

Review

# International Election Observer in African Democracy: Curse or Blessing?

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**Abstract:** The election observer is one of the stakeholders of the electoral process in Africa. The role of the international observers just like other players of the electoral process, is to ensure free, fair and credible election. This body mostly work hand in hand with civil society group/organization in order to ensure smooth conduct of election. Election observers have been seen as democracy police in Africa which has added value to the conduct and manner at which election is being managed in the society. Although, many studies have been conducted on both positive contribution and negative impact of the election observers into the system, but this study will juxtapose the two sides of a coin to examine whether the role of the observer is a blessing or curse to the development of Africa and its democratic consolidation. The study makes use of Normative Theory to explain the role and contribution of election observers to the democratic consolidation in Africa. The study is a qualitative, and it employs the use of secondary source of data to explain the pros and cons of the international election observers towards monitoring election that mostly usher-in the transition of power from one democratically elected leader to another in Africa.

**Keywords:** Simulation Election; Free and Fair; International Observers; Democracy; Africa

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## Public Interest Statement

Election is a process by which the masses choose those who will represent their interests during the decision making. In order to ensure free, fair and credible election in a country, the election observers contributed to the exercise, particularly in Africa. Therefore, the role of the election monitoring group or observers has been perceived differently by many towards the democratic consolidation in the African continent. Hence, this study examines whether the role of election observers in the continent is either curse or blessing to the African democracy. The finding of this research will help both the African society and the international election monitoring group on how best the conduct of election in the continent can be more strengthen in order to allow for peaceful transfer of power from one civilian administration to another.

## 1. Introduction

*To prevent the abuse of power, 'tis necessary that by the very disposition of things power should be checked by power. A government may be so constituted, as no man shall be compelled to do things to which the law does not oblige him, nor forced to abstain from things which the law permits.*

~ Montesquieu <sup>1</sup>

Election as a mechanism towards preventing the abuse of power, is a tool used by the masses to remove bad leader or government from the corridor of power in order to pave way for a new administration that will improve the citizen welfare. Election is equally a process by which masses or electorates choose those who will represent their interests during the decision making. This process of chosen representatives by the masses needs to be free, fair and accepted by all (Elklit & Syensson, 1999; Ali, Dalaram & Dauda, 2018; Lawal, 2018). As argued by Fukuyama (2015), the successful transition of power from one democratic government to another is determine by the smooth conduct of election. Meaning that, if the election is free, fair and credible in which the outcome/result from such poll is accepted by all, then the smooth transfer of power from one civil administration to another is guarantee and vice versa. This arguably has been part of what canvassed for the abuse of democracy among African countries.

As a result of the above, scholars have device several means towards curbing the menace that hindered the conduct of free, fair and credible election in most of the African countries. One of those measures is to ensure that the stakeholders or apparatuses involve in the electoral process are discharging their duties and responsibility diligently without fear or favour (Ojo, 2018). As posited by Chernykh and Svolik (2015) and Ojo (2018), the following stakeholders involved in the electoral process; the Election Management Bodies (EMBs), the political parties and the contestants, the accredited observers, the media, the legislative assemblies, the judiciary and the electorates/voters. Each of these electoral apparatuses mentioned has its own role to play for free, fair and credible election to be guarantee in Africa. Similarly, above mentioned apparatuses to electoral process has been described by Diamond et al (1999) as "agents of accountability". One of those described by Diamond et al (1999) as agents of accountability in the electoral process is the election observers.

The election observation group in African society play significant role in checking and preventing all sorts of electoral abuse (Birch & Van Ham, 2017; Dauda, Ahmad, Keling & Ameen, 2018). Similarly, Bjornlund (2004) has also argued that election observation group assisted tremendously in documenting and make public records of allegations of irregularities. The election observers can as well help in pursuing and initiating judicial complaints by assisting electorates to seek for redress from the law court over any infringement perceived in their voting rights (Birch & Van Ham, 2017). The electoral observer is one of the mechanisms that can ensure that the EMBs are independent (both de facto and de jure) and impartial in order for the institution to discharge its duties and responsibilities without fear or favour (Hamberg & Erlich, 2013). Election observation group often work closely with media in monitoring the process of election and make publicly the allegations of abuse. Election observers as suggested by Bjornlund (2004), Birch and Van Ham (2017) that, it is reliable source of newsworthy information for media which mostly serve as signal to both the governed and the governors.

However, scholars such as Laakso (2002), Kelley (2010), Adebisi and Loremikan (2013), Onapajo (2014), Birch and Van Ham (2017), Dodsworth (2018), Cheeseman and Klaas (2018), Manina, Karpov and Tsiunchuk (2018), Nginya (2018), Ugwu (2018) among others, perceived or discovered some lapses and flaws committed by the election monitoring group during the course of discharging its

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<sup>1</sup> Culled from Montesquieu (1977:200). Details Montesquieu could be sourced from his 1748 publication on L'Esprit des lois.

duties towards ensuring free, fair and credible election. The errors committed by the election monitoring groups particularly, the international election observers include; partial, bias, double-standard among others. These alleged flaws perpetrated by the election observers if not properly curb and correct, it can pose threat to the African democratic consolidation. Therefore, as the significant contribution of the election observers to the successful, free, fair and credible election in Africa is paramount to the democratic sustainability of the continent, the abnormalities found in the action of the observers are also capable of disrupting the polity from yielding the desire results if unchecked. It is against this background that the study is examining whether the involvement of the international election observers is a blessing or curse to African democracies.

## 2. Statement of Problem

There are several studies on the significant contribution of election monitoring group towards having free and fair election in Africa. These numerous literature include studies by Geisler (1993), Hyde (2011), Daxecker (2014), Lewis and Kew (2015), Buzin, Brondum and Robertson (2016), Bose (2016), Manina, Karpov and Tsiunchuk (2018), Luo and Rozenas (2018), Asunka et al (2017), Casas, Diaz and Trindade (2017), Leeffers and Vicente (2019), Onslow (2018), Lührmann (2018), Dodsworth (2018), Bush and Prather (2018), Nasos and Ruiz-Rufino (2018) among others. Nevertheless, observation has been equally raised on the flaws committed by the election observers, particularly the international observers during the course of monitoring the elections in Africa. These errors according to scholars like Laakso (2002), Kelley (2010), Adebisi and Loremikan (2013), Onapajo (2014), Birch and Van Ham (2017), Dodsworth (2018), Cheeseman and Klaas (2018), Manina, Karpov and Tsiunchuk (2018), Nginya (2018), Ugwu (2018) among others, are capable of truncating the democratic consolidation in Africa.

However, having studied the above mentioned literature on the role play by the international election monitoring group in Africa, it was observed that limited studies is found juxtaposing the prons and cons of the role played by electoral observers in the African democracies. Thus, it is against this backdrop that this study is examining whether the involvement of international election observers is a blessing or curse to African democracies.

## 3. Methodology

The study adopted a systematic review of literature which focusing on African democracy and the election monitoring team in Sub-Sahara Africa. The study is qualitative in nature that utilized secondary data as its source of materials which include journal articles, books, newspapers, policy documents among others.

Similarly, the study makes use of Normative Theory to explain and discuss the role of election monitoring team in African democracy. According to Gibbards (1993), every individual must care about rationality. The norms mostly refer to as right, rationality or choice. Gibbards argues that "rationality is not a naturalistic property, neither simple nor complex". Normative theory clarifies the question of what states of character are desirable or morally good that can match a societal situation or issue in order to produce a desire result. The theory also simplifies the nature of right and virtue in the action of man over issue in the society.

The theory of normative is relevant to the study simply because the employment of the election monitoring team to the African democratic system is to add value and credibility to the process of transferring power from one democratically elected government to another. Therefore, it has become the general perception of African people that the coming of election observers, particularly the international election observers would be of advantage towards the African democratic consolidation. However, when those expected to add value and credibility to African electoral process, are found wanting or involving in some acts that capable of truncating the democratic consolidation in the continent, then there is urgent need for the continent to thoroughly search and monitor the observers.

## 4. Conceptual Clarification

*Voting* – this is an act exercising by the citizens as their civic right to participate in the process of selecting leaders that will represent their interest in the decision making.

*Election* – this is a process by which the masses choose their leaders that will hold public office and govern their affairs.

*Voting Behaviour* – this is the voting pattern or response of the citizens during an election. The voting behaviour of citizens is determined by numerous factors that influence their role and response during an election.

*Electoral Bodies* – they are the constituted body charged with the responsibility of organizing and conducting free and fair election that will produce those that will occupy the public offices and oversee the welfare of the citizenry.

*Democratic Consolidation* – this is the ability of State to successfully transfer power from one democratically elected government to another. Mostly, African countries faced this challenge which canvassed for the adoption of the introduction of election observers to ensure free, fair and credible election that can guarantee successful handing over of power from one democratic government to another. As posited by Mahmud (2015), a despotic administration is mostly replaced in Africa through free and fair election. This process allows for easy change of power from one democratically elected government to another.

*International Election Observers* – these are official delegation from other countries who are invited by the government of the host country to monitor election. As argued by Hyde (2011), the international election observers “are official delegations of foreigners who are invited by the host government to observe and report on the electoral process”. The international election observers are mostly sponsored by the international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU) among others. Similarly, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) also sponsored international election observers to countries. These NGOs include the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute among others.

## 5. Historical Background of the Election Observation Team

The history of election observation group is dated back to October 1958, when Cuban leader Fulgencio Batista seek for the foreign observers to monitor the election in his country. As argued by Hyde (2011), the regime of Batista was not supported by the United States government which made them to decline his request for international election observers from the State. Upon turning Batista request down by the US, the Organisation of American States and the UN refused to send election observers to the country stating that “they lacked facilities to supervise election” (New York Times, 1958). Shortly after the non-recognition of the election by the international community, Batista resigned from government and flew into exile which paved way for Fidel Castro to assume power (Hyde, 2011).

Having noticed the idea behind adding value and credibility to the electoral process by inviting the election monitoring group or team to witness the conduct of election in a country, many leaders have adopted the strategy not only to strengthening their electoral process but also to legitimize their system of government (Hyde, 2011; Bush & Prather, 2018). For instance, in 2009 when the Iranian government refused to allow the international observers to its country, the action of the Iranian government was interpreted by the international community as “the Iranian elections had been stolen” (Hyde, 2011). In fact, the then US President, Barack Obama also expressed his dissatisfaction about the Iran’s election where he stressed that “we didn’t have international observers on the ground” and for that reason “we can’t say definitively what happened at polling places throughout the country” (Associated Press, 2009). Therefore, the above analysis has formed the impression that election can neither be considered free nor fair without the involvement of the election observers.

### 5.1. Election Observation and the Participants

Election observation is an important tool towards promoting democracy and good governance in the society. The presence of impartial and credible observers creates a kind of legitimacy and confidence in the electoral process of the host country (Hyde, 2011; Leeffer & Vicente, 2019). Due to

this important role played by the election monitoring team, the system accommodates set of categories who will involve in the monitoring of election to ensure smooth and free exercise in the process of transferring power from one civil administration to another. These include: the States, Intergovernmental Organizations (IGOs) and Non-Intergovernmental Organizations (NGOs).

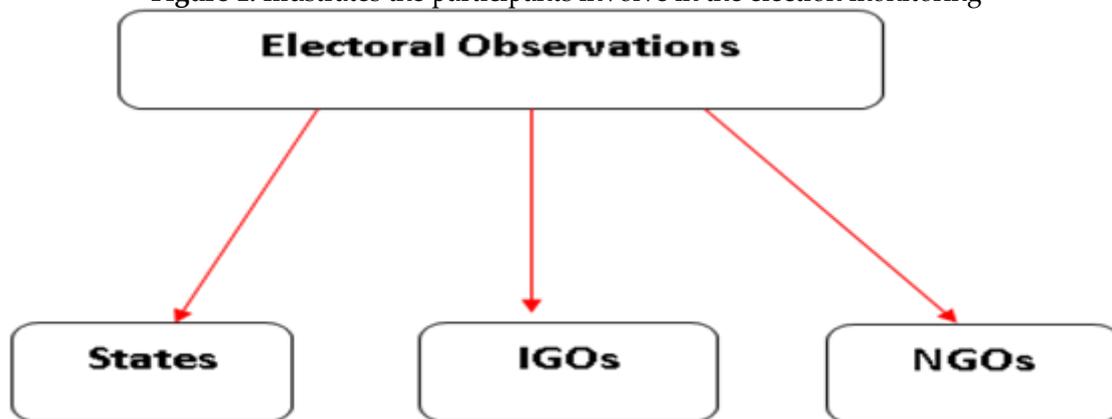
*The States* – The invitation of States to monitor election has to do with relationship of the host country with other countries. The bilateral or multilateral relations of a country can influence the host country to call on friendly countries within and beyond its region to witness and monitor the conduct of election in its country. For instance, Nigeria’s cordial relationship with Ghana, South Africa, Algeria, and Morocco among others, can influence the host country’s decision to call on these mentioned countries for election monitoring.

*Intergovernmental Organization* – The IGOs is international organizations. This organization is another monitoring team that see to the smooth conduct of election in a particular country. The IGOs includes, the Commonwealth, the European Union, United Nations, African Union, Economic Community of West African States, the South African Development Community among others (Dodsworth, 2018).

*Non-Governmental Organization* – the NGOs are mostly independent and non-profit oriented international organizations. They are also charged with the responsibility of ensuring free, fair and credible election as part of the process of transferring power from one administration to another (Macdonald, 2016). These organizations include National Democratic Institute (NDI), Carter Centre, International Republican Institute (IRI), Election Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) among others (Dodsworth, 2018).

It is important to note at this juncture that, the arrival of the election observers, most especially the international election monitoring team to a country is usually on the invitation of the host country (Hyde, 2011; Luo & Rozenas, 2018). Therefore, every country will like to showcase to the world, how transparent their democratic process is. In other word, the involvement of the international election monitoring assist in bringing sanity to the electoral process.

**Figure 1.** Illustrates the participants involve in the election monitoring

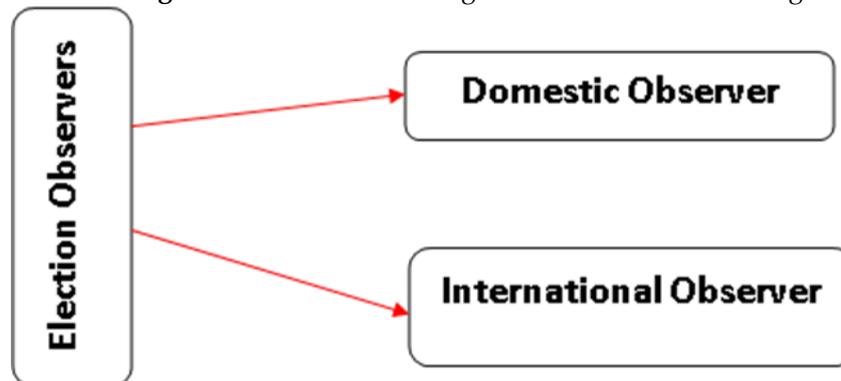


### 5.2. Election Observers

The election monitoring teams are of two types. The Domestic/Local Observers and the International/foreign observers. The domestic or local election observers are the voluntary group or team and non-profit organization who are charged with the responsibility of ensuring smooth and peaceful conduct of election. This monitoring category are within the country serving as a watchdog to the government of the day in order to ensure that the wishes and aspirations of the masses are fulfilled (Hyde, 2011). Similarly, the international or foreign observers could be described as the official delegations who are in the country on the invitation by the host country to observe and make comment on the process of transferring power from one administration to another. This category are

deployed and mostly sponsored by the international organization (i.e. the intergovernmental organizations) (Lührmann, 2018).

Figure 2. Illustrates the categories of election monitoring



Hence, both the domestic and international election observers have a common mission of ensuring transparent and smooth conduct of election in a country. However, scholars have observed that in African election, mostly the domestic observers are more active than the international observers, due to the fact that the former have mastered the election terrain and the constituencies where election fraudulent often taken place (Daxecker, 2014; Mahmud, 2015; Leeffers & Vicente, 2019). At the same time, the domestic observers mostly stationed themselves at one polling unit during the election which prevented any forms of rigging or election fraudulent to take place in that unit. While the international observers are mobile observers who moves from one polling unit to another during an election.

## 6. Contribution of Election Observers to African Democracies

As argued by Dodsworth (2018), the presence of election monitoring team in an election is not only aim to detect and deter fraud but also to increase the credibility of election. Therefore, the introduction of election monitoring group into African election has assisted and strengthened more the democratic consolidation in the continent. These are some of the merit of involving election monitoring group into African electoral process:

*Credibility* – the presence of international observers in the African election has arguably demonstrated to the entire world that the continent is mature enough to nurture its democracy without any violence. As argued by Daxecker (2014), Asunka et al (2017), the transparency displayed in the process of the African electoral process for the continent to have invited the international observers to grace the process of transferring power from one administration to another, itself is a credit to the African countries. Mostly, after the election, the observers will submit the reports of the conduct of election to the organizations whom they represent which will be made public to the entire world. Positive comments or reports of an election given by the election monitoring group promotes the practice of democracy in Africa and vice versa (Hyde, 2011).

*Popular Participation* – the presence of international election observers in a country to witness the conduct of election will boost the morale and participation of the masses in the electoral process (Lührmann 2018; Ojo, 2018). For instance, the 2015 general election in Nigeria where people were of the view that the poll would be characterized with violence and to the extent that people were envisaging another civil war in the country (Okafor, 2015; Owen & Usman, 2015). However, the presence of international observers in the country then, gave assurance to the masses that they can go out to cast their votes to the best candidates without any intimidation or maim. For that reason, the international election observers serve as the motivating factor to the electorates which made them to come-out *en masse* to perform their civic rights and obligations.

*Free and Fair* – one of the basic tenants of the democracy is for an election to be free, fair and transparency. The involvement of international election observers assisted an election to be free and fair. This is because both the incumbent and opponent will want the election process to be transparent

and flawless, particularly since such involve the international observers. Arguably, such will influence the observers to comport themselves towards ensuring free, fair and transparent process of changing power from one administration to another (Roussias & Ruiz-Rufino, 2018).

*Democratic Quality* – the presence of international observers enforced the doctrine and principle of democracy on the countries in Africa (Ojo, 2018; Onslow 2018). As argued by Hyde (2011), the struggle for political seat or power among the politicians and their political parties is cautioned by the presence of the international observers. This makes the political system and the system of democracy to be played according to the rules. Since no nation or country will like to be projected negatively by the international community, thus the presence of the international election monitoring team encourages them to shun all forms of violence during the conduct of election.

Having mentioned some the benefits attributed to the involvement of the international election observers in African election, many scholars have pointed to some of the abnormalities and atrocities committed by the international observers during the conduct of monitoring the election in the region. Arguably, some of these errors perpetrated by the international observers are capable of truncating or jeopardizing the African democratic consolidation if adequate measure is not put in place. Hence, the following are some of the atrocities involved in by some international election observers:

*Bias and Double Standard* – the election observers have been accused of taken side in an election which made them to be either bias or playing double standard in an election (Dodsworth, 2018). The observers are expected to be neither favouring any political party or candidates nor partisan in the election, rather than to ensure the smooth conduct of the polls during the election. But, the international observers have been accused of being bias and playing double standard in an election. For instance, the report of the international election observers over Kenya's Presidential election was positive where observers claimed that the election in the country was free and fair (Dodsworth, 2018). However, it was surprised when the Kenya's Supreme Court nullified the election and described such as neither sufficiently transparent nor verifiable (Chege, 2018). Similarly, since 2004 in Mozambique both the international and domestic observers have been faulted of non-transparent (EU Observation Mission, 2004; 2009). In addition to the flaws committed by the election observers, the role played by the international observers during the 2009 Mozambique general election was described as been bias which had made the opposition parties and other concern groups to have filed complaints about fraud committed during the election which the election observers overlooked (Leeffers & Vicente, 2019). This act is dangerous to African democratic consolidation and at the same time, it is capable of making the African continent not having trust and interest in the report of election observers.

*Influence by the Ruling Party* – As argued by Alfa-Shaban (2017), Olasanmi (2018) and Salau (2018), most African countries are facing with the challenges of sit-tight syndrome where African leader will like to be in power or government permanently. As a result of this, the sitting/incumbent administration can maneuver its way to ensure that the invited election observers are bribed in order to influence their reports on its election irrespective of the level of election's fraudulent, violence or intimidation of opponent by its party (Laakso 2002; Adebisi & Loremikan 2013; Onapajo, 2014; Dodsworth, 2018); Ugwu, 2018; Nginya, 2018). This act has been put unchecked which can arguably affect African democratic consolidation.

## 7. Way Forward and Conclusion

There is need for African continent to correct the observed abnormalities among the election monitoring teams, particularly the international election observers. This will ensure stability in the African polity and at the same time, ease the transition from one civilian administration to another which will in-turn promote the democratic consolidation in the continent. The remedies below are suggested in order to improve the role of election monitoring teams and to make their impact be positive on the African democratic consolidation. These ways forward include:

*Election Monitoring Norms and rules* – As previously argued by Dodsworth (2018), Nasos and Ruiz-Rufino (2018) among others that, the role of election observers is beyond detecting flaws, or making the reports on how an election is conducted, but also to ensure credibility and smooth

transition of political power from one administration to another through the process of election. Therefore, the observers need to comport themselves toward the assigned tasks. As a matter of fact, the international organizations that mostly see to the deployment of the international observers should ensure that the rules and norms govern the conduct of election monitoring should be strictly adhere to, by the election observers. Compliance with the election monitoring norms and rules is capable of making the mission and notion behind election monitoring to be successfully achieved and vice versa.

Secondly, there should be stages of observation by the election monitoring teams. These stages should be in three moments of observation, that is: (i) *Before*, (ii) *During*, and, (iii) *After election day*. Unlike the former pattern of monitoring elections in Africa where the election monitoring teams will be on ground only during the conduct of election (the D-day), when voting is going on. However, for the proper monitoring of election by the election observers, their work or mission supposed to have started since the commencement of voters' registration and the political parties by the Electoral bodies. Having monitoring how orderliness the registration of voters and political parties by the electoral bodies before the poll/election day, the election observers will begin to garner and forecast how the poll or the election will be. Similarly, on the day of election, the election observers will find themselves familiar with the constituencies or terrain of the region where the election is taking place. This will assist the observers in proper monitoring of the conduct of election. And finally, after Election Day, it is not ideal for the observers to leave the country where the election is being held immediately after the poll, this is because there should be chance or freedom for the loser or defeated candidates to challenges the results of the election at the law court. And it becomes part of what is to be observed by the election monitoring team on how the opposition or defeated candidates from the polls are given such rights and freedom to express their dissatisfaction or grievance legally over the results of the polls. Therefore, one can argue that mere monitoring the conduct of election during the voting exercise is not enough for the election monitoring groups to base their judgement or reports on either the election is free and fair or not.

Lastly, there should be adequate sensitization of the electorates on the needs for free, fair and credible election. As argued by Ojo (2018), the masses who are the electorates/voters are the king among the other stakeholders of the electoral process. This is because, without the electorates there can be no election not to talk of rigging in an election (Ugwu, 2018; Ojo, 2018). Therefore, it becomes pertinent for the masses to understand the importance of free, fair and credible election in the society. If the masses are aware of the baneful effect that associated with the rigging and election violence toward the democratic consolidation of their country, they will equally prefer to be the agent of change to a peaceful poll and successful transition of power from one administration to another. Hence, the road towards having free, fair and credible election in African societies rest on all. Meaning that, it is everybody's business to ensure that things are in order, for the successful polls and smooth transition of government from one administration to another.

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