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Internal party democracy and democratic norm-setting in West Africa: A comparative analysis of Nigeria's PDP and Ghana's NDC, 2011 –2025

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This study examines the internal operations of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in Ghana from 2011 to 2025, assessing their impact on democratic norms in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Grounded in democratic consolidation theory, the research explores how party structures shape political culture and institutional legitimacy. Using a qualitative research approach, data were drawn from semi-structured interviews and electoral commission reports, and analyzed thematically. Findings show that internal party governance significantly affects national democratic health and regional influence. The PDP demonstrates persistent centralization, elite dominance in candidate selection, over 600 pre-election litigations in 2023, low female representation (below 10%), and declining voter turnout (69% in 1999 to 27% in 2023). In contrast, the NDC has institutionalized participatory mechanisms, codified dispute resolution processes, and increased female candidacy (above 15% by 2020). These differences shape regional standing: Nigeria's internal party instability has weakened its ECOWAS mediation credibility, while Ghana's stable party system has strengthened its diplomatic reputation. The study recommends transparent candidate selection rules, periodic constitutional reforms, and regional guidelines on internal party democracy, peer review mechanisms, and linking party support to measurable democratic reforms.

Key words: Internal party democracy; political parties; electoral participation; democratic norm-setting; democratic consolidation theory.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties are often regarded as fundamental components of democratic governance across the globe. They serve as instruments of political representation,

aggregate diverse societal interests, and connect citizens to governing institutions. Through their programmes and agendas, parties provide policy direction, encourage

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public participation, and act as intermediaries between the state and the electorate (Stavridis, 2018). This critical role persists even as democracy faces increasing challenges. In established democracies, declining party loyalty and growing public distrust have weakened long-standing political traditions, while in other regions, authoritarian tendencies are expanding. In large states such as Russia and China, centralized leadership has constrained pluralistic political systems. Across Latin America, countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua, which once showed signs of fragile democratic progress, have experienced setbacks. In Europe, countries such as Turkey, Hungary, and Poland, although still functioning as electoral democracies, have increasingly concentrated power in the executive, restricted media freedoms, and suppressed dissent. These developments highlight that even in hybrid or fragile systems, well-structured political parties remain essential for sustaining democratic resilience and responsiveness (Stavridis, 2018). In Africa, the importance of political parties is even more pronounced. Institutionalized and functional parties are vital not only for democratic consolidation but also for political stability. Evidence suggests that strong party institutions help prevent democratic backsliding by promoting credible competition, inclusive governance, and orderly transfers of power. However, many African countries continue to face structural and organizational challenges, including elite dominance, limited resources, and weak opposition parties that hinder deeper democratization (Randall and Svåsand, 2002; Stocker et al., 2024).

In West Africa, the democratic landscape remains particularly fragile, characterized by hybrid regimes, recurring electoral irregularities, and weak institutions that often fail to effectively check executive authority (Jaesen, 2025). This fragility renders many states vulnerable to instability and democratic regression. In this context, inclusive and transparent political reforms are essential for building resilient systems. However, recent developments such as political exclusion, manipulation of term limits, and unconstitutional changes of government in countries like Mali and Côte d'Ivoire demonstrate how the erosion of party integrity can trigger political unrest (Accord, 2022; Ishii, 2024). At the national level, Nigeria and Ghana present instructive yet contrasting cases. Since 1999, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (Nigeria) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) have been central to democratic transitions in Nigeria, shaping electoral competition and governance outcomes. Similarly, in Ghana, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) (Ghana) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) dominate the political landscape and have facilitated relatively stable alternations of power, contributing to democratic continuity. Within this context, this study examines the internal party practices of the PDP and the NDC from 1999 to 2025. It aims to evaluate their impact

on democratic consolidation and regional political stability within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The study provides a comparative analysis of how party organization and internal governance can either strengthen democratic resilience or contribute to institutional fragility in the sub-region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Democracy is commonly defined as a form of government in which supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or through freely elected representatives. It embodies principles of political equality, popular sovereignty, majority rule with respect for minority rights, and the protection of fundamental freedoms (Beetham, 1999).” As both an aspirational principle and a system of governance, democracy is often regarded as the most legitimate political structure, even by regimes that do not follow its foundational tenets (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Key issues such as justice, human rights, the rule of law, good governance, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development are routinely analyzed through the lens of democratic principles (Diamond, 1999; Sen, 1999), but its actual implementation differs significantly across various political systems, reflecting historical developments, institutional frameworks, and socio-economic contexts (Zakaria, 1997). Political parties are essential entities in democratic governance, acting as conduits for political representation, aggregation of interests, and participation in politics. In the ancient Greek city-states, citizens acknowledged that while democracy ideally meant government by the people, direct involvement by all was unrealistic for managing governmental affairs (Aldrich, 1995). This led to the emergence of representative governance, where citizens elected individuals to represent them. Gradually, groups formed around common political ideals, setting the stage for contemporary political parties. In Africa, the roots of political parties can be traced back to nationalist movements aimed at achieving independence. In Nigeria, for example, political party dynamics began with the elective principle introduced by the Clifford Constitution in 1922, which provided limited political representation (Coleman, 1958).

Concept of internal party democracy

The term Internal Party Democracy (IPD) denotes the structures, processes, and practices within political parties that enhance democratic decision-making, inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability. It influences how parties select leaders, determine candidates, develop policies, and involve members in

decision-making processes. A robust culture of IPD guarantees that party leaders are answerable to their members, that candidate selection is conducted through competitive and impartial procedures, and that members' contributions shape significant policy and strategic choices (Scarrow, 2005). Effective IPD is crucial for political stability, sound governance, and the consolidation of democracy. Its vital components include open and competitive procedures for candidate selection and nomination, established rules and democratic frameworks for electing and managing party leadership, alongside transparency and accountability in decision-making, financial practices, and internal operations. It also involves inclusivity and participation, ensuring that all members, including marginalized groups, have equal opportunities to engage actively in party activities, as well as efficient internal dispute resolution mechanisms for handling conflicts justly and constructively (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2013). The shift to civilian governance in 1999 under President Olusegun Obasanjo, following years of military rule, represented a significant milestone, with the PDP and Alliance for Democracy (AD) being the dominant forces in the early Fourth Republic (Hoffman, 2005). During the period from 2006 to 2007, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua emerged as the PDP's presidential candidate (Omotola, 2009). After Yar'Adua passed away, Goodluck Jonathan took over until 2015.

The 2015 victory of Muhammadu Buhari's APC concluded 16 years of PDP hegemony. Buhari notably differed from Obasanjo in his anti-corruption approach and national appeal, yet the centralization of power within the party continued (Diamond, 2020). Empirical research, such as Okeke (2023) has consistently connected weak internal democracy to reduced electoral integrity, public disenchantment, and conflicts within parties. These internal deficiencies have also been associated with negative governance results, as candidates frequently emerge through patronage instead of merit (Ibrahim, 2022). Furthermore, flawed internal mechanisms lead to instability in Nigeria and undermine its democratic impact in West Africa (Okoro, 2023).

In Ghana, the political landscape is dominated by two main parties, the NPP and the NDC, both of which have put in place formal structures for leadership selection, candidate nominations, and the resolution of intra-party disputes. Over various electoral cycles, these mechanisms have developed to solidify democratic norms within political parties (Ayee, 2019). Each party has a constitution that requires regular congresses to elect officials and flagbearers, frequently preceded by open primaries in which delegates or members cast votes for their preferred candidates. Empirical research emphasizes the relative advantage of Ghana's political parties in promoting inclusion and transparency. Gyampo et al. (2017) and Ayee (2019) spotlight the systematic mechanisms that enhance participation, while Gyampo

and CODEO (2020) characterizes the NDC's 2019 reforms as a significant milestone in the democratization of the party. Whitfield (2009) observes the NPP's gradual shift towards competitive primaries that reduce the imposition by elites. This research addresses this gap in the literature by methodically comparing internal party democracy in the PDP and NDC from 1999 to 2025, connecting party practices to democratic governance and regional stability in West Africa, and providing evidence-based recommendations for political reform, party enhancement, and democratic consolidation.

Theoretical framework

This research is grounded in Democratic Consolidation Theory. The theory posits that democracy becomes consolidated when no major political actors seek to subvert democratic rules and when democratic norms are internalized by both elites and citizens as "the only game in town." It examines how democratic norms, institutions, and practices become deeply ingrained in political culture and are widely recognized as the legitimate basis for governance (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

Proponents of the theory

Democratic Consolidation Theory proponents are Linz and Stepan (1996). Beyond Linz and Stepan (1996), several scholars have contributed to the development and refinement of Democratic Consolidation Theory. For instance, Guillermo O'Donnell (1996) emphasized the importance of horizontal accountability and institutional checks in sustaining democracy, while Schmitter (1986; 1996) highlighted the role of elite consensus and political pacts in democratic stability. These contributions collectively reinforce the argument that democratic consolidation is not a single event but a continuous and multidimensional process involving behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutional dimensions.

Scholarly application

In terms of scholarly application, Democratic Consolidation Theory has been extensively applied in the study of post-authoritarian and transitional societies across Latin America, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. The theory has been used to analyse issues such as electoral integrity, party institutionalization, rule of law, civil-military relations, and governance accountability. In the African context, it has been particularly useful in examining the durability of democratic institutions in countries like Ghana and Nigeria, where democratic transitions have been relatively recent and sometimes fragile.

Distinction between democratic consolidation theory and generic democratic theory

This study distinguishes Democratic Consolidation Theory from generic Democratic Theory in both scope and analytical focus. While Democratic Theory broadly addresses the philosophical foundations, normative principles, and ideal characteristics of democracy, such as popular sovereignty, representation, participation, and accountability, Democratic Consolidation Theory is more empirically grounded and process-oriented. It is concerned with how democratic systems endure over time, the conditions necessary for their stability, and the mechanisms through which democratic practices become institutionalized. In essence, whereas Democratic Theory explains what democracy ought to be, Democratic Consolidation Theory explains how democracy survives, deepens, and becomes resilient in practice. Furthermore, the theory underscores the centrality of political parties as key agents of democratic consolidation. It argues that the internal functioning of parties, particularly in areas such as leadership selection, candidate nomination processes, conflict resolution mechanisms, and adherence to party rules, plays a decisive role in shaping the broader democratic culture. Weak internal party democracy can undermine democratic consolidation by fostering elite dominance, factionalism, and electoral malpractice, while strong internal practices enhance legitimacy, accountability, and institutional trust. On the basis of this, the theory serves as a framework for evaluating the internal democratic practices of Nigeria's PDP and Ghana's NDC from 1999 to 2025. Both parties have alternated positions of governance and opposition, yet their paths of internal governance have diverged significantly. Thus, Democratic Consolidation Theory provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how the quality of internal party practices, including leadership turnover, candidate selection, and dispute resolution in NDC Ghana and PDP Nigeria, affects democratic resilience, public trust, and regional political stability.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative correlational research design with a comparative orientation to examine the relationship between internal party democracy and democratic consolidation/political stability in Nigeria and Ghana, focusing on the PDP and the NDC from 2011 to 2025. Unlike a purely descriptive qualitative design, the correlational approach enables the study to systematically explore how variations in internal party practices such as leadership selection, candidate nomination, and conflict resolution are associated with broader outcomes of democratic consolidation and political stability in the sub region. The comparative dimension of the design allows for cross-national analysis, facilitating the identification of similarities, differences, and context-specific dynamics in how internal party governance influences democratic

outcomes across Nigeria and Ghana. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of both relational patterns and contextual variations across multiple electoral cycles.

Sources of data

The study utilized purposive sampling to select key informants and employed semi-structured stakeholder interviews with political figures, including national and state-level party leaders, former electoral officials, political aides, civil society advocates, political scientists, and representatives from the ECOWAS democracy unit. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, indicating that no new significant information was forthcoming. A total of 18 interviews were conducted, with 9 participants from Nigeria and 9 from Ghana, ensuring a balanced comparative view. Ghanaian respondents were interviewed virtually, while Nigerian participants were engaged using a mix of in-person and virtual approaches. Additionally, documentary sources were systematically analyzed to complement and triangulate interview data, including party constitutions and manifestos, electoral laws, judicial decisions on intra-party disputes, ECOWAS protocols, peer-reviewed articles, policy briefs, and investigative media reports. This triangulation strengthens the validity of the findings and supports the examination of relationships between internal party practices and democratic outcomes.

Table 1 details the sampling framework, including the number of participants per category, country, and selection criteria. This stratified purposive sample guaranteed that the data represented a variety of institutional roles, gender viewpoints, and political environments within the two primary parties, PDP and NDC, from 2011 to 2025, encompassing both governance and opposition periods. This method bolstered the validity, relevance, and comparative usefulness of the qualitative results.

RESULTS

For data analysis, the study employed the thematic analysis method as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) to recognize, categorize, and interpret recurring patterns within the qualitative data. A cross-national comparative analysis was conducted to systematically evaluate the PDP and NDC concerning different variables, including institutional frameworks, leadership structures, candidate nomination processes, party reforms, internal dispute resolution mechanisms, and citizen engagement. The comparison covered both governing and opposition periods (2011–2025), allowing for the identification of similarities and differences in internal democratic practices, the evaluation of institutional strengths and weaknesses, and the assessment of how internal processes contributed to political stability or crises in each nation. This approach also enabled the extraction of lessons across borders that are pertinent to party development and regional democratic resilience. Table 2 outlines developments from 1999 to 2025 and provides a deeper understanding of how party-level practices have evolved and their impact on national democratic performance and regional stability.

Table 1. Composition of interview respondents by category, country, and selection criteria (PDP–Nigeria and NDC–Ghana, 2011–2025).

Category of respondents	Country	Number interviewed	Selection criteria
National Executive Members (PDP/NDC)	Nigeria/Ghana	4 (2 each)	Senior officials involved in party leadership, conventions, and internal reforms
Former Legislators and Presidential Advisers	Nigeria/Ghana	4 (2 each)	Served during PDP/NDC administrations or opposition phases; experience with governance
Electoral Commission Officials (INEC/ECG)	Nigeria/Ghana	2 (1 each)	Direct experience managing party primaries and elections
Political Scientists and Governance Scholars	Nigeria/Ghana	2 (1 each)	Academics with research focus on party politics and democratization
ECOWAS and Regional Civil Society Representatives	Regional	2	Experts in regional peace building, election monitoring, or policy engagement
Youth and Women Wing Leaders (PDP/NDC)	Nigeria/Ghana	4 (2 each)	Involved in grassroots mobilization and internal party representation efforts
Total	-	18	-

Field survey (2025).

Based on the information provided in Table 2, the development of internal party democracy in Nigeria between 1999 and 2025 has been characterized by centralization, elite capture of power, and frequent litigation, resulting in widespread voter disillusionment, low trust in institutions, and persistent defections from parties. These characteristics were particularly pronounced during competitive election periods, including 2007, 2015, and 2023. The consistent inability to hold transparent primaries or effectively address internal disagreements through party structures has contributed to a fragmented political landscape and weakened democratic legitimacy. Ghana's NDC, by contrast, has demonstrated significant progress in institutionalizing internal democratic practices, particularly following its loss of power in 2001.

Organized nomination processes, established appeals procedures, and increased delegate participation have contributed to greater internal stability and member engagement. These advancements have supported improved perceptions of electoral credibility, reduced intra-party legal disputes, and enhanced public trust in party governance. Instances of electoral violence have remained low, and internal conflicts have largely been managed through established party procedures. The metrics for female and youth representation highlight that while both nations face challenges in achieving full gender equity, Ghana has made more systematic

progress through quotas and leadership training initiatives, particularly from 2012 onward. Conversely, Nigeria's PDP continues to treat youth and women largely as symbolic actors rather than decision-makers. This situation is further supported by Figure 1. This line graph illustrates a steady decline in Nigeria's voter turnout, dropping from 69.1% in 2003 to 27% in 2023. In contrast, Ghana's voter turnout remains relatively high, fluctuating but consistently staying above 60%, peaking at 85% in 2003 and standing at 76% in 2023. This trend is corroborated by Figure 2, which presents data on party defections and pre-election court cases from 1999 to 2023. This bar chart shows surging litigation and defections in Nigeria over the years, with over 600 pre-election court cases and 130 notable defections by 2023. Ghana, in contrast, maintains lower and more stable levels, with defections and court cases remaining below 30 per election cycle.

Internal party democracy in People's Democratic Party (PDP), Nigeria

Between 1999 and 2025, the PDP's internal party democracy exhibited persistent deficiencies across the Obasanjo (1999–2007), Yar'Adua–Jonathan (2007–2015), and post-2015 opposition periods. Interviews (Interviewees A–F, 2025) revealed recurring candidate

Table 2. Comparative trends in IPD indicators in Nigeria (PDP) and Ghana (NDC), 1999–2025.

Indicator	Nigeria (PDP)	Ghana (NDC)
Electoral participation (contextual indicator – not direct measure of IPD)	69% (1999), 57% (2003), 54% (2007), 53% (2011), 43.7% (2015), 34.7% (2019), 27% (2023) – INEC Data	61% (2000), 85% (2004), 72% (2008), 79% (2012), 68.6% (2016), 79% (2020) – Electoral Commission of Ghana (ECG)
Pre-election court cases	Increasing trend: ~150 (2003), ~300 (2011), ~450 (2015), ~600 (2023) – NBA; CDD Reports	Consistently low: ~10 (2004), ~20 (2012), ~35 (2016), <50 (2020–2024) – Ghana Judicial Service
Party defections	Persistent: Notable waves in 2006 (Atiku), 2014–2015 (5 governors), 2022–2023 (Peter Obi, Kwankwaso) – Vanguard, Premium Times	Minimal: 2001–2008 internal rifts managed internally; 2016–2024 factional tensions resolved through party channels – Gyampo et al. (2020)
Electoral violence	High: 2007 (notorious for violence), 2011 (post-election riots), 2015–2023 (violent primaries and localized clashes) – INEC, Situation Room Reports	Low and isolated: Some tension in 2008 and 2020, but largely peaceful elections; parties used mediation mechanisms – CODEO, CDD-Ghana
Public trust in parties	Declining: 52% (2003), 41% (2011), 32% (2022) – Afrobarometer Nigeria	Relatively high: 62% (2004), 66% (2012), 59% (2021) – Afrobarometer Ghana
Female candidate inclusion	<5% (1999–2011), increased slightly to ~9.5% (2019), ~10% (2023) – INEC Gender Report, CDD	7% (1996), increased to 13% (2012), 15%+ by 2020 – Electoral Commission of Ghana, NDC/NPP Party Reports
Youth inclusion	Tokenistic: Youth wings exist, but have low actual representation in decision-making – Interviews, CDD (2023)	Increasing youth delegate base; strong youth mobilization in 2012–2020 – Gyampo et al. (2020)
Conflict resolution	Weak: Reliance on courts only in procedural matters; party structures often bypassed – NBA, Interviews (2025)	Strong: Active disciplinary committees, appeals systems, internal mediation used before legal action – Ayee (2019), Party Officials (2025)

imposition by incumbent governors during the 2011 and 2015 elections, coupled with the monetization of primaries (gubernatorial nomination forms costing up to ₦40 million in 2019 and 2023) and ongoing factionalism evidenced by parallel congresses and legal disputes. Participants described the party as "a business cartel where merit or popularity among members doesn't count" (Interviewee F, 2025). Such practices undermined legitimacy, diminished grassroots engagement, and contributed to a decline in public trust, recorded at 26% in 2022 (Afrobarometer, 2022). The 2023 elections further highlighted institutional shortcomings. Voter apathy, reflected in a turnout of 27% (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2023), was linked to problematic primaries, manipulated delegate lists, and unclear zoning practices that marginalized grassroots voices. In Rivers,

Zamfara, and Cross River States, primaries were marred by factional disputes, parallel congresses, and last-minute judicial interventions. It should be noted that Nigerian courts generally refrained from imposing candidates, maintaining that candidate selection is an internal party matter, intervening only where party rules or statutory requirements were violated. This judicial approach is consistent with Nigerian electoral jurisprudence emphasizing procedural compliance over substantive substitution of party decisions. These internal disputes also prompted defections, including those of Peter Obi and Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso, who cited exclusionary practices and elite dominance as motivating factors. Overall, elite control, litigation, and exclusionary politics have generated a legitimacy crisis within the PDP, weakening Nigeria's democratic framework.

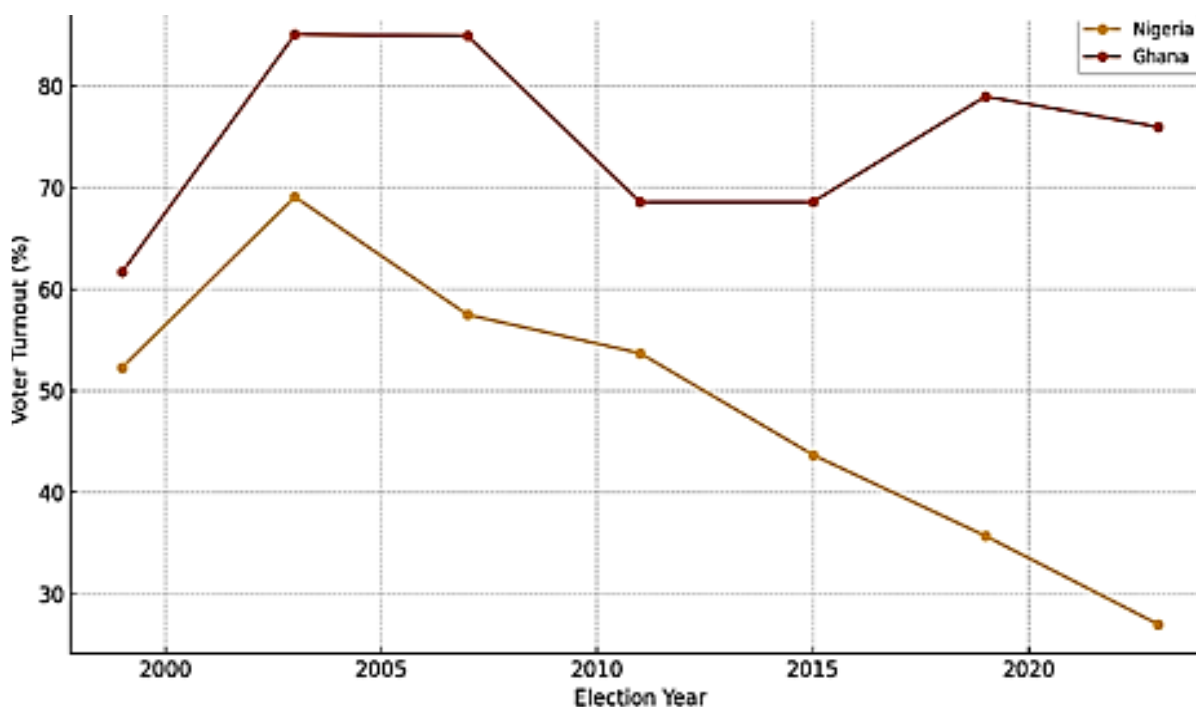


Figure 1. Trends in voter turnout (Presidential Elections, 1999-2023). Source: Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) official election reports (1999–2023); Electoral Commission of Ghana official election results (1992–2020/2024).

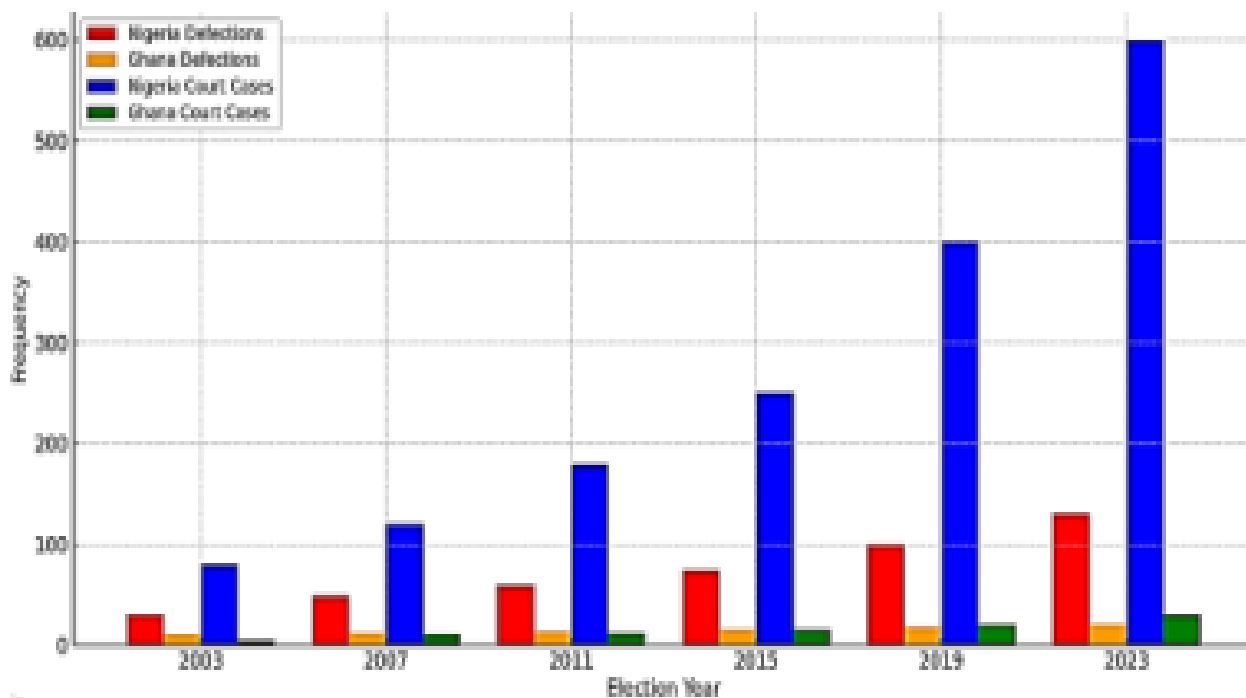


Figure 2. Party Defections and Pre-election Court Cases (1999-2023). Source: Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) official election reports (1999-2023); NBA, Interviews (2025); Electoral Commission of Ghana official election results (1992-2020/2024).

Table 3. Summary of regional impacts: PDP vs. NDC (1999–2025).

Indicator	PDP (Nigeria)	NDC (Ghana)
Internal party structure	Centralized; elite-dominated	Institutionalized; rules-based
Candidate selection	Frequently imposed by party elites	Broad-based delegate primaries
Intra-party conflict	High; often escalates to courts	Moderate; managed through internal appeals
Electoral violence	Frequent during primaries and general elections	Isolated incidents, largely contained
Regional diplomatic credibility	Eroded by internal instability	Strengthened by democratic consistency
Contribution to ECOWAS stability	Inconsistent; reactive	Proactive; trusted mediator

Source: Compiled by the researcher from interview data (2024), INEC reports (1999–2023), Electoral Commission of Ghana (2000–2024), CDD-West Africa (2023), CODEO (2020), International IDEA (2020), Omotola (2021), Gyampo et al. (2020).

Afrobarometer (2022) found that only 32% of Nigerians believed their vote was meaningful, citing corruption, lack of internal democracy, and electoral disillusionment.

Internal party democracy in the National Democratic Congress (NDC), Ghana

In contrast, Ghana's NDC exhibits a more organized and participatory model of internal party democracy (Interviewees I–Q, 2025). Following its 2001 electoral loss, the NDC implemented reforms to address centralized decision-making and inadequate grassroots engagement. These reforms included open nomination practices, a defined appeals process, and regular constitutional updates. Between 2009 and 2017, the party institutionalized rotational leadership, mandatory primary elections, and increased delegate engagement. Party congresses were held systematically, internal timelines were adhered to, and candidate vetting followed constitutional standards. A participant noted, "The NDC's strength lies in its lessons from the past. Now, party decisions engage a broader audience, and there are structured avenues for addressing disputes" (Interviewee P, 2025). The 2019 presidential primaries marked a milestone as the NDC expanded its delegate pool to over 300,000, reducing elite influence and promoting broader representation (Gyampo et al., 2020; Whitfield, 2009). Internal disputes during the 2020 and 2024 elections were largely resolved through appeals committees and disciplinary boards, with minimal court involvement. Strong internal institutions, including the National Executive Committee (NEC), Council of Elders, and Legal and Disciplinary Units, operate with autonomy and legitimacy, upholding procedural standards and

accountability (Interviewee Q, 2025). These internal democratic practices have contributed to high voter turnout, with 79% participation in the 2020 general elections (Afrobarometer, 2022 and ECOWAS (2023). Electoral Commission of Ghana, 2020), reflecting public confidence in party processes. Ghana's stable party structures have also enhanced the NDC's capacity to serve as a credible mediator in ECOWAS missions, including in The Gambia (2016–2017) and Mali (2020) (ECOWAS, 2023). Challenges such as elite negotiations, factional divides, and monetization of politics persist but are moderated by internal checks, civil society oversight, and media scrutiny (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). Table 3 shows the summary of regional impacts: PDP vs. NDC (1999–2025). The comparison demonstrates that robust internal party institutions correlate closely with democratic stability and regional harmony. Weak internal dynamics, as in the PDP, exacerbate electoral conflict, authoritarian tendencies, and reduced diplomatic credibility. Conversely, the NDC's participatory and accountable structures have bolstered public trust, enabled peaceful transitions, and reinforced Ghana's role as a credible regional mediator.

DISCUSSION

From 1999 to 2025, the PDP in Nigeria and the NDC in Ghana displayed markedly divergent trajectories in IPD. The present findings reveal that these differences are evident across multiple dimensions, including participation in elective primaries, the mode of primaries (direct versus indirect), transparency in candidate selection, intra-party conflicts (IPC), voter turnout, litigation rates, and public trust. In Nigeria, the PDP's IPD

has been consistently constrained by centralized control, elite dominance, and opaque internal processes. Candidate selection was frequently indirect and manipulated by party elites, while the monetization of primaries limited meaningful participation, especially for marginalized groups.

These practices generated recurrent intra-party conflicts, widespread litigation, and high-profile defections. The findings indicate that these dynamics intensified during periods of competitive elections, particularly in 2007, 2015, and 2023. Moreover, as the PDP transitioned to the leading opposition party after 2015, internal factionalism and elite capture undermined its ability to consolidate authority, present a unified platform, and maintain electoral competitiveness. Defections of prominent figures such as Atiku Abubakar, Peter Obi, and Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso illustrate how exclusionary internal practices eroded party cohesion and weakened opposition capacity. By contrast, the NDC's IPD reflects a gradual but sustained institutionalization of inclusive, transparent, and rules-based processes. The party adopted broad-based direct primaries, established formal appeals and disciplinary mechanisms, and implemented constitutional reforms that enhanced participation and minimized elite capture. This resulted in lower litigation rates, minimal defections, and higher cohesion, even during periods of electoral loss. Notably, these reforms strengthened public trust and voter engagement, as demonstrated by consistent voter turnout levels above 60%, peaking at 85% in 2004 and remaining at 76% in 2023. The findings suggest that the NDC's emphasis on procedural transparency and internal dispute resolution created resilience against intra-party conflict and reinforced its credibility as both a governing party and a competitive opposition.

The comparative evaluation underscores that the mode and transparency of primaries directly shape intra-party conflict and overall party legitimacy. In the PDP, indirect and monetized primaries exacerbated conflicts, necessitating judicial interventions in over 600 pre-election cases in 2023 alone. In contrast, the NDC's structured and participatory processes enabled most disputes to be resolved internally, with fewer than 50 court cases between 2019 and 2024, reflecting the effectiveness of institutionalized conflict resolution mechanisms. These differences highlight the critical role of IPD in managing internal disputes and fostering cohesive party structures that can sustain political engagement and legitimacy. The implications of these trajectories extend beyond national politics to regional democratic and diplomatic influence. The PDP's internal instability and fragmentation weakened Nigeria's credibility in ECOWAS-led mediation efforts, particularly during contested elections, signaling democratic fragility to the region. Conversely, the NDC's stable internal governance enhanced Ghana's capacity to mediate

regional conflicts, as evidenced in The Gambia (2017) and Mali (2020), thereby reinforcing Ghana's reputation as a democratic anchor in West Africa.

Conclusion

This comparative study of the PDP (Nigeria) and NDC (Ghana) from 1999 to 2025 demonstrates that internal party practices are critical determinants of both national democratic health and regional political stability in West Africa. While the PDP's persistent elite dominance, monetization of primaries, and litigation-heavy dispute resolution mechanisms have eroded voter trust, weakened cohesion, and diminished Nigeria's regional democratic influence, the NDC's gradual institutional reforms, participatory processes, and effective conflict management have sustained public confidence and enhanced Ghana's diplomatic credibility. The findings confirm that IPD is not merely an intra-organizational concern; it shapes the legitimacy of electoral competition, influences citizen engagement, and sets precedents for democratic norm-setting across the ECOWAS region. Political parties, therefore, are both the foundation and the frontline of democratic governance, and their internal weaknesses or strengths resonate far beyond national borders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) Political parties at the domestic level should institutionalize internal democracy by adopting transparent, codified candidate selection rules that limit elite capture and reduce monetization of primaries;
- ii) Political parties at the domestic level should regularly update party constitutions to reflect evolving democratic best practices and implement enforceable quotas for women and youth in candidate lists and party leadership structures.
- iii) ECOWAS should establish regional guidelines for internal party democracy, with periodic assessments and peer reviews among member states;
- iv) ECOWAS should link certain forms of political party funding or technical assistance to measurable improvements in IPD and facilitate knowledge exchanges between parties in the region, enabling struggling parties to learn from stable, institutionalized counterparts.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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