

POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

Since the return of democracy in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed increasing wave of political violence. The last two general elections in 2011 and 2015 have witnessed an unprecedented orgy of violence perpetrated by the members of the various political parties. The 2019 general elections are around the corner and serious concerns have been expressed by well-meaning Nigerians on the level of political violence across the country. This paper therefore, recognizes political violence as a threat to national security. The paper has examined the effects of political violence to national security and peaceful coexistence among the various socio-cultural groups in Nigeria. The paper employs the content analysis as its main methodology; the paper observes that political violence violates fundamental bases of democratic rule and weakens both internal and external sovereignty of a nation state. The paper concludes by recommending among other things effective policing and the entrenchment of true democratic ideals as some of the feasible measures to curtail the increasing wave of political violence across the country.

Introduction:

Elections remain a stabilization factor in any democratic society. It is an important component of any transition process, especially from one civilian administration to the other. According to Adesote and Abimbola describes election as follows: "elections have become an integral part of representative democracy that by and large prevail across the world over" (140). For Lindberg (Cited in Adesote and Abimbola) asserts that "every modern vision of representative democracy entails the notion of elections as the primary means of selection of political decision makers" (140). Therefore, it is almost impossible to talk about democracy without making implicit reference to elections. However, election is the center of any democratic order. At the same time,

Keywords: Violence, youth, politics, political violence and national security.

election is the hallmark of any democratic process. Summarily, elections constitute the body, soul and spirit of democracy. But how credible and peaceful an election is; determines its democratic measurement.

Historically, violence has always featured prominently in all electoral processes in the post-colonial Nigeria but its frequency and magnitude of occurrence in the country since the return of the country to democratic rule in 1999 have assumed a catastrophic dimension, particularly, in 2011, thus: threatening the democratization process in the country. In his book *The African States*, Martin Meredith further elaborates on the nature of politics in Nigeria thus:

By nature, the Nigerian politics tended to be mercenary and violent. Political debate was routinely in acrimonious and abusive language; and ethnic loyalties were constantly, exploited. The tactics employed were often those of rough-house variety. But the reckless manner in which the Nigerian politicians fought for control during the six years of civilian rule was to lead ultimately to a tragedy of monumental proportions (192).

Electoral violence is not a modern day phenomenon in Nigeria. The first republic (1960-1966) collapsed due to widespread violence unleashed by politicians in the disputed 1964/65 general election. Historians and political scientists recall the ugly incident tagged "Operation We-ti-e, literally meaning, Operation spray it!" in the Western Region in which many notable politicians and their supporters were murdered in broad daylight. This largely warranted the first military coup of January 15, 1966. At the return of civil rule in 1979, politicians displayed their incorrigibility as they, again resorted to electoral violence and fraud, especially during the August 1983 general election. Political observers recall the Akin Omoboriowo versus Governor Adekunle Ajasin saga in the old Ondo State where the electoral fraud allegedly perpetrated by the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) stalwarts in the state led to three days of mindless killings and arson. That again was part of the reasons the military struck on December 31, 1983.

The Fourth Republic: Nigeria has had five successive general elections (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015) with each of them recording high electoral violence. Indeed over 800 lives were reportedly lost due to pre and post- election violence in 2011 particularly in about 12 Northern states. Ten youth corps members serving in Bauchi State were among the casualties. The high number of deaths and destructions necessitated the setting up of the Sheikh Ahmed Lemu

presidential committee which looked into the immediate and remote causes of the crisis and came up with far reaching recommendations which former President Goodluck Jonathan largely ignored. The only major thing done was to pay some modest compensation to some of the victims of the violence. However, nothing much was done in terms of bringing the alleged masterminds and arrowheads to justice, till date. In his book, *On a Platter of Gold: How Jonathan Won and Losi Nigeria*, Bolaji Abdullahi gives some insights on the violence thus: What no one could deny was that over three terrible days, hundreds of people were killed, thousands displaced, houses burnt, churches and mosques razed and properties destroyed. Among the casualties were serving corps members on election duties in those areas (96-7).

According to the reports presented by the human Rights Watch, about 800 people were reported killed and 65,000 displaced during the election crisis.

Seven years after, impunity still reigns. Rivers State recorded the highest number of cases of election- related violence in the run- up to 2015 general election and afterwards. Attempts by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to hold re-run and bye elections in the state had been largely thwarted by political gladiators who obviously are above the law. In fact the state became the political Golgotha of Nigeria so much so that it was renamed “Rivers of Blood”.

Concept of Political Violence

Political violence is a term commonly associated with the use of actual physical violence or very serious threats of such violence to achieve political goals. The Wikipedia views political violence as a common means use by people and governments around the world to achieve political goals. This view holds that because many groups and individuals believe that their political systems will never respond to their political demands, such groups and individuals believe that violence is not only justified but also necessary in order to achieve their political objectives. By the same token, many governments around the world believe they need to use violence in order to intimidate their populace into acquiescence. At other times, governments use force in order to defend their country from outside invasion or other threats of force.

National Security

National security is a concept that has attracted many definitions or explanations from multitude of scholars and national leaders. It is important that nation states have deployed human and material resources towards national policies

formulation. How the nature, degree, level and direction given to the concept will depend on the perspective from which a nation state conceptualizes national security. Some definitions national security will be provided. Major General Lawrence Onoja in his book, *Peace Keeping and International Security*, defines national security “as the ability of a nation to protect its internal values from perceived threats” (Cited in *Role of the Media*, 100). While former President Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, describes national thus: “The concept of national security shall be the aggregation of security interest of the individuals, community, ethnic groups, political entities and institutions that inhabit the territory of our great country” (46). The Federal Governments perspective of the security position of the country is premised on the following. The most essential function of any government is to provide peace and security for its people. There can be no development without peace, meaning that security is also an essential pre-condition for delivering on developmental pledges. Scholars, politicians and social administrators tend to have a common view that:

National security is the podium of democracy and its values for the people. As such there is no factor that provides meaning and legitimacy to democratic rule than security. It is the umbrella of all other sectors of the democratic system. It is also the pillar of political order, stability and development in all segments of societal values and aspirations... the survival of democracy is therefore dependent, among other things on the dynamics of national security (Quoted by Okwilagwe, 18).

Causes of Electoral Violence

Many factors are traced to occurrence of electoral violence in Nigeria. In Nigeria, electoral violence is made possible because the political system supported zero-sum politics, as the winning parties considers the losing parties stiff opponent who has nothing to offer to them winning party, which eventually forms government. This however, led Otohile (2009) to conclude that electoral violence is visible as a result of the structural and attitudinal imbalance in the Nigerian society on the part of political leaders. However, the democratization process is threatened as a result of the manipulation and subversion of peoples' will which often leads to violence. Attesting to the above, Duru, (2002 p.47) asserted thus: What happens is those politicians conscious of the values of the spoils of office, adopted various means to ensure they capture power. They buy votes, rig elections and commit other infidelities designed to subvert the people's

will to choose leaders capable of leading the state towards development and enduring democracy.

The country's electoral management body is not strong enough to withstand the pressure exerted by the political system and the electoral misconducts that accompany it continue to threaten the deepening democratization process. The negative effects of electoral violence in the country continue to reduce the citizen's confidence in the democratic process as well as heighten the fears of possible democratic collapse I (Duru, 2002; Edet&Asua, 2013). This will be explained later in details.

1. **Inadequate voter education:** The electoral umpire has a major task to carry out educating the voters on the dos and don'ts before, during and after elections. There must be conscious effort to reach the voters physically to demonstrate and educate them on the need to carry out their franchise within the ambit of the law
2. **Failure of the justice system:** A situation where politicians who have been indicted for electoral violence in the past are still working freely till this day tend to promote impunity among the political class, who has developed the mindset that they can get away with violent acts during the electioneering period. There is a need to look into the justice system to fashion out ways to prosecute electoral offenders.
3. **Unemployment:** Majority of the mass number of youths who are unemployed are a readymade army in the hands of unscrupulous politicians. The desperation of the political class to grab or retain power by all means is consistent with the desperation of some of the unemployed youths to survive at all cost.
4. **Corruption:** Corruption is a menace that has eaten deep in virtually all strata of the Nigerian society. Indeed, the electoral system is not free from this menace as monies constantly change hands during electioneering period to induce, silence or influence the process as the case may be.
5. **Lack of internal democracy in political parties:** Nigerian political parties have failed in their primary duty to re-orientate politicians within their fold on the need to play by the rules. Worst still, electoral violence is consciously or unconsciously encouraged at the party level when candidates emerge for the main elections. This is due to the flawed processes instituted internally by the parties.

6. **Inadequate security:** The Nigerian security agencies are most times overwhelmed by the spate of political violence that has been witnessed in the society over time. Several media reports have detailed how security personnel were on ground when these acts were committed, but look the other way because of their limitations in terms of their numbers or tools they need to carry out their duties effectively.
7. **Misinterpretation of politics:** Quite a lot of people in the Nigerian society believe that violence in politics is a norm. And they have unfortunately, gotten accustomed to the violence that spring up during the electioneering period. In-fact, many youths who are recruited into the private armies of politicians, already have the mindset that their duty is to cause mayhem, foment trouble, intimidate voters and engage in a brawl with political opponents. This kind of mindset clearly shows that politics have been greatly misunderstood by the political class, the large section of the public and party followers.
8. **Poverty:** The mass poverty in Nigeria is capable of turning a decent man into a beast within a twinkle of an eye. The political class in the country is aware of this fact, and they use it to their advantage, knowing that getting people on their side is not a big deal; in so far they can easily make cash available at the polling station. It is also the norm to influence voters' decisions with cash and gifts in order to gain their support, a phenomenon known as vote-buying.
9. **Lack of democratic culture:** Decades of military rule has affected the psyche of the average Nigerian and indeed Nigerian politicians, indeed, many are still struggling to come to terms that we are now practicing democracy. Lack of democratic culture is evident in all the stages of the electioneering period from internal party wrangling, to campaign rallies, to political debates and to the interactions between politicians and the public. Efforts need to be made by civil society groups to instill democratic culture in the Nigerian populace.
10. **Lack of integrity from electoral umpires:** A situation where the electoral umpire clearly shows bias for one group over another is a recipe for political violence: Over time, those whose duties are to conduct a free and fair have been at the fore front of electoral malpractices, which in turn results to civil disturbances by political parties that have been cheated. The onus is on electoral umpires to ensure the electoral process is credible in

order to eliminate the constant cases of violence that is now associated with elections.

Methodology

Data for the research were drawn from journals, books, newspapers, workshop papers as well as publications of non-governmental organizations.

Implications of Electoral Violence on the Democratization Process in Nigeria

Nigeria's electoral history has always been marred and characterized by various levels of violence at the pre, during and post election phases, with high consequences including deaths, displacement and destruction of livelihood as was witnessed during general elections in the country. We state below the impacts of electoral violence as it affects different aspects of our social life:

1. Political violence deprives women of the opportunity to participate actively in politics in a climate of thuggery, killing, maiming, because they carry an essence that is not violence compliance; thereby robbing the society of the subtle, tenacious managerial capacity that only women can give.
2. The syndrome of given appointment to unskilled, unqualified thugs, leaving the skill people branded "opposition" has caused unprecedented decay in governance, low productivity in the entire civil service and general apathy in society.
3. Business people suffer serious loses as a result of political violence. Others move theft businesses elsewhere, which are serious blow on the economy of the affected state, city or community.
4. There is politicization of social services amenities, (transformers, roads, farm-inputs) in which those in the opposition do not benefit or enjoy.
5. The massive destruction of lives and property, throwing family members into grief and misery. The erosion of confidence in the law enforcement agents, and general feeling of insecurity.
6. There is general voter apathy due to political violence. Many citizens are afraid to come and exercise their franchise for the fear of the unknown.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has critically examined electoral violence and its implications and democratization process in Nigeria, with focus on previous

general elections that were conducted in the country. Elections Nigeria always create an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension as a result of undemocratic roles played by politicians. Nigeria's most valuable asset remains not its mineral resources but its resourceful and diverse people. Peaceful, credible and transparent elections could be the first step to the responsible and transparent government that Nigerians deserved. The paper therefore contended that the major factor that facilitate electoral violence has to do with zero-sum politics in the Nigerian political system. The discourse posits that the level of electoral violence within the period characterized by pervasive quest for political power has negative consequences on the political system.

Recommendations

To attend appreciable democratic status in the Nigerian political system, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. The political leaders and participants in the political system should not see politics as investment or do or die affair, rather they should see politics as a medium of service to the people.
2. There should be severe sanctions put in place to punish supporters and perpetrators of electoral violence to serve as deterrent to others.
3. Allowances and remuneration of public office holders should be considerably reduced to discourage selfish interest as well as discourage the notion of politics as easiest means of access to wealth
4. Electoral Offences Commission should be established to handle electoral related offences as courts are already congested with cases so as to dispense justice to electoral cases as urgent as possible. The establishment commission should be duly backed by relevant laws to avert jurisdictional challenges.
5. Regional and international actors should support Nigeria's quest for electoral reforms as well as support violence prevention mechanism where necessary.
6. Civil society groups, religious leaders and other non-governmental organizations should encourage high voter turnout. This should be accompanied by credible electoral process through which people's vote counts.
7. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should conduct free, fair and credible elections to avert possible post-election violence. In

addition INEC should engage in massive and extensive voter education in all the nooks and crannies of the country.

8. International development partners like European Union, (EU), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), International Foundation For Election Studies (IFES), etc. must assist the Nigerian government in diligently monitoring immediate acts that trigger electoral violence and in combating structural causes of electoral violence.
9. Courts should set out definite time frame to conclude election related litigations as well as entertaining election related cases on merit rather than on technicalities.
10. The role social media played during the 2015 general elections cannot be over-emphasized. The usage of social media in announcing elections results should be strongly discouraged, especially during elections. Only INEC should be the body solely responsible for announcing election results.

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