. Rostow, Daniel Lerner, and Seymour Martin Lipset in the 1950s and 1960s. Rostow's (1960) five-stage model of economic growth conceptualised development as a linear progression from traditional to modern societies, while Lipset (1959) argued that economic development creates social conditions, such as increased literacy, urbanisation, and civic engagement, that are essential for democratic consolidation and political stability.

At its core, Modernisation Theory rests on the assumption that economic development precedes and stimulates social and political transformation, including democratisation (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). It further assumes a unilinear and universal path of development, with Western liberal democracies portrayed as the highest stage of political evolution. Within this framework, external interventions, particularly foreign aid, are viewed as catalysts for modernisation, providing capital, technology, and institutional support necessary for democratic growth and governance reform in developing societies (Lerner, 1958).

In relation to Nigeria's 2015 general election, Modernisation Theory provides a useful analytical lens for understanding how foreign aid contributed to democratic stability. Nigeria's post-colonial democratic experience has been marked by institutional weaknesses and political instability. Electoral assistance from international donors such as the European Union, the United States, and the United Nations Development Programme played a critical role in strengthening institutions like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), enhancing voter education, and improving electoral transparency (IFES, 2015). From a modernisation perspective, such interventions represent an external stimulus that facilitated institutional reform, political accountability, and a credible democratic transition.

One of the major strengths of Modernisation Theory is its emphasis on the interdependence between economic development, institutional capacity, and democratic governance. The theory offers a coherent explanation of how structural changes, such as improvements in education, infrastructure, and administrative institutions, can promote democratic norms and political stability (Lipset, 1959). In the Nigerian context, it underscores how foreign aid can address immediate electoral challenges while also contributing to the longer-term foundations of democratic consolidation through civic participation, rule of law, and political pluralism.

Despite its analytical value, Modernisation Theory has been widely criticised for its deterministic and Eurocentric orientation, which assumes the universal applicability of Western development and democratic models (Frank, 1966). Critics argue that the theory neglects local historical, cultural, and political realities and underestimates the risks associated with aid dependency, elite capture, and the misuse of foreign assistance (Moyo, 2009). In Nigeria's case, although foreign aid supported the conduct of the 2015 elections, persistent concerns regarding accountability, selective donor engagement, and short-term intervention strategies continue to challenge the sustainability of democratic gains.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survei design and relied exclusively on Key Informant Interviews (KII). Fifteen purposively selected participants drawn from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society organisations, political parties, and donor/development agencies in Taraba State provided in-depth insights. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and dominant themes.

Results and Discussion

Participants were asked to share their perspectives on how foreign aid has influenced democratic stability in Nigeria. Analysis of the interview responses revealed recurring and interconnected themes, including improved electoral administration, enhanced transparency, increased voter participation, reduced electoral violence, and greater public confidence in democratic institutions. Several key informants, particularly from INEC, emphasised that foreign aid funding has helped to address critical financial and logistical gaps in election administration. According to one senior INEC official:

Foreign donor funding has assisted INEC in areas where government funding is often inadequate. It supports logistics, training, and the movement of election materials, especially to difficult terrains, which improves the credibility of elections (KII/INEC Official/2025).

Another INEC official further explained that donor funding enhances institutional preparedness and operational efficiency:

With donor support, INEC is better positioned to plan, train ad hoc staff, and deploy election materials on time. This reduces confusion on election day and strengthens public trust in the process (KII/INEC Official/2025).

Beyond election management, respondents from civil society organisations highlighted the role of foreign aid funding in promoting voter education, civic awareness, and peaceful participation. A CSO leader noted that:

Most voter education and peace campaigns before elections are supported by donors. These programmes help citizens understand their rights and responsibilities, which reduces misinformation, manipulation, and violence during elections (KII/CSO Leader/2025).

Another CSO respondent added that donor-funded civic engagement initiatives contribute to democratic stability by empowering marginalised groups:

Donor support enables us to reach women, youths, and rural voters who are often excluded. When people feel included in the process, they are more likely to accept election outcomes (KII/CSO Official/2025).

Political party representatives also acknowledged the stabilising influence of foreign aid funding, particularly through election observation and monitoring. One party official observed that:

Donor-funded election observers create checks and balances. Politicians and officials become more cautious because they know their actions are being monitored and documented (KII/Political Party Representative/2025).

Another political stakeholder noted that such monitoring enhances post-election legitimacy:

When observers confirm that elections are credible, it becomes easier for parties and supporters to accept defeat. This reduces post-election protests and violence (KII/Political Party Representative/2025).

In addition, several respondents linked foreign aid funding to post-election peace and conflict prevention. A civil society respondent explained that:

Transparent elections reduce tension. When people believe the process is fair, they are less likely to resort to violence after elections, which helps to sustain democratic stability (KII/CSO Official/2025).

Despite these positive assessments, some participants raised concerns about the long-term implications of heavy dependence on foreign aid for elections. A donor agency official cautioned that:

Foreign aid is important, but overdependence can be risky. If elections rely too much on donors, it may weaken domestic commitment and ownership of democratic institutions (KII/Donor Agency Official/2025).

Similarly, another key informant argued that sustainable democracy requires stronger internal funding mechanisms:

Donor support should complement, not replace, government responsibility. For democracy to be stable, the country must be willing to fund its own electoral process (KII/INEC Official/2025).

Conclusion

The findings revealed that foreign electoral assistance has played a significant role in stabilising Nigeria's electoral process by improving election administration, enhancing transparency, supporting voter education, and reducing electoral violence. These interventions helped to address critical financial and logistical gaps, strengthened the operational capacity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and increased public confidence in electoral outcomes. This supports existing studies, which argue that external electoral assistance can enhance the credibility and professionalism of electoral institutions in emerging democracies (Diamond, 2019; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021).

The study also found that donor-funded civic engagement, election monitoring, and peacebuilding initiatives contributed to post-election legitimacy and reduced political tension. By promoting inclusive participation and strengthening accountability mechanisms, foreign aid helped to foster acceptance of electoral outcomes among political actors and citizens. These findings are consistent with scholarly arguments that democracy assistance is most effective when it strengthens citizen participation and institutional oversight, thereby reinforcing democratic stability (Bratton, 2016; Carothers, 2022; Brown, 2023). In the context of Nigeria, such interventions were particularly relevant in mitigating electoral conflict and promoting peaceful democratic transitions.

However, the findings equally underscore concerns regarding the sustainability of democratic gains achieved through foreign aid. While external funding has proven effective

in the short term, excessive reliance on donor assistance may undermine domestic ownership and long-term institutional resilience. This aligns with critiques that caution against aid dependency and elite capture in developing democracies (Rakner & van de Walle, 2009; Moyo, 2019). Consequently, the study concludes that although foreign aid has contributed meaningfully to democratic stability in Nigeria, lasting democratic consolidation ultimately depends on increased domestic investment, institutional self-reliance, and sustained political commitment to democratic governance.

Recommendations

1. Enhance Domestic Electoral Funding: The Nigerian government should increase and ensure timely domestic funding for electoral processes to strengthen institutional autonomy and reduce over-reliance on foreign aid, while allowing external support to remain complementary.
2. Focus Foreign Aid on Institutional Capacity Building: Development partners should prioritise long-term institutional strengthening, particularly for INEC and civic education programmes, rather than concentrating mainly on short-term election-cycle support.
3. Strengthen Inclusive Civic Engagement: Government and civil society organisations should expand continuous voter education and peacebuilding initiatives, especially targeting women, youths, and rural populations, to promote trust, participation, and democratic stability.

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