

Elections and Political Violence in Nigeria: Past Mistakes and Challenges Ahead

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ABSTRACT

Elections in Nigeria over the years have become much more than a democratic process of acquiring political power. We have for some time now witnessed escalating political violence in different parts of the country, with increasing loss of faith between the electorates and political leaders. During the last general elections of April 2011, there were charges and counter charges by the political parties of rigging and general abuse of power at the federal and states level. Riot, arson, murder and looting became widespread in many states particularly in the northern part of the country. This paper intends to look at the process of conducting elections in Nigeria and how it caused political violence and make recommendations on how to bring to an end the increasing wave of violence in the electoral system. This is significant because as 2015 draws nearer, there is increasing fear and apprehension about possible political violence across the country. Fundamentally, there is need for political education and youth's empowerment to convert election violence in our polity.

Keywords: *Elections, political violence, Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

According to Anifowose (1982), violence or threat of violence is a universal phenomenon, because, where ever there is political competition, there is always an element of violence mostly associated with election. Individuals and groups throughout history, have in one form or another resorted to violence or its potential use as a tactic of political action. Interestingly, politics is expected to manage the conflict in the society, even though no political system has succeeded in eliminating political violence. The problem with Nigeria, is that the politicians who are suppose to manage political conflicts, are the ones promoting, arming and funding violence. Consequently, electoral violence has become a recurrent feature of the Nigerian democratic process (Odojin and Omojuwa, 2007). The backward state of the Nigerian economy which has created a large and ready pool of the jobless is seen as the factor promoting political violence. With this phenomenon, one can say that Nigeria is far from being a liberal democratic state. For example, ahead

of the April poll in 2011, the Weekly Trust of April 16, reported that, at least 90 people were killed and over 204 injured. After the elections, supporters of candidates who failed at the polls protested violently in different parts of the North, which led to the death of over 120 people and about 15,000 others were displaced (Daily Trust April 19; Leadership, April 20, 2011). Similarly, past elections in Nigeria were characterized by organized and unorganized violence, which make the exercise as a result of high level of intimidations, destructions and killings at different strata of the society. As if these were not enough, bomb blasts have become a common thing at political rallies and gatherings marking the peak of violence in the nation body politics. Etannibi (2004) notes that Nigerian electoral process and governance system largely rest on the logic and practice of organized criminal enterprises where people employ secrecy, co-optation and violence to promote and defend their interest and organizations". Thus, elections have become a battle between contending interests embedded in the composition of the parties.

Political contestants regarded victory at elections a matter of life and death struggle and were determined to capture or retain power by all means and at all cost. Election is that process of casting votes in favour of a candidate or political party, or the process of choosing representatives. Election in the broader sense is much more than that. Rather it is the major means of resolving conflict between constituent political groups. In a democratic system, election is the mechanism by which the numerous political problems of a country could be resolved. It is against this background that, this study examines election and political violence in Nigeria with a view to unraveling the causes and proffering solutions to avoiding the past mistakes in the subsequent elections. For the purpose of clarity, the paper focuses on the manifestations of election violence in Nigerian political process.

The study therefore, examines the implications of election violence on the sustenance of democracy and the political development of Nigeria. Giving the above situation, the theory of political economy has been found to be more relevant in this study because of its focus on material or economic aspects of the society. As observed by Abbas (2010), dialectical materialism is premised on the issue of man's inherent motivations of economic pursuits and needs. Thus, man's fierce inclinations and struggles to acquire, control and maintain political power at all cost justify the choice of this theory. Therefore, the relations between people in the production processes are symbolically connected with the direction of the political struggles to capture political power in order to determine economic factors. This situation is further disturbed by moral decadence of the society and abject poverty among people, which have made them easy prey to be paid and instigated into electoral violence.

In another perspective, the Marxists view elections in capitalist societies as a process which merely enable masses every four or five years to elect their executioners. This is because the masses are mere onlookers at best, grudgingly tolerated participants in the process of decision making in the society (Oyebode, 2003). According to the Marxists, the masses lack active franchise because they cannot provide the means for running for office. But they enjoy passive franchise which merely enables them to cast their votes for rival contestants among the ruling class. The rich in the society therefore, monopolized all elected offices. Hence, the masses play the role of cannon fodder in the contestation for the exercise of political power, position and influence. This represents the actual relation of forces in the class struggle in capitalist society. In essence, elections will have meaning only when it accorded equality of citizens in a democratic society through right of expression and political significance through free, fair and credible exercise based on 'one man one vote.' In Nigeria, past elections since independence were generally not credible due to massive irregularities such as fraud, manipulations and thuggery (Daily Trust April 30, 2011).

Nigerian Electoral Process: Nigeria started her journey to democracy as far back as 1922. But successive elections in Nigeria since the colonial time lacked credibility in the eyes of the general public and therefore, fell short of meeting the essential ingredients of a democratic electoral process. There is general lack of transparency, fairness and free play during all the elections particularly the elections that were held under the current democratic dispensation (1999, 2003 and 2007). Although the elections of 2011 was adjudged to be the most free and fair by some international observers, yet, it was not without its shortcomings. But why did elections in Nigeria became tug of war any time they were conducted. The answer is not far fetch, because of the nature of the Nigerian state which encourages primitive accumulation of wealth by few elites to the detriment of the majority. According to Etannibi (2004), elections in Nigeria were characterized by,

“manipulation of the decisions and activities at the various stages of electoral process by the governments and politicians, corruption of officials and electorates, violence during campaigns, polling and collection of results, rigging through the stuffing of ballots, snatching and destruction of ballot boxes and falsification of results, and ineffective electoral dispute resolution mechanism (p10).”

He further observes the following stages of the electoral process where violence may erupt:

- [i] Delimitation of constituencies.
- [ii] Voter registration.
- [iii] Party primaries and nominations.
- [iv] Campaigns and rallies.
- [v] Display of voter register.
- [vi] Polling.
- [vii] Counting of votes.
- [viii] Declaration of results
- [ix] Verdicts at tribunals (Etannibi, 2004).

It has been observed that violence occurred or erupted at different stages in the electoral process in Nigeria as a result of unwholesome practices such as rigging through stuffing, snatching, destruction of ballot boxes and falsification of results. Others are, partiality and corruption by electoral and security officials, manipulation of electorates through the activation or mobilization of ethnic, religious, regional and other primordial sentiments. There is also, disruptive behaviours, including use of weapons to scare away supporters of opposition during elections, killing, harming, maiming and intimidating persons trying to vote during elections in order to snatch ballot boxes so as to stuff them with ballot papers illegally obtained and thumb printed. Sometimes, incumbent government seeking re-election often used its power to manipulate the security and law enforcement agencies to disperse rallies and campaigns of opponents under the guise of not securing approval or the likely hood of breach of public peace. From the above, it appears that in Nigeria, politicians lacked the manner and correct attitude that are needed to build a truly democratic society. Indeed the impression which any objective observer would come up with on Nigeria's effort at liberal democracy was that Nigeria was attempting to practice democracy without true and sincere democrats.

Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Electoral violence has been defined as any form of physical force applied at disorganizing the electoral process, destruction of electoral materials, and intimidating of the electorate to vote against their wish (Nweke, 2005; Odojin and Omojuwa, 2007). According to Ogundiya and Baba (2005), electoral violence include: all sorts of riots, demonstrations, party clashes, political assassinations, looting, arson, thuggery, kidnapping spontaneous or not, which occur before, during and after elections. Violence associated to election has become common place in Nigeria is because of the nature of the

state which is materially inclined. And the fact that an enormous wealth is put at the disposal of the government accounted for high level of political tension that is always accompanied by violence. According Usman (2002), electoral violence of the forties and fifties had actually transformed political tension and crises and consequently wrecked all attempts by Nigerians to build and sustain democratic governance.

The situation has deteriorated after the return to civilian rule in 1999 to date, with deep-seated crisis unparalleled since the era of the Nigerian civil war. Though, these various forms of violence have characterized Nigerian elections over the years, they have been particularly intense as observed by Odofin and Omojuwa (2007), in elections organized under incumbent governments that are themselves (through the ruling party) part of the contestants in the particular election. This has made it a fact that it is difficult to unseat incumbent governments in Nigeria through elections. In essence, the power of incumbency is been used by whatever party is in control of state power. But the oppositions have their problems too. Aspiring politicians and parties have been able to easily mobilize thugs and social miscreants to perpetrate violence by taking advantage of the poor state of the economy that has created a huge base of the unemployed youth and illiterates. Thus, employment for violence, to many jobless people, becomes a means of livelihood.

Trend of Political Violence in Nigeria

Political violence refers to the use or threat of force against an opponent within the context of competition for state power particularly during elections. This happens more often during democratic transition and consolidation. It is therefore, no wonder that succeeding elections in post-independence Nigeria (1964, 1965, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011) have been marked by sharp division and distrust and a zero sum attitude which manifest in electoral fraud, serious disputes and high level of violence (Odofin and Omojuwa, 2007). The general (but typical) disposition of Nigerian politicians who regard politics as a life or death struggle were the direct cause of this problem. This position was clearly captured by a statement credited to former president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, in February, 2007 when he described the elections as “a do-or-die affair” (Daily Independent, February 2007). It was these acts of violence that actually prevented Nigeria’s democracy from taking roots and standing on its feet. As indicated above, in 1964 and 1965 violent political conflicts occurred during the Federal elections as well as Western regional elections. The violence in some parts of the country and especially in the Western Region before and after the elections

played a role towards the military takeover in January 1966. In 1983, the general elections conducted across the country ended in chaos in different places particularly in the South, following the declaration of a landslide victory by the defunct National Party of Nigeria (NPN). In 1993, the cancellation of presidential elections conducted on 12th June, generated serious violence that forced the military to relinquish power to an interim government in August. The elections held under the current democratic dispensation in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 were marked by violence as a result of corruption and falsification of results in many places. In a report issued out in 2004, the Human Rights Watch observes that both Nigeria's Federal and State elections in 2003 and Local Government elections in 2004 were marred by serious incidents of violence, which left scores dead many others injured. The report further indicates that majority of the serious abuses were perpetrated by supporters of the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP). In a number of places, elections simply did not take place because of the activities of thugs linked to political parties and candidates who intimidated and threatened voters in order to falsify results. In 2004, elections were conducted into Local Councils in various states across the country. These elections were characterized by serious cases of violence and intimidation, as well as widespread fraud and rigging.

A clear testimony about political violence associated with election in Nigeria was obtained in a judgement declared by Justice Francis F. Tabai (Justice of the Court of Appeal), in 2003 in a suit filed by the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP), Presidential candidate, challenging the victory of PDP candidate in April elections. He observed that, there were allegations of violence perpetrated by PDP in the presence of military and police personnel or by the military and police personnel themselves. He went further and declared that there were instances of some violence in all the 14 states which elections were questioned in this petition. Instances of brutal killings either immediately, before or on April, 19 are numerous. He added that the most tragic and disturbing aspect of the incidents is that these incidents either happened in the presence of policemen and soldiers or immediately reported to them. No arrest was made and no investigations carried out. He concludes that the scenario created from the various incidents was that some persons were in the name of politic, licensed to destroy lives and property. It is a serious dent on our claim to democratic ideals (Type written judgement of the Court of Appeal, CAN/A/EP/3/2003). Again in 2007, there were reported cases of violence before, during and after the April elections. Dozens of people were reported killed and hundreds injured, beside several lost of property.

The wide spread fraud that were recorded during that election made the worst in the country's history, that even the person that was announced winner in the presidential polls admitted the exercise were flawed. What followed was the nullification of election at tribunals including those of five State Governors. Fresh elections were later conducted on the orders of court. As if Nigerians did not learn any lesson from previous exercises, the April 16, 2011 presidential polls were equally marked by unprecedented violence. A paper report indicated that in many states in the North, people were killed, but the major killings took place in Kaduna 50, Kano 30, Gombe 17, Bauchi 16 and Katsina 8. Also about 15,000 people were displaced during the crisis (Leadership, April 20, 2011). The loss of lives and destruction of property that followed the presidential election of 2011, could only be comparable to the post election violence recorded in 1983. The main difference between the 1983 and 2011 election violence was the ethnic and religious dimension that were introduced at the latter stages of the 2011 post-election riots. That aside, the two scenarios both reflected an anger targeted at people regarded as collaborators with the ruling party to undermine local interests.

From the above incidences we understand that the Nigerian state is "privatized". Ake (1996), has observed that where the state is privatized, those in power will use violence and state repressive apparatuses to retain power. The people excluded from power or governance (especially in a society where politics is a license to oppress other citizens and to rob the public treasury with impunity) will resort to violence in their quest for office.

"The reality was that Nigerian politicians perceived politics and political office as investment and as an avenue for the acquisition of extra ordinary wealth (through corruption) which they think is not possible through other forms of legitimate vocation and enterprise. Thus in Nigeria, the shortest cut to affluence is through politics. Politics means money and money means politics.... to be a member of the government party means open avenue to government patronage, contract deals and the like"(Dudley, 1965 cited in Etannibi, 2004).

As a result of that practice, the desire and logic to belong to government party undermine the sustainability of viable opposition in the political system.

The Challenges for a Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria

The contradictions of the Neo-colonial state made it very difficult for the seed of democracy to germinate in Nigeria. Thus, the military under the

guise of reform intervened in politics and stayed in office for quite long period of time without achieving the objective of their coming. By the time the military were finally forced to disengage through the collaborative effort of the civil society and international pressure, corruption was deeply rooted in the political system. This now brings us to the challenges to democratization process in Nigeria. Some of the serious challenges facing our democracy include:

Lack of ideologically based political parties: Because the transition was hurriedly executed by the military, there was no time to organize political parties based on any known ideology or principles. The political parties are not based on any distinct ideology or principle. They do not have clearly defined programs. As such, they lack discipline and internal democracy. Therefore, they could not offer the electorate real choice.

Unproductive elite class: This class being the dominant remain virtually fractionalized and corrupt and could not contribute meaningfully to the development of the state. Sadly, it is this class that control politics and hold the machinery of state apparatus. In this kind of situation, we operate a democracy that endangered the life of the citizens rather than promoting their wellbeing.

Failed Institutions: This is another serious challenge. A situation where the state institutions like the legislature, the judiciary and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and various States Electoral Commissions (SIEC) remain virtually stooges, partly due to selfishness or lack of experience. Our legislators at all levels of government find it difficult to bargain without inducement. Furthermore, the problem of corruption has pervaded these institutions making them vulnerable to manipulation (Adigwe, 1979; Okoli, 2003; Ejukonemu, 2005). A good example is the ongoing case of bribe scandal involving the former chairman of the House of Representatives finance committee, Mallam Farouk Lawal and a businessman, Mr. Otodela.

Insecurity: The rising wave of insecurity in the country calls for a serious thought about the viability of our democracy. The fact is that if insecurity, is not addressed urgently, it will become difficult to conduct free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The fact that the 2015 election is becoming closer, makes it necessary for the people of Nigeria to wake up and face the challenges of democratization in our country, by electing only credible people with proven integrity as

representatives. It is imperative to understand that the Nigerian nation cannot be built or sustained on the foundation of lies, falsehood and deceit. Therefore, we must tell ourselves the truth. The truth is that, all politicians are guilty of electoral violence. In Nigeria today, politicians with lots of resources have a number of thugs at their disposal. The main problem with engaging thugs is, what to do with them after their assignment have been concluded. With arms at their disposal, ex-thugs deployed new anti-social career paths as soon as elections were over. The current security threat, in the country may not be unconnected with the activities of politicians who supply arms to their agents with the aim of winning elections even if it may involve the elimination of their opponents. In a recent development, an operative of the State Security Service (SSS), was quoted by a News Paper (Vanguard, Nov 12, 2012), to have stated in a court that a PDP senator gave the phone number of the Minister of Justice to the “Boko Haram” members all in a bid to influence the outcome of the Borno State gubernatorial election in favour of the PDP. This marks one of the highest forms of betrayal to the nation by the politicians. The rising wave of militancy all over the country is therefore the repercussions of political thuggery.

Apart from the politicians, other political institutions like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the Judiciary are equally encouraging political violence through their actions and inactions. The electoral commission occupies strategic position in the electoral process and by implication are decisive for the success of democratic system of government. No doubt the aim of every election management body is to organize credible elections, in which all stakeholders and observers will be satisfied with the outcome. The failure on the part of the electoral body in Nigeria to be transparent and impartial (at least in the eyes of the opposition) had prevented the attainment of a free and fair election devoid of violence.

The Judiciary which has been acclaimed as the last hope of the common man has in recent time more often compromised its independence through the series of unpleasant judgments that are mostly one sided, and the controversial suspension of the former President of the Court of Appeal, Justice Ayo Salami. Until we are ready to change all that, we cannot dream of a democratic, peaceful and prosperous nation. With long history of political violence dating back to colonial period, Nigeria needs to take far reaching decisions to curb the menace and rid itself of violent democratic system. This is necessary since Nigeria cannot afford to be left behind other African nations considering its huge human and material resources. Several recommendations have been made on how to improve our democracy. Some of the recommendations are considered worthy of mention here:

- (i) *Prosecution of perpetrators of election violence:* Persons implicated in election violence whatever their political affiliation or position in the society, should be prosecuted to serve as deterrence to others. The relevant law enforcement agents like the police and also the Judicial authorities should live up to expectation by bringing to book the persons who ordered or organized the violence as well as those carried it out. In this regard we support the establishment of Electoral Offences Commission as recommended by the Electoral Reform Committee of Justice Mohammed Lawal Uwais, for the purpose of apprehension, and trial of the offenders.
- (ii) *Political parties and candidates should oppose violence and discrimination in their campaigns, rallies and conventions.* Violence free politics should be the platform of the political parties. This will bring to end the use of thugs by all groups of politicians. However, a violence free politics will be difficult until government at all levels live up to expectation, and creates job opportunities to our teeming youths who are always recruited into political thuggery.
- (iii) *Political campaigns should be based on issues rather than sentiments:* Contestants to political offices at all levels of the political dispensation should refrain from invoking sentiment on the voters along ethnic, religious or sectional considerations. Politicians should not use uncomplimentary statements that are likely to increase tensions especially in the pre-election period.
- (iv) *Neutrality of law enforcement agents:* The police and other law enforcement agents should be appropriately used by state. They should be neutral as much as possible, during the preparations and conduct of elections. On no account should federal or state officials attempt to use the police as their own personal armed force.
- (v) *Provision of adequate security for voters:* To ensure voter's security, adequate number of policemen should be deployed outside polling stations. This will help prevent violence. However, the police should refrain from the use of excessive force to contain violence related to elections. Those suspected of violence or electoral misconduct should be arrested and prosecuted, after proper investigation.
- (vi) *Adequate preparation by the electoral commission:* This is necessary to ensure free and fair elections. Election plans must be finalized before the election time. INEC, should complete and post the register of voters and resolve all claims or objections fairly and expeditiously. Transparent production and distribution of ballots (under

the watchful eyes of the opposition), should be ensured. The electoral body should be vigilant in ensuring that local party members do not replace trained temporary staff in the election duty.

- (vii) *Increase Awareness among Citizens:* There is need for wider political education by the government, civil society groups, community as well as religious leaders. This will increase awareness among voters and other political actors about the essence of elections under a democratic set up.
- (viii) *Youth's empowerment:* The youths who have constituted the most politically active group in the country should be economically empowered to become self reliant. A situation where majority of the youths are jobless is dangerous for the country and sustenance of democracy. As noted earlier in this paper, politicians always employ the youths as thugs during elections only to be dumped after the exercise. Therefore, governments at all levels should hasten the process of job creation in the country in order to safeguard our democracy.

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