



The Military, Conduct of Elections and Matters Arising in Nigeria

By

Aliyu, M. Kolawole, PhD
Department of Political Science,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Abstract

The conduct of elections in Nigeria was a civil matter before the return to civil rule in 29 May 1999. The Ekiti State gubernatorial election conducted in 21 June 2014 under former President Goodluck Jonathan marked the beginning of massive deployment of the military during elections and has since become a norm to engage the military in electoral processes in the country. In view of the controversy the issue has generated, this study draws on secondary data to provide an overview on the current debate. The study also interrogates the circumstances that led to the deployment of the armed forces in the conduct of elections in the country and examines the propriety or otherwise of the action under a democratic rule in line with the constitutional roles of the military. The study equally discusses the expected professional conducts of the military in the electoral processes as well as the handling of security matters between the Election Management Body and security agents, and finally discusses the conducts of soldiers and matters arising with reference to the 2027 general elections. These were with the view to preparing the military for a robust professional engagement in Nigeria's future elections.

Keywords: deployment, military, elections, security, insecurity

Introduction

One of the fundamental ways to sustain democracy is the conduct of credible elections. A free and credible election requires adequate security. This is important, because election is a potentially crisis-prone exercise. As a result, security failure is likely to have a severe damage on the outcome of the elections, peace and stability of a state. This is why, Igini (2023) notes that one of the ways to have a hitch-free election is to have professional security agents that would oversee electoral processes. According to Solomon (2016), insecurity may engender serious consequences for the fundamental rights and freedoms of the citizens, including the right to participate in the electoral process. Usually, the police should provide security for the nation's election in line with global practices. However, in Nigeria, especially since 2014, soldiers have deeply involved in the country's electoral processes. Since then, the conducts of the armed forces have raised a snag as to the legality or otherwise of deploying soldiers for elections.

The deployment of soldiers for elections has become contentious because they constitute a source of intimidation to voters. This is in view of the power they wield. Thus, the involvement of the military needs a careful guide to prevent it from becoming a source of intimidation to voters and prevent them from exercising their franchise. It is therefore germane that the armed forces discharge their duties within the constitutional limits. For instance, Comments to Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights state that sovereign states must take effective measures to ensure that all persons entitled to vote are able to exercise that right. As an extension of the above commitment, there is a general obligation on the part of the state to facilitate democratic election by ensuring its safety.

Until the return to civil rule in 29 May 1999, the police was in charge of elections in Nigeria. The federal government, in the fourth republic, began to deploy troops during isolated gubernatorial elections in Edo and Ondo states in 2011; and Anambra state in 2013. According to John (2017), the deployment of soldiers was initially restricted to highways and volatile areas in order to make sure that nobody illegally move arms

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from one place to another during elections. However, it assumed a new dimension during the Ekiti and Osun States gubernatorial elections in 2014 when the federal government deployed soldiers to polling stations and collation centers. Since then, the deployment of troops has become a regular thing. Conventionally, it is during insurrection or insurgency that the President of Nigeria can call on the armed-forces to restore order and must be with the approval of the National Assembly as provided for in Sections 217 (2) and 218 (4) of the Constitution. Except during emergency, when the task of protecting the democratic institutions and constitutional order lies on the armed forces, the military should not play direct role during elections. Most advanced democracies do not allow their soldiers to come near the ballot (ThisDay, 2019).

Even while there is no uniformity with regard to the roles of soldiers in elections across the globe, there is a consensus that the protection of polling stations is not within the purview of armed forces but that of the police. Thus, the arguments for and against the roles of the military in elections vary. It is more or less a consensus that the involvement of the military with regard to provision of security during elections should be a special one. According to Solomon (2016), the military is a profession set of human beings with special mission and character, and keeping the military away from polls will ensure that the Nigerian state preserves the political neutrality of soldiers and makes them more professional and effective.

Theoretical Explanations

This study uses Hobbesian Theory to explain the use of soldiers for the conduct of election. Thomas Hobbes had argued that greed and superior power of force influence man by nature. As a result, it is needful to prevent violent nature of human being, and to do this effectively; a powerful garrison state is required. In view of the above, the state holds the rights to ensure the protection of the people and prevent recourse to anarchy and breakdown of law and order, especially during elections. Since elections in Nigeria are equivalent with warfare by politicians, it is important that state employ maximum force to prevent or reduce bloodletting, killings, and other associated violence.

In addition, the fear and anticipation of the inability of Independent National Electoral Commission to conduct free, fair and open election warrants the use of soldiers during civil transition. This is to say that the fear of rigging, ballot snatching, thuggery, falsification of results and intimidation of voters is responsible for the deployment of soldiers by the federal government. While this school of thought appears convincing, that the military has been able to stop some of the electoral malpractices, another school of thought has indicted the military as sometimes used by the incumbent to perpetuate electoral malpractice. To put it directly, soldiers engage in complicity with politicians, especially the incumbents to subvert the wishes of the electorate and disrupt the electoral processes. Such political biases by armed forces put the neutrality of soldiers to serious questioning and test. There have been accusations that incumbents government sometimes use security agents; including soldiers to neutralize the opposition parties and achieve their pecuniary political ambitions and not necessarily to keep or uphold the sanctity of election. This is part of the reasons why the deployment of the military has drawn public furry than accolades from Nigerians.

The Military and its Roles

Military is a central part of the state apparatus. It is also a body of people charged with the responsibility, both morally and statutorily of maintaining internal and external security of the state. By internal and external security, we are referring to the keeping of peace within the civil populace and deterring external aggressors from encroaching upon the country landed property, air and sea. Hence, the military is highly skilled body of persons specially trained to protect the territorial integrity of a state. It is a body of professional men and women trained in the use of arms and armaments for the protection and security of a state. The military is men in “Khaki” who wield the gun. The military is an organization or a team of soldiers connected with a state of war. The military is to serve, maintain and enforce laws of a country. They have the responsibility to keep the territorial sovereignty of a nation by preventing any invasion into the nation on either land, sea, or air. Thus, the military is a conglomeration of nation armed forces and seen

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in the army, navy, and air force who perform their roles within a well-defined territory. For instance, the army is to guard, the navy is to perform the same role on the sea while the air force is expected to protect the air space.

There are also para-military forces such as Police, Customs, Immigration, and Department of State Security (DSS), National Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC), Federal Road Safety Corps, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), and so on. The police and DSS are to make protect the lives and property of the citizenry of the state. The custom is to guard our natural resources and collects revenue on tariffs and other sectors, the immigration controls movement of outsiders in and out, within and outside the country.

The roles of the military all over the world are similar but have become varied, most especially among “developing countries”. The traditional role of the military is to maintain both internal and external security of a country. The traditional role is legislated in the country’s constitution, just like the role of other institutions of the state. Thus, the role of the military as the custodians of the nation’s defense involves protection of its institutions, territories and interest against attack, violation, intrusion or interference from internal or external aggression. The followings are the roles of the military as enshrined in Section 217 subsection 2a-d of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria:

- (a) defending Nigeria from external aggression;
- (b) maintaining its territorial integrity and securing its borders from violation on land, sea or air;
- (c) suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the president, but subject to such conditions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly; and
- (d) performing such other functions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly.

From the above, it is clear that the military supposed to be responsible to the civilian President and the National Assembly for their actions. Therefore, Section 218 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria grants the Nigerian President the position of the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. With the position, the President is to appoint national security advisers like the Chief of Defence Staff, the Chief of Army Staff, the Chief of Naval Staff, the Chief of Air Staff, and heads of other branches of the armed forces by an Act of the National Assembly. Given the above, the military is supposed to be an instrument of use by the political head of the country and its involvement in electoral processes should be minimal.

The Role of the Military in Elections: The Controversy and Debate

The legality or otherwise of deploying troops for the conduct of elections in Nigeria has sparked off continuous agitations. In the past, the military had participated in one way or the other in election matters; however, the use of the military to tamper with the process of elections is a new dimension to the role of the military. Some scholars are of the view that the deployment of troops in “aid” of civil authority is legal and constitutional but as long as it has been approved or regulated by the National Assembly. However, does the president seek the approval of the legislature before deploying soldiers for elections? How does legislature regulate activities of soldiers when some of them misbehave? What happens when the President does not seek such approval or the National Assembly declined approval?

The former chair of INEC, Professor Atairu Jega (2022) notes that the use of the military becomes imperative due to attack of electoral officials and facilities and other civil security personnel on election duties. Other reasons are due to misuse of security orderlies by politicians, especially incumbents; attacks and intimidation of opponents and members of the public; intimidation of voters; snatching of election materials; kidnapping and assassination of opponents on Election Day. The position of Jega becomes worrisome in view of the challenges of securing human beings and materials on Election Day. It is becoming herculean task and daunting to secure voters and materials during election periods. It is also alarming to see elections in Nigeria becoming more or less warfare except. Between May 29, 1999 and March 2019, electoral conducts have not fared better in terms of insecurity. Except the 1999 and 2015

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general elections that were a bit peaceful, the 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2019 elections were massively violent (Herberg, 2016). According to (Solomon (2016), there were alarms that politicians raised private militias to realize personal ambitions while instances of electoral disruptions were high. Accordingly, the do or die mentality of politicians gives room for the use of another security alternative during elections. For instance, a former president of the Court of Appeal, Hon. Justice Umar Abdullahi (JCA) noted, “in spite of non-tolerant nature of Nigeria’s political class, we cannot do without armed personnel in our electoral processes” (Joel, 2023). His thought suggests that the civilian authorities should conduct themselves in civil manner and carry out the electoral processes in accordance with extant laws at all levels. In addition, the security situation in some parts of Nigeria, such as Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Gombe, Benue, and so on, also reinforce the need to deploy the military during election periods

Also in support for the deployment of the military during elections, former President of Nigeria Bar Association, Joseph Dauda, SAN, said the idea of deploying the military for election is in order to protect sensitive materials used during the exercise (Abedello, 2017). Also backing the call for troop’s deployment to ensure peace during election is the Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, Prof. Chidi Odinkalu, who is of the view that Nigeria is currently in a state of war, which justifies such action in line with the Geneva Convention Act (Abegunde, 2015). The Chairman, International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law, Mr Emeka Umeagbalasi also noted that the deployment of the military is commendable. In his view, “the role of the military in the sustenance of Nigeria’s fragile democracy, including reduction in poll roguery and brigandage is a welcome development.” According to Peter, (2017), the deployment of the military has drastically reduced use of violence as well as poll rigging. For instance, over 300 citizens died in 2011 pre-election violence as against 60 in 2015 due to good use of soldiers. No doubt, the military and surveillance of poll materials and personnel in recent times have added credibility to polls outcomes and results. According to Gedion (2017), various polls tribunals in Nigeria have upheld most elections held under massive deployment of the military. Nigeria is widely known for turbulent polls and military is the only neutral third party capable of providing hope for Nigerians (Ayelazuno, (2016).

Contrary to the above, the antagonists of military deployment for elections alleged that the ruling party has used soldiers to intimidate and arrest leading political opponents. The ruling party is taking advantage of the increasing insecurity in the country to set the stage for the full involvement of the military during elections. Even, when it is not necessary to use the army, ruling party mobilize them to terrorize oppositions, and therefore requires proactive steps. For instance, former president of the Court of Appeal, Hon. Justice Ayo Salami (JCA), on his part, remarked that “it is up to the police to protect our nascent democracy and not the military; otherwise the democracy might be wittingly or unwittingly militarized (Abegunde, 2015). Reinforcing the condemnation of the military for elections, Hon. Justice Aboki (JCA), the then chair, Ekiti State Governorship Election Appeal Tribunal noted that not even the president of Nigeria has powers to call on the Nigerian armed forces to unleash terror on peaceful citizen who are exercising their franchise to elect their leaders (Abegunde, 2015). The Court of Appeal, in deciding the Ekiti-election petition, ruled that it is illegal to deploy soldiers for election duties (Ibid). The Court of Appeal ruling on 2014 gubernatorial election in Ekiti state validated the decision of a Sokoto High Court that the military have no direct role during elections in Nigeria (Paul, 2018).

Given the arguments for and against, the deployment of the military might not be legal or illegal. In whatever dimension one views the issue, so long, Nigeria’s polls remain turbulent, the lives and liberties of Nigerians and makes it important for the country’s armed forces. As a guide therefore, the roles of soldiers in elections as suggested by Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (2010) could be limited to the following tasks:

- i. transportation of material before the Election Day;
- ii. transportation from local government headquarters to polling stations, as well as security of polling staff on election day;
- iii. deployment on polling day outside polling stations; and

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- iv. securely transporting election materials and polling staff back to electoral body offices.

Professional Conducts of the Military during Elections

In the event that it becomes inevitable to engage the military in the conduct of elections in Nigeria, the army should behave in a republican manner to meet the needs of the electoral process. According to Fredrick Ebert Foundation (2016), one of the major requirements of involving the security personnel in the electoral process is for them to maintain the required peace. In view of this, the armed forces are to respect the submission of the army to democratic civilian regime during the pre-electoral, electoral and post-electoral phases. They are to be civil, law abiding, and treat the people with respect, dignity and honor (Gedion, 2017).

It is also part of the professional conducts of the military to enforce electoral laws and regulations in force. In doing this, the military should reasonably demonstrate fairness and neutrality in their conduct with stakeholders. There should be no preferential treatment of any political party, candidate, religious group or tribe. With respect to rule of law, the military should be fair to all and be politically neutral. All political stakeholders must enjoy existing electoral laws without intimidation or discrimination. To use the words of Joel (2023), the military should be non-partisan and be free from such indictment.

It is also necessary for the military to keep faith in the abiding recognition of the fact that all registered voters have the right to vote. The military command must respect the neutrality of the army. Elections must be free from the military's influence and pressure. Soldiers bearing arms must not have access to the polling stations. Restrictions may be imposed if the security of a state or human rights and freedoms are been threatened. As affirmed by Fredrick Ebert Foundation (2016), the military high commands must inform citizens on security measures put in place for elections. Members of the public should be reassured of the absence of risks for them during elections. The military is required to allay the fears and apprehension of the electorate.

Finally, it is required to guarantee the freedom of expression of soldiers on election duty. A soldier on duty during elections should not make any remark on the inadequacy of the security until such he/she seeks authorization of the Defense Ministry not to compromise the integrity of the poll. Armed forces should not make political statements or speeches where they disagree with officially announced election results.

Handling of Security Matters among Election Management Body and Security Agents

Electoral Management Body (EMB) whether it is independent or not; is a source of violence and insecurity during elections. This is because; the EMB is responsible for implementation of major decisions of the electoral process. As a result, election administration that other stakeholders see as biased may lead to violence and insecurity. The EMB should not only understand security arrangements put in place for elections but fully implement them to make them a success.

In Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), a federal institution established by article 153 (1) F of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, that plays the leading role in election matters. However, the provision of security during election is not its exclusive function. The functions of INEC as provided under the Constitution are as follows:

- organize, conduct and supervise all elections to the post of president and vice president, governor and deputy governor of a state and elections of members of senate, the House of Representatives and the Assembly of each state of the Federation;
- register political parties in consonance with the provisions of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution and the law of the National Assembly;
- undertake monitoring of the organization and functioning of political parties, especially the finances;
- organize the review and annual audit of the finances and accounts of the political parties, and publish a report which reflects this review and audit;
- organize and lead the registration of qualified persons to prepare, update and revise the voters register for all elections within the framework of provisions of the 1999 Nigeria Constitution;

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- monitor election campaigns and prescribe regulations to govern political parties;
- ensure that all the electoral commissioners and returning officers swear an oath in consonance with the law;
- delegate all powers given to it to a resident electoral commissioner; and
- carry out other duties provided under the 2014 Electoral Law.

From the above stated functions, it is clear that INEC plays a crucial role in the organization of free, fair and credible election but without a clear role of what it is expected to do and the extent of its limit to secure the ballot and its processes. At most, it can only set up ‘security committee’ among other committees as provided for in Part 1, 7 (1) of the Electoral Act 2022. Yet, such a security committee exists between the Nigeria Police Force, the State Security Services, the Army and INEC. With regular meetings, the role of the INEC in the security meetings is limited to giving of broad guidelines and presentation of security proposals. On the other hand, the operational implementation or deployment of security agents is the sole preserve of the President, the Commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The lopsidedness concerning the provision of security by INEC is vague because there is no particular provision concerning the conditions in which to supervise it. Thus, in the face of ‘silence’ of the election legal framework on the precise security role of INEC, handling of election security matters is currently on ad-hoc arrangement.

2019 and 2023 General Elections, the Military and Matters Arising

The Nigerian army deployed 95 percent of its troops for the 2019 and 2023 general elections duties (Chijioke, 2023; Linus, 2024). The number of army deployed for the election was worrisome. The worry was high because of the indictment against the army of partisanship and unprofessional conducts during the 2014 gubernatorial elections in Ekiti and Osun States; as well as 2015 general elections (Abedello, 2017). In October 2015, the Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Buratai set up a panel to investigate the alleged malpractice and role of its personnel in Ekiti and Osun states during the 2014 elections, nothing tangible came out from the committee. However, to douse the tension of concerned stakeholders, who felt the number of troops deployed for the 2019 general elections was too much and unnecessary, the Army spokesman, Brigadier General Usman noted that all Nigerian Army personnel must remain neutral, non-partisan and transparent in all constitutional duties (Don, 2019).

Unfortunately, the conducts of some army officers negated the assurances given by the Army spokesperson. For instance, in Rivers and Bauchi states, men in army uniform intimidated and blocked voters from getting to polling stations, snatched ballot boxes and instigated needless violence (This Day, 2019). The situation in Rivers state was worst between Governor Nyesom Wike and immediate Governor and Minister of Transport, Chief Rotimi Amaechi. The collation of election results was suspended for weeks and inconclusive, at a period but later announced in favor of PDP. Nyesom Mike later dedicated his party’s (PDP) victory to the deceased and victims of the violent elections held in the state. In addition, two civil society groups, the Save Democracy and Impact Future Nigeria staged a protest in Abuja over what they termed ‘heavy militarization of the 2019 general elections’ (This Day, 2019). Reports from Rivers state indicted soldiers and armed gangs of invading polling centers resulting in intimidation and unlawful arrest of election official, thereby disrupting the collation process.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) also expressed displeasure with the role played by some soldiers and armed gangs in Rivers state disrupting the collation process and attempting to truncate the will of the people. Anonymous INEC official admitted that the military bombarded their offices and confiscated elections results, thus rendering collation tasks impossible (This Day, 2019). In addition, there have also been accusations that soldiers prevented International Observers from performing their duty of monitoring the conducts of the elections. According to the National Commissioner and Chairman, Information and Voter Education Committee in Rivers state, Festus Okoye, return for 21 state’s constituencies out of 32 were made but have to be suspended because ‘collation centres were invaded by some soldiers’ and unlawful arrest of election officials’ (This Day, 2019). However, the military refuted

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the claim, ascribing the atrocities to 'fake soldiers' but there was no arrest. Thus, many Nigerians see the defense as afterthought. Similar military invasion occurred in Kaduna, Kano, Bauchi, Plateau and Sokoto (This Day, 2019). It is an aberration of Nigerian laws for the military to be directly involved in elections as we have witnessed in some states during the 2019 elections. The indictment of the military called to question their roles in the electoral process.

However, the conduct of the army during the 2023 general elections revealed a steady improvement compared to the previous experience. The 2023 general elections was the 7th elections and the 24th years of unbroken civil transitions since the return of democracy in 1999. Before the 2023 general elections, the military witnessed several temptations, violence and repeated attacks on Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) facilities across Nigeria. There were more than fifty attacks in some states in Nigeria such as Imo (with the highest, and about eleven), Akwa Ibom, Ebonyi, Cross Rivers, Abia, Kaduna, Anambra, Taraba, Bayelsa, Borno, Ogun, Lagos, and Ondo states INEC facilities (Jibrin, 2023). In addition, there were Islamic agitations by Boko-Haram and Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP), banditry, and farmers-herders conflict in virtually all geo-political zones in Nigeria. Ordinarily, the military could have used all the above situations to militarise the 2023 general elections but did not do so. Instead, the military promised its unwavering commitment to provide support to the police at the polls. For instance, the Chief of Defence Staff, General Lucky Irabor maintained that the military would be more professional, politically neutral and impartial, and show more commitment to work with the police and other security agencies during the elections (Jibrin, 2023). He assured democratic stakeholders that the military would only provide logistics support and emergency response to police during the elections. The army's conduct during 2023 general elections was more professional and a supportive one to the Nigeria Police that is the lead security agent in electoral exercise (Tunde and Tarkaa, 2023). Reports across the states during the 2023 general elections showed that the military institution has improved significantly on its conducts during elections in Nigeria (Ibid).

Conclusion

It is the desire of this study that Nigeria should be able to conduct elections that are devoid of militarization. However, it is unfortunate that the country is still far away from this position because the political class and other stakeholders in the country are yet to embrace the reality of crisis-free elections. In view of this, it is almost difficult to have elections that would be fully demilitarized. It is imperative that the military do not encroach on the constitutional duties of the police but assist them only in situations that the police cannot bring under control. The president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces should limit the role of the military during elections to requisition, when the need arises. The military must step back from direct involvement in elections and put an end to the worrying trend. The conduct of the military during the 2023 general elections showed a remarkable improvement and an attempt to depart from the old order. The trend must be for sustained for 2027 general elections and beyond.

Recommendations

Election ought to be a civic matter and its processes clearly distinguishable from war. Therefore, armed forces should only support the electoral process and have no direct role in the conduct of elections. The soldiers should only be restricted to designated areas considered hot spots. This is only to ensure that people do not traffic arms, ammunition or engage in conduct that could tamper with the electoral process. Top military commanders should as well not use their positions for political purpose. It is necessary for Nigeria to imbibe the practice in modern climes, such as Germany that sets out the rights and responsibilities of the military commanders in its statutory. Such anticipated legal frameworks would set out, and clarify the terms of cooperation and collaboration between the Election Management Body and the armed forces and set out the limits of the latter.

It is necessary that political stakeholders have a positive change of attitudes towards elections, such that the military would have no business in the conduct of the country's elections but discharge their constitutional duties. Nigeria's government should strengthen its police formations in the country. To use the above

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effectively, it is important to provide the police with more funds, better equipped and its capacity enlarged, by recruiting more personnel across its ranks and file. It should not business as usual for the nation's security task with lackadaisical attitude by some men of the force.

For the police to be capable of handling elections without the military, it needs to professional training and skillful creation of quiet and safe environments capable of allowing citizens to exercise their franchise without fear or intimidation before, during and after elections. By ensuring safe electoral process, police would also be working to guarantee a quiet and peaceful environment to ensure power transfer.

The legal framework that sets out the duties of the armed forces in the electoral process needs to be in line with international best practices. The legal framework should be in line with professional trend across the globe. Nigerian state needs to be assertive in this regard. There must be adequate and timely remuneration of armed forces to ensure they discharge their duties with human face and professionalism. It is important the state is able to guarantee the trust of the citizens, voters, candidates and political parties beyond political lineage through the conducts of the country's security apparatus. In addition, as a conventional rule, the military should only be engaged in counting and collation of results only as ordinary administrative officers of the electoral commission. The military and other security agencies should only act as back up whenever the country is conducting general elections. There is urgent need to investigate the alleged malpractice and partisan role played by some soldiers during the 2019 and 2023 elections. The essence is to prevent future unprofessional conducts by officers and men of the force in the performance of their roles, to strengthen Nigerian Army's support to democratic values in Nigeria.

The military must accept democracy as the best option of governance in Nigeria. This will help soldiers to deepen their loyalty to the constitution of the country. The military as an institution needs to train its officers on civil conducts, human rights and safety of the electorate during elections. It is necessary for the army to cultivate attitude of respect for the democratic process and its sustainability. For no reason should the military be political. Its neutrality must be evident and open to all political stakeholders. Politicians must resist the temptation of luring the military into partisan politics.

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Citation:

Aliyu, M. Kolawole (2024). The Military, Conduct of Elections and Matters Arising in Nigeria. *FUOYE Journal of Public Administration and Management* Vol. 2 (1), pg. 256-263. WWW.FJPAM.COM