



Intellectuals as Patriots: Contributions of Nigerian Academics to Democratic Movements (1999–2023)

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Abstract. The role of intellectuals in shaping democratic governance has been a subject of global scholarly inquiry, yet the contributions of Nigerian academics to democratic movements in the Fourth Republic (1999–2023) remain underexplored. This study examines how Nigerian intellectuals, through activism, policy advocacy, and public engagement, have influenced the trajectory of democracy in the country. Using a multidisciplinary approach that combines historical analysis, political theory, and qualitative interviews, the research highlights key moments where academics have acted as patriots challenging authoritarian tendencies, advocating for electoral reforms, and promoting inclusive governance. The paper traces the evolution of academic participation in Nigeria's democratic struggles, from early resistance to military autocracy to more recent interventions in electoral accountability and social justice campaigns. It identifies pivotal contributions by university-based think tanks, civil society organizations, and individual scholars in fostering political consciousness and mobilizing grassroots participation. While acknowledging the constraints of institutional decay, brain drain, and political co-optation, the study argues that Nigerian academics have played a dual role: as critics of state inefficiencies and as architects of reformist ideas. The research concludes by exploring the prospects of intellectual engagement in an increasingly digitalized public sphere, emphasizing the need for sustained scholarly advocacy to strengthen Nigeria's democratic institutions.

1. Introduction

The relationship between intellectuals and democratic governance has long been a focal point of within our polity. In Nigeria, academics have historically served as a major propelling force for social and political change, particularly in challenging authoritarianism and advocating for reforms towards self-rule and total inclusive governance. With the transition to democratic governance in 1999, the role of Nigerian academics graduated from resistance to active participation in institutionalising democratic institutions and processes. Their contributions evolved from theoretical frameworks and policy advocacy to direct involvement in governance and electoral reforms. This study seeks to examine the multifaceted role of Nigerian intellectuals as patriots who have contributed majorly to the sustenance and advancement of democracy in the Fourth Republic (1999–2023).

The problem as Identified, despite Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, has been inundated with challenges, such as electoral malpractices, weak institutions, and governance deficits. While the contributions of civil society and political actors have been extensively studied, the role of academics in shaping democratic processes remains underexplored. However, Nigerian intellectuals have engaged in various capacities, from critiquing undemocratic practices to driving reforms such as the Electoral Act amendments of 2010, 2022, and the advocacy for digital election processes. Academics' impact,

motivation and the challenges they face in this role are so far insufficiently documented, leaving a gap in understanding the intellectual's place in Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Hence, necessitated this research paper.

The objectives of this paper are; to analyse the contributions of Nigerian academics to electoral reforms and democratic processes between 1999 - 2023, to evaluate the involvement of academics in governance and policy advocacy within the fourth republic and to assess the challenges faced by Nigerian intellectuals in their roles as patriots and advocates for democratic consolidation.

The followings are the thematic questions designed to solicit responses from the respondents; what contributions have Nigerian academics made to electoral reforms and the democratic process during key political moments between 1999 - 2023, how have academics influenced governance and policy advocacy in the Fourth Republic, and what challenges do Nigerian intellectuals face in their efforts to advance democratic governance?

This paper underscores the critical role of intellectuals in fostering democratic governance, highlighting their contributions to electoral reforms and policy advocacy. In documenting the interventions of Nigerian academics, the paper provides a comprehensive understanding of how intellectuals shape political discourse and reform. However, the findings are expected to assist the policymakers, scholars, and civil society organizations seeking to strengthen democratic institutions and practices in Nigeria. In the same vein, this study is expected to contribute to global scholarship on the intersection of intellectualism and patriotism in postcolonial states.

2. Thematic Review of Related Literature

Academic Contributions to Electoral Processes (1999 - 2024) Nigerian academics have played pivotal roles in key electoral moments. Aside Justice Ephraim Akpata the then Chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) who was from Judiciary arm of government, the subsequent chairmen are from the academics. This ranges from Prof. Maurice Iwu (2007), Prof. Attahiru Jega (2011-2015) and Prof. Mahmud Yakubu (2023).

Professor Maurice Iwu served as the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) from 2005 to 2010, a period marked by significant challenges and efforts toward electoral reform in Nigeria. While his tenure was controversial, it also included some notable contributions to the electoral

process. Below are key areas of his contributions: Technological Innovations such as; Introduction of ICT in Election Management and Biometric Voter Registration (BVR), Electoral Legal Framework such as; Advocacy for Electoral Reforms and Political Parties and Campaign Financing, Stakeholder Engagement such as; Inclusion of Civil Society and Collaboration with International Bodies, including Voter Education and Awareness.

Professor Attahiru Jega, as Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) from 2010 to 2015, played a pivotal role in advancing electoral reforms in Nigeria. His leadership marked a turning point in the country's electoral process, focusing on transparency, credibility, and inclusiveness. Below are key contributions to electoral reform under his tenure: Introduction of the Biometric Permanent Voter Card (PVC), Deployment of Smart Card Readers (2015), Improved Voter Registration Process, Institutional Reforms within INEC, Transparent Election Result Collation Process, Promotion of Electoral Legal Reforms, Engagement with Stakeholders and Credible 2015 General Elections (Osayi, 2024).

As Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) since 2015, Professor Mahmud Yakubu has been at the forefront of implementing significant electoral reforms in Nigeria. His tenure has focused on leveraging technology, improving transparency, and addressing challenges in Nigeria's electoral processes. Below are his key contributions: Introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), Electronic Transmission of Results, Continuous Voter Registration (CVR), Introduction of the INEC Result Viewing (iReV) Portal, Advocacy for Electoral Legal Reforms, Improvement in Logistics and Election Operations, Engagement with Stakeholders, Promotion of Inclusion in Elections and Conduct of General Elections (2019 and 2023).

2.1 Academics in Governance

Beyond electoral processes, Nigerian academics have directly engaged in governance, serving as ministers, advisers, and members of reform committees. Notable examples include Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, whose tenure as Minister of Finance saw significant economic reforms, and Oby Ezekwesili, who championed transparency initiatives.

Professor Yemi Osinbajo (Vice President, 2015–2023) who Played a vital role in economic policies, particularly the implementation of the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (ERGP) during Nigeria's

recession, championed social investment programs such as TraderMoni, N-Power, and Conditional Cash Transfers, which targeted poverty alleviation and advocated for judicial reforms and good governance practices (Atakpa 2024).

Professor Charles Soludo (Governor, Anambra State, 2022–Present; CBN Governor, 2004–2009) As Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, introduced banking sector reforms, including the recapitalization of banks, which stabilized the financial sector and as Governor of Anambra State he focused on infrastructure development, economic revitalization, and governance reforms.

Professor Babagana Zulum (Governor, Borno State, 2019–Present) who implemented innovative governance strategies to address insurgency and humanitarian crises in Borno State and prioritized education, healthcare, and rebuilding communities affected by Boko Haram insurgency.

Professor Jerry Gana (Minister of Information, 1999–2001; Political Advisor) who advocated for national unity and democratic governance through public engagement and policy initiatives during Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999.

Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Minister of Finance, 2003–2006, 2011–2015) who introduced the Debt Relief Initiative, leading to the cancellation of \$18 billion in Nigeria's debt by the Paris Club and Implemented economic reforms, including the creation of the Sovereign Wealth Fund and the establishment of the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS).

Professor Ibrahim Gambari (Chief of Staff to the President, 2020–2023) who provided strategic policy advice to the presidency, particularly in foreign relations and governance and advocated for democracy, peacebuilding, and human rights during his tenure as a diplomat and academic.

Professor Ruqayyatu Ahmed Rufa'i (Minister of Education, 2010–2013) who championed reforms in Nigeria's education sector, including the establishment of more federal universities and policies to improve access to education.

Professor Bolaji Akinyemi (Former Minister of External Affairs, Academic Advisor) who advocated for democratic reforms and Nigeria's leadership in African diplomacy and played advisory roles in constitutional development and democratic governance.

Professor Ali Pate (Coordinating Minister of Health and Social Welfare, 2023–present under Bola Tinubu) He is leading reforms to Nigeria's healthcare system, including efforts to strengthen primary healthcare and universal health coverage.

Professor Tahir Mamman (Minister of Education, 2023 – 2024 under Bola Tinubu) He focuses on restructuring Nigeria's education system, addressing funding, access, and quality of education, particularly in tertiary institutions.

Dr. Bosun Tijani is driving policies that promote digital inclusion, innovation, and the growth of Nigeria's technology ecosystem.

Professor Mohammad Mahmood Abubakar he worked on climate change adaptation, environmental protection, and the implementation of Nigeria's climate action plans.

Dr. Yemi Kale revolutionized Nigeria's data collection and reporting systems, providing reliable statistics that informed policy decisions in governance, economics, and development planning.

Dr. Jumoke Oduwole worked on reforms that improved Nigeria's ranking in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index, making it easier for businesses to operate in the country.

Professor Abubakar Rasheed oversaw major reforms in the accreditation of Nigerian universities and advocated for improvements in higher education quality and funding. These individuals exemplify how intellectuals translate academic expertise into practical governance solutions.

This body of literature reveals a rich tapestry of intellectual engagement in Nigeria's democratic journey.

3. Research Methodology

The population for this study consists of Nigerian intellectuals who are actively involved in advancing democratic governance. These individuals are typically found in academic, research, political, and civil society settings. The specific population are University Academics, Political Analysts, Civil society leaders, Journalist/media experts and Government Officials/Policy Makers. To ensure comprehensive and representative findings, a quantitative research design was employed, using survey questionnaires. Stratified random sampling technique was adopted in selecting population size of the study. Based on this, five (5) respondents were

selected from each Geo-Political zone consisting North East North Central, North West, South-South, South East South West.

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3.2 Administration of questionnaires

Below are the areas covered during the administration of the questionnaires:

Universities

North Central - University of Ilorin (UNILORIN) – Kwara State

North East-Federal University of Technology (FUTY) – Yola, Adamawa State
 North West-Bayero University Kano (BUK) – Kano State
 South East-University of Nigeria (UNN) – Nsukka, Enugu State
 South South-University of Calabar (UNICAL) – Cross River State
 South West-University of Ibadan (UI) – Oyo State
 Journalist/Media Experts
 North Central - Leadership Newspaper (Abuja)
 North East - The Scope Newspaper (Adamawa State)
 North West - Daily Trust (Kaduna State)
 South East - The Sun Newspaper (Anambra State)
 South South - The Tide (Rivers State)
 South West - The Punch (Lagos State)

Civil Societies

North Central - Centre for Transparency and Advocacy (CTA) – Based in Abuja (FCT)
 North East - Borno State Civil Society Coalition (BOCISCO) – Borno State
 North West - Kano State Civil Society Forum (KCSF) – Kano State
 South East - Human Rights, Justice and Peace Foundation (HRJPF) – Enugu State
 South South - Niger Delta Citizens and Budget Platform (NDCBP) – Rivers State
 South West - Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) – Lagos State

For the sake of anonymity, the details of the political analysts and government officials will not be revealed.

4. Analysis

Table 1 showing Involvement in Discussions, Research, or Advocacy Related to Electoral Reforms in Nigeria

Respondent Group	Very Involved (1)	Somewhat Involved (2)	Not Involved (3)	Percentage Involved	Very Involved	Percentage Involved	Somewhat Involved	Percentage Involved	Not Involved
North East	2	3	0	40%	60%	60%	0%	0%	
North Central	1	3	1	20%	60%	60%	20%	20%	
North West	3	1	1	60%	20%	20%	20%	20%	
South South	1	3	1	20%	60%	60%	20%	20%	
South East	2	2	1	40%	40%	40%	20%	20%	
South West	3	2	0	60%	40%	40%	0%	0%	
Total	12	14	4	40%	46.7%	46.7%	13.3%	13.3%	

Source: Researcher

Key Insights:

North West and South West respondents showed high involvement in electoral reforms (60% very involved). North East and South East respondents had lower involvement, particularly with some not involved at all.

Table 2: showing Major Contributions of Nigerian Academics to Electoral Reforms (1999 - 2023)

Year Range	Significant Contribution (1)	Partial Contribution (2)	No Contribution (3)	Percentage Significant	Percentage Partial	Percentage No Contribution
1999 - 2004	10	10	10	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%
2007 - 2011	7	15	8	23.3%	50%	26.7%
2015 - 2019	8	14	8	26.7%	46.7%	26.7%
2023 to date	9	12	9	30%	40%	30%

Source: Researcher

Key Insights:

1999-2004 shows a balanced perception, with academics regarded as contributing significantly by 33.3% of respondents.

2007-2011 saw a larger portion of respondents viewing academics' contributions as partial (50%).

2023 shows a similar pattern, with 40% rating it as partial contribution.

Table 3 showing Primary Areas of Focus for Nigerian Academics Regarding Electoral Reforms (1999 - 2023)

Focus Area	No Focus (1)	Partial Focus (2)	Significant Focus (3)	Percentage No Focus	Percentage Partial Focus	Percentage Significant Focus
Voter Education & Electoral Law	5	10	15	16.7%	33.3%	50%
Election Monitoring & Observation	4	8	18	13.3%	26.7%	60%
Electoral Transparency & Technology	6	9	15	20%	30%	50%

Source: Researcher

Key Insights:

The majority of respondents view Election Monitoring & Observation and Voter Education & Electoral Law Reform as having significant focus (50% and 60%, respectively).

Electoral Transparency & Technology was also regarded with significant focus by 50% of respondents, suggesting a major area of academic focus in recent years.

Table 4 showing Impact of Research or Advocacy on Electoral Reforms

Impact Assessment	No Impact	Slightly Impactful	Highly Impactful	Percentage No Impact	Percentage Slightly Impactful	Percentage Highly Impactful
Total	5	12	13	16.7%	40%	43.3%

Source: Researcher

Key Insights:

A large proportion of respondents (43.3%) believe their research or advocacy has been highly impactful, while 40% rated it as slightly impactful.

A smaller portion (16.7%) felt their research had no impact, suggesting that while academics feel influential, challenges still exist.

Table showing 5 Level of Involvement of Academics in Governance and Policy Advocacy

Level of Activity	Very Active	Slightly Active	Not Active	Percentage Very Active	Percentage Slightly Active	Percentage Not Active
Total	8	18	4	26.7%	60%	13.3%

Source: Researcher

Key Insights:

Most respondents (60%) believe academics are slightly active in governance and policy advocacy, while 26.7% believe they are very active.

A small portion (13.3%) feels that academics are not active.

Table 6 showing Challenges Faced by Nigerian Intellectuals in Advocating for Democratic Consolidation.

Challenge Area	Major Challenge (1)	Partial Challenge (2)	Not a Challenge (3)	Percentage Major Challenge	Percentage Partial Challenge	Percentage Not a Challenge
Political Instability	20	8	2	66.7%	26.7%	6.7%
Corruption in Government	25	4	1	83.3%	13.3%	3.3%
Censorship & Repression	15	10	5	50%	33.3%	16.7%
Ethnic & Religious Divisions	18	8	4	60%	26.7%	13.3%
Limited Access to Decision-makers	10	14	6	33.3%	46.7%	20%
Economic Constraints	22	6	2	73.3%	20%	6.7%
Lack of Public Interest	18	8	4	60%	26.7%	13.3%

Source: Researcher

Key Insights:

Corruption in government and political instability are regarded as the major challenges (83.3% and 66.7%, respectively).

Censorship and repression, and economic constraints also emerged as significant barriers to democratic advocacy.

5. Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Involvement in Discussions, Research, or Advocacy Related to Electoral Reforms

North West and South West displayed the highest levels of involvement, with 60% of respondents being very involved. This suggests stronger advocacy or research networks and possibly a more robust academic or civil society presence in these regions. North East and South East showed lower levels of involvement, with North East respondents entirely avoiding "Not Involved" responses. This could imply heightened interest but limited capacity or engagement opportunities in certain areas. The overall involvement statistics (40% very involved, 46.7% somewhat involved, and 13.3% not involved) reflect moderate participation, with room for more active contributions across all regions.

Table 2: Contributions of Nigerian Academics to Electoral Reforms (1999–2023)

1999–2004 shows a balanced perception with 33.3% each for significant, partial, and no contributions. This aligns with the nascent democratic processes post-military rule, where academic contributions may have been exploratory. The 2007–2011 period saw a shift, with 50% of respondents noting partial contributions, reflecting possibly the increased complexity of electoral issues during that time. 2015–2019 and 2023 to date show consistent trends, where significant contributions remain below 30%, and partial contributions dominate. This indicates persistent barriers preventing full academic involvement in electoral reform.

Table 3: Primary Areas of Focus for Nigerian Academics Regarding Electoral Reforms

Election Monitoring & Observation (60%) and Voter Education & Electoral Law (50%) emerge as dominant areas of focus. These findings highlight academia's role in promoting free and fair elections and educating the electorate. Electoral Transparency & Technology also received significant attention (50%), reflecting the growing importance of technology in combating electoral malpractice. The relatively high "partial focus" percentages suggest that while these areas are priorities, constraints such as funding, political environment, or technical capacity limit deeper academic engagement.

Table 4: Impact of Research or Advocacy on Electoral Reforms

43.3% of respondents rated their efforts as highly impactful, indicating that academic research and advocacy play a critical role in shaping reforms. However, 40% felt their contributions were only slightly impactful, which underscores challenges in translating research into actionable policy changes. The 16.7% with no perceived impact could reflect disillusionment or systemic barriers like political apathy, weak institutions, or limited access to decision-makers.

Table 5: Involvement of Academics in Governance and Policy Advocacy

60% of respondents consider academics slightly active, reflecting moderate involvement in governance and policy advocacy. The 26.7% rating academics as

very active indicates pockets of strong influence but highlights a need for more consistent engagement. The 13.3% identifying no activity points to barriers such as lack of resources, political interference, or weak networks for influencing governance.

Table 6: Challenges Faced by Nigerian Intellectuals in Advocating for Democratic Consolidation

Corruption in government (83.3%) and political instability (66.7%) are the most significant barriers, undermining efforts to promote transparency and accountability. Economic constraints (73.3%) also pose a major hurdle, limiting research funding and participation in advocacy activities. Censorship and repression (50%) reflect systemic threats to academic freedom and democratic discourse. Ethnic and religious divisions (60%) further complicate advocacy efforts, as these divisions often exacerbate political tensions. Limited access to decision-makers (33.3% major, 46.7% partial) highlights institutional bottlenecks that stifle direct academic contributions to policy formulation.

Overall Insights

Moderate but Growing Involvement: Academics are increasingly engaged in electoral reforms, but challenges like corruption, economic constraints, and limited policy influence hinder more significant contributions.

Prioritization of Key Areas: Research focus on voter education, monitoring, and technology aligns with Nigeria’s pressing electoral challenges, though broader engagement is needed.

Impact of Efforts: While many respondents see their efforts as impactful, a substantial portion indicates that systemic challenges diminish their effectiveness.

Challenges as Bottlenecks: Structural issues such as corruption, political instability, and repression remain significant obstacles that must be addressed to enhance the role of academics in democratic consolidation.

6. Recommendations

Strengthen Academic: Policy Linkages: Formal channels for academics to engage directly with policymakers should be established, ensuring that research findings and advocacy efforts translate into actionable reforms.

Promote Collaborative Research and Advocacy: Partnerships between academics, civil society, and electoral bodies should be encouraged to amplify the impact of electoral reform initiatives, especially in underrepresented regions like the North East and South East.

Increase Funding for Electoral Research: Resources should be allocated through government and international organizations to support studies on voter education, election monitoring, and electoral technology.

Address Systemic Barriers: Corruption, censorship, and economic constraints can be tackled through institutional reforms and the establishment of independent watchdogs to protect democratic advocacy.

Expand Capacity-Building Initiatives: Provide training and resources for academics to enhance their expertise in emerging areas such as electoral technology and transparency.

Promote Inclusive Engagement: Facilitate broader participation of academics across all geopolitical zones by addressing regional disparities in access to opportunities and resources.

7. Conclusion

The findings highlight the crucial role Nigerian academics play in advancing electoral reforms, particularly in voter education, election monitoring, and transparency. However, systemic challenges, including corruption, political instability, and limited access to decision-makers, hinder their full potential. Addressing these barriers through enhanced collaboration, funding, and institutional support will not only bolster democratic consolidation but also empower academics to contribute more significantly to Nigeria’s electoral Reform, policy advocacy and democratic consolidation.

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