



Project Management as a Governance Intervention: Re-Examining the Integrity of the Nigerian 2023 General Election

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Abstract - Elections in fragile democracies are frequently characterised by logistical breakdowns, institutional mistrust, violence and administrative inefficiencies. The Nigerian 2023 General Election reignited longstanding debates concerning electoral credibility, risk exposure and governance capacity. This paper critically evaluates the extent to which structured project management frameworks could have strengthened the integrity, transparency and operational performance of the election.

Drawing on established project governance theory, including PMBOK principles, enterprise risk management frameworks and project-oriented organisational models, the study examines deficiencies in planning, stakeholder communication, resource coordination and institutional risk mitigation within the Nigerian electoral process. Comparative insights from electoral management practices in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia contextualise the analysis.

The findings suggest that while elections are inherently political, their operational components resemble complex multi-stakeholder mega-projects requiring structured governance, integrated risk systems and strategic alignment. Institutionalising project management within Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) could reduce systemic vulnerabilities, strengthen accountability and enhance public trust in democratic outcomes.

Keywords: Electoral governance; Project management; Risk management; Electoral integrity; Governance reform; Public sector transformation; Nigeria

1. Introduction

Across several African democracies, elections have evolved into high-risk governance events rather than routine democratic exercises. Nigeria exemplifies this paradox: while democratic structures formally exist, electoral processes have repeatedly been undermined by administrative weaknesses, political interference, violence and technological failure.

The 2023 Nigerian General Election exposed persistent structural deficiencies, including delayed logistics deployment, contested electronic transmission systems, communication breakdowns and post-election disputes. These operational weaknesses raise a fundamental governance question: can electoral integrity be strengthened through structured project management systems?

Contemporary project management scholarship recognises the discipline's relevance beyond engineering and construction. Complex public operations characterised by fixed deadlines, high stakeholder diversity, budget constraints and reputational exposure share core attributes with major projects. National elections fit this profile. They are temporary, resource-intensive, multi-layered undertakings requiring coordinated execution across thousands of decentralised units within constitutionally defined timelines.

This paper reframes the Nigerian election as a complex governance project requiring systematic organisational architecture rather than purely political interpretation.

2. Conceptual Framework: Elections as Complex Projects

2.1 Electoral Administration as a Time-Bound Governance Project

A project is commonly defined as a temporary endeavour undertaken to produce a unique outcome within defined constraints of scope, time and cost. Elections satisfy these characteristics. They operate under constitutionally fixed timelines, are funded through predetermined budgets, require nationwide coordination and produce measurable deliverables in the form of certified results.

The Nigerian electoral cycle includes voter registration, procurement planning, logistics distribution, polling unit coordination, collation management, public communication and dispute resolution. These stages correspond directly to recognised project lifecycle phases: initiation, planning, execution, monitoring and closure.



2.2 Risk Governance in Electoral Systems

Risk management theory emphasises systematic identification, analysis, mitigation and monitoring of uncertainties. In the Nigerian context, recurring risks include electoral violence, logistical disruption, technological malfunction, political interference and stakeholder distrust.

International electoral governance literature advocates structured Election Risk Management systems incorporating early warning indicators and escalation protocols. However, institutionalisation of such frameworks in Nigeria remains inconsistent. The 2023 election demonstrated reactive crisis management rather than proactive risk governance, suggesting limited integration of structured risk matrices within operational planning.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Electoral Integrity and Institutional Capacity

Electoral credibility is strongly correlated with institutional professionalism and administrative clarity. Historical analyses of Nigeria's elections—from the 1983 electoral crisis to post-2011 violence—illustrate recurring structural fragility. Institutional independence without managerial capacity is insufficient to guarantee integrity.

Scholars argue that procedural transparency, communication clarity and oversight mechanisms determine public trust in electoral outcomes. Where these systems are weak, legitimacy deficits emerge irrespective of political competition.

3.2 International Comparative Practice

Comparative institutional models demonstrate how structured governance reduces operational ambiguity. The United States Federal Election Commission integrates formal reporting structures and performance monitoring systems. The United Kingdom Electoral Commission operates under audited planning frameworks subject to National Audit Office review. The Australian Electoral Commission applies risk-mapped operational planning embedded within corporate strategy.

These institutions exhibit features characteristic of project-oriented organisations, including defined governance hierarchies, structured documentation systems and cross-functional coordination. Such institutionalisation remains underdeveloped within Nigeria's electoral administration.

4. Project-Oriented Organisational Transformation

The transition of Electoral Management Bodies into project-oriented organisations represents a structural reform pathway. Observed weaknesses in Nigeria include over-centralised authority, fragmented coordination, ambiguous departmental boundaries and limited strategic alignment across electoral cycles.

Project governance theory emphasises strategic coherence and cross-functional integration as prerequisites for successful execution. In the Nigerian context, electoral activities often operate within administrative silos, limiting systemic visibility and reducing accountability mechanisms.

Embedding program governance architecture within the electoral commission would align operational activities with national democratic objectives and introduce clearer performance accountability.

5. Critical Analysis of the 2023 Nigerian Election

Applying PMBOK knowledge areas reveals multidimensional governance gaps. Scope management weaknesses were evident in unclear public expectations regarding electronic result transmission. Time management deficiencies manifested in delayed logistics deployment, indicating inadequate critical path planning.

Risk management systems failed to sufficiently mitigate foreseeable vulnerabilities, including technological reliability concerns and violence patterns observed in prior election cycles. Communication management breakdowns intensified public distrust, particularly during result collation phases. Stakeholder engagement processes lacked structured transparency, weakening confidence among political actors, observers and civil society groups.

These deficiencies suggest managerial misalignment rather than isolated technical malfunction.

6. Discussion

The 2023 election crisis reflects systemic governance weakness rather than purely political contestation. Elections in fragile democracies require institutionalised risk dashboards, integrated data management systems, structured escalation hierarchies and transparent communication frameworks.

International evidence demonstrates that structured governance frameworks reduce ambiguity and enhance operational predictability. However, project management mechanisms alone cannot eliminate political interference. They must operate within constitutionally protected independence structures and legal safeguards.

Institutional reform therefore requires both managerial professionalisation and political insulation.

7. Reform Recommendations

Reform should prioritise the establishment of a permanent Electoral Project Management Office responsible for cross-cycle planning and governance continuity. Structured election risk registers should be institutionalised and updated continuously rather than episodically. Quality management systems comparable to ISO-aligned frameworks should be embedded within electoral administration.

Digital transparency dashboards could enhance public accountability, while formal stakeholder communication protocols would reduce perception gaps during high-tension phases. Strategic alignment between electoral cycles and long-term institutional reform must replace reactive short-term preparation models.

8. Conclusion

The Nigerian 2023 General Election exposes a structural governance gap rather than merely political rivalry. Elections are inherently political in outcome but managerial in execution. Without structured project governance architecture, large-scale democratic operations remain vulnerable to preventable systemic breakdowns.

Institutionalising project management within Nigeria's electoral framework would not depoliticise elections, but it would professionalise their administration and enhance operational integrity.

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