



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT POLITICAL PARTIES' PRIMARY ELECTIONS

Background

- The National Assembly passed the Electoral Bill 2021 and transmitted it to President Muhammadu Buhari on 19 November 2021.
- Section 87 of the Bill stipulates that political parties seeking to nominate candidates for elections must hold direct primaries, which shall be monitored by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).
- This is a change from the current law which give parties the discretion to choose whether to conduct direct or indirect primaries.
- On 20 December 2021, President Buhari declined assent to the Electoral Bill 2021, citing the mandatory requirement for direct primaries as the reason for withholding assent to the Bill.

What are Primary Elections?

- Primary elections (also known as primaries) refer to the process through which political parties nominate candidates to contest upcoming general, state, local, by-, or other elections on their platform.
- Some countries adopt open primaries, where all registered voters are eligible to vote during primary elections.
- In Nigeria, we practise closed primaries, where only party members are eligible to vote during primary elections. These closed primaries may be either direct or indirect. The various political parties in Nigeria have constitutions that stipulate the mode of primaries they adopt.

What are Direct Primaries?

- Direct primaries involve all registered party members voting for their preferred candidate.
- Direct primaries involve a lot of costs and logistics, which can put smaller parties at a disadvantage.

- Nevertheless, they give all party members a voice in the party. In the Nigerian context, it suggested that direct primaries could help to reduce godfatherism where a few influential persons singlehandedly decide who the party's candidate should be.

What are Indirect Primaries?

- Indirect primaries involve a certain number of representatives, known as party delegates, voting for their preferred candidate.
- These party delegates may be elected by party members, appointed by party leaders, or automatically selected by virtue of the office they hold (e.g. a party member who is in the Senate may automatically be a party delegate). The mode in which party delegates are chosen is stipulated in the constitutions of the various parties.
- Indirect primaries are more cost-effective, as only a few delegates vote on behalf of the party members.
- Nevertheless, it breeds godfatherism as it makes it easier for a few influential persons to influence the choice of the party's candidate.
- Another issue with indirect primaries is the lack of inclusion among party delegates. In Nigeria, there are hardly any women, youth, or persons with disabilities among delegates, which makes them fail to be fully representative of the party members.

Consensus Option

- In certain situations, a consensus candidate emerges which eliminates the need for a primary election.
- This could occur when only one person purchases the candidate nomination form or when all major stakeholders in the party agree on a particular candidate. The specific form in which a consensus candidate could emerge depends on the party's constitution.
- The consensus option is seen as unfair to other potential aspirants, as it does not give them a chance to contest the primaries.
- It also breeds godfatherism as it allows influential persons to impose their preferred candidate on the party.
- Nevertheless, it could save time and money where it is clear that only one person seeks to contest the election.

Which Option is Better for Nigeria?

- There are sound arguments that in the Nigerian context where godfatherism is rife, direct primaries are better than indirect primaries. This is because it will take away the decision-making power from the godfathers and put it in the hands of party members.
- Nevertheless, it has been noted that even direct primaries, like indirect primaries, can be skewed to subvert the will of the people.¹
- What is required therefore is for the parties to provide INEC with the required tools to monitor elections. In the case of direct primaries, this would be the certified register of party members. In the case of indirect primaries, this would be the certified list of party delegates.
- If these tools are provided, then primary elections, whether direct or indirect, can be monitored effectively by INEC to ensure that they meet a high standard of integrity and credibility.

About The Electoral Hub

The Electoral Hub is a multidisciplinary strategic think tank committed to strengthening electoral governance, and accountability in Nigeria. The Electoral Hub works to enhance electoral integrity and credibility through research, documentation, electoral education, policy and legal influencing, and impact advocacy.

The main focus of The Electoral Hub's intervention in the electoral governance process is on complementing the roles and activities of the different institutions, stakeholders and drivers of the electoral process by providing back-end support services to them. Since its establishment, The Electoral Hub has grown into a leading research, knowledge and advocacy hub with the capacity to conduct ground-breaking research and analysis of electoral issues.



¹ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/10/politics-of-direct-and-indirect-primaries/>