

## ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: A HINDRANCE TO DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

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### **Abstract**

Since Nigeria attained her independence, almost all general elections have been marred by violence. It is these acts of violence that have actually prevented Nigeria's democracy from stabilizing. The basic thrust of this paper is to examine the incidence of electoral violence in Nigeria and determine its implication for democratic stability. The paper makes use of secondary data as its source of information. The study observes that electoral violence discourages election of credible leaders and people's participation in the electoral process thereby militating against democratic stability. The paper recommends that political parties should conduct their campaigns on the basis of issues rather than attacking opponents and raising religious and ethnic sentiments.

**Key words:** Electoral violence, democratic stability, democracy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Election has been accepted in almost all parts of the world as the hallmark of democracy. Free and fair election is powerful instrument to achieve democratic stability. This is because credible election abhors violence which inhibits voters' right to freedom of choice in peace and in line with their conscience (Muheep, 2015:1). It is imperative for the politicians and electoral umpire to endeavour to achieve peaceful election devoid of violence. This would encourage electorate to participate in the electoral process, thereby strengthening democratic stability. A close observation of democratic history in Nigeria reveals that electoral violence has sometimes threatened the country to its very foundation. This development has made democratic consolidation somehow problematic and on the other hand has made it difficult for Nigeria to be referred to as a democratic state even though operators vehemently lay claim to it (Onebamhoi 2011). It is beyond doubt that since attainment of her independence, Nigeria is beset with various forms of electoral violence. These forms of violence can take place before, during and after election. Electoral violence could be intra or inter party affair. According to Albert (2007) "electoral violence resulting from representational campaign, balloting, and result conflicts have been a terminal problem of Nigeria's politics since 1950's. In the same vein, Kean (2004:155) observes that violence is the greatest enemy of democracy, being the bane of Nigeria's march to democracy. Thus, there cannot be democratic election, democratization and democratic stability, if there is prevalence of electoral violence in any country.

Therefore, the focus of this paper is to examine the incidence of electoral violence in Nigeria and determine its implication on democratic stability. The paper also suggests suitable strategies to address the menace of electoral violence in Nigeria. The paper is divided into six sections. Section one deals with the introduction. Section two is concerned with clarification of concepts. Section three focuses on theoretical framework. Section four deals with the incidence of electoral violence in Nigeria and section five dwells on implication of electoral violence for democratic stability. The last section is concerned with conclusion and recommendations.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

### **Electoral Violence**

Electoral violence could be regarded as elections–motivated-crisis employed to alter, change or influence by force or coercion the electoral behaviour of voters or voting patterns or possibly reverse electoral decision in favour of particular individual, groups or political party (Okafor: 2015:3). According to Balogun cited in Onebamhoi (2011:101-102) “electoral violence connotes all forms of violence (physical, psychological, administrative, legal and structural) at different stages engaged in by participants, their supporters, and sympathizers (including security and election management body staff) in the electoral process”. Electoral violence is “all forms of organized acts or threats-physical, psychological and structural aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view to determining, delaying or otherwise influencing the electoral process” (Albert, 2007:133). Electoral violence according to Ladan (2006) could be categorized into physical and psychological. physical election violence including physical attack, resulting into assault, battery, grievous body harm or death, disruption and use of abusive language and other forms of violence inflicted on individuals and groups. Psychological election violence including indiscriminate pasting of campaign posters, chanting slogans (particularly use of local poets and singers to attack and abuse opponents), intimidation of public servants and businessmen for opposing the status quo or the incumbent administration, use of media (especially state owned) to inflict psychological violence on the opposition and denial of access to such media by the opposition parties, reckless driving by those in a procession to campaign rallies, which intimidate other road users and the use of traditional rulers to intimidate the masses into electing particular preferred candidates.

### **Democratic Stability**

According to Osaghae (1997:62) ‘the premise of democratic stability is that what sustains government and ensures stability is voluntary support or consent of the citizens rather than reliance on coercion. This means that there is nexus between democratic stability and legitimacy. Democratic stability implies that the government is a product of the will of the people and derives its legitimacy from the people’s consent (Alfa and Otaida 2012:45). In this context, it

“ensures that people willingly support the government given that the government is not arbitrary fostered on them”. The government on its own part executes the programmes that are not contrary to the interest of the people.

Therefore, once a society is democratically stable, democracy is said to be more or less consolidated. To that end, the revert to authoritarianism becomes remote because democracy is seen as the “only game in town” (Alfa 2011:150).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The importance of theories in political discourse cannot be overemphasized as it proffers empirically based general explanatory laws through synthesizing and integrating of empirical data for maximum clarification (Raphael, 1978:2). A lot of theories could be used to explain electoral violence in Nigeria, but pluralist theory is more applicable to Nigeria situation. The pluralist theory posits that conflict is inevitable in plural society (Cohen 1996). Therefore, conflict generated by competition among plural groups in democracies of the third world countries like Nigeria is a common phenomenon. Since Nigeria is a plural society, composed of various ethnic groups, there is always competition among these ethnic groups to capture political offices and control national wealth. This is because in variegated society like Nigeria, every ethnic group is mobilizing support for its candidates during elections. Under this condition, free and fair elections during and after election becomes very difficult.

Again, electoral violence in Nigeria could be explained by using the psychological theories especially Ted Gurr’s theory of relative deprivation (1980) and James Davies (1971) J-curve hypothesis. The centrality of the theory rest on the fact that frustration aggression mechanism is analogous to the law of gravity: men who are frustrated have an innate disposition to do violence to the intensity of their frustration, just as objects are attracted to one another in direct proportion to their relative masses (Dugan, 2004). According to the theorist, the main cause of human capacity for violence is frustration aggression mechanism. This means that “unfulfilled expectations create relative deprivation gab between expectations and capabilities”. In other words, when someone or group of people have the perception of their ability or right to something (goal), if prevented from attaining such goals, the result is frustration which will in turn generate aggressive behaviours that will snowball to violence (Ojo, 2014). Therefore, in Nigeria if an individual or group of people are prevented from attaining their expected goals like joining public office, it could result in frustration and aggressive behavior that may lead to electoral violence.

### **INCIDENCE OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA**

The first republic was not devoid of the electoral violence. The 1964 general election conducted after independence was marred by electoral violence such as massive killings, kidnapping, arson and reprisal attacks. Commenting on 1964 general elections Dudley (1982:268) observes “the electoral officers were terrorized into absconding from their offices once they receive the nominations of governing party candidates, leaving the opposition candidates with no opportunity of registering their nomination papers”. Electoral violence reached its highest zenith in 1965:66 during the Western Regional elections. Electoral violence in the Western Region

emerged because of fierce electoral battle between the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) and the Nigerian National Democratic party (NNDP) for the control of the government of Western Region. It was reported that about one thousand people lost their lives. According to Ochoche (1997), the Western Regional crisis of 1965:1966 remains the worst single period of electoral violence in the history of Nigeria. The electoral violence of 1965 and 1966 elections contributed among other things to the military takeover in journey 1966.

The 1979 general elections conducted under Obasanjo's era that ushered in the Second Republic were not devoid of malpractice, various forms of electoral malpractices were also recorded. The malpractice ranged from victimization, use of thugs, manipulation of results by the polling agents to bribing of electoral officials as well as the policemen (Ugoh, 2004:172). According to Nwolise (2007), the election was characterized by violence at three stages pre-election, during the election and post election. In almost all the states the results were contested or disputed. The major contending issue was that of 2/3 of 19 states which was resolved in favour of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, NPN presidential candidate by the Supreme Court (Alfa and Otaida 2012:15).

The 1983 general elections were manipulated through the incumbency influence of Shagari's administration. This led to violent demonstrations in some parts of the country and provided the military an opportunity to overthrow the civilian government on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1983. In what could have ushered in the third republic by Babangida designed in 1993, was however aborted by the June 12 1993 annulled presidential election which created chaotic situation in the country (Alfa and Otaida 2012:46). The cancellation of the election resulted in massive ethno religious conflict. Babangida stepped aside in August 1993 which paved way for an interim government led by Chief Shonekan which was swept into oblivion following the palace coup led by General Sani Abacha. Abacha was mysteriously struck to death while he was planning to "transform himself into a civilian president" (Adele 2012:210).

General Abdulsalami Abubakar who succeeded Abacha put in place a brief transition time-table and actualized his promises and supervised the 1999 general elections. Observers in the said election reported a lot of irregularities. The 2003 election which was conducted under Obasanjo's government witnessed massive electoral violence as that of 1964 and 1983. Elections were blatantly rigged through illicit means varying from ballot stuffing and snatching of ballot boxes with aid from security agents (Ojo 2014:9). There was clear evidence of massive rigging, fraud and intimidation in different parts of the country. The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) observed that "twenty-nine of the registered political parties that either contested or did not contest the elections have variously rejected the results as announced by the INEC declaring the result as fraudulent. Both domestic and international election observers documented massive irregularities that characterized the elections and refused to endorse the elections as free and fair. Some political parties and their candidates decided to challenge some of the results before the various election petition tribunals and have gone ahead to do so while others declared "mass action" to presurise a government without popular mandate to abdicate power (Iyagi 2005:11). The experience of 2003 clearly showed that no election could be successfully conducted in Nigeria under the supervision of civilian administration, devoid of massive electoral malpractices and violence.

The 2007 general elections which took place under Obasanjo administration is generally regarded as the worst election conducted in Nigeria. Violence and intimidation were so

pervasive and clearly visible that they made mockery of the entire electoral process. Before the election, President Obasanjo surprised Nigerians, other Africans and the world at large that the 2007 elections would be “a do-or-die affair” (Nwolise, 2007: 165). Actually, the election was marred by serious irregularities in different parts of the country. According to Adele (2012:211) “in Rivers State, a police station was attacked and burnt by unknown assailants a night before the election day. In Anambra and Rivers States voters were faced with intimidation and violence. In Ekiti State, there was confrontation between the PDP and Action Congress Supporters and election results were blatantly falsified in many areas. Violence was equally reported in the northern state of Kastina where opposition supporters burnt down government building in protest as the announcement that PDP had swept the state’s gubernatorial polls. Soldiers clash with angry voters in Nasarawa State. In Oyo State, PDP thugs beat up opposition party officials, and hijacked ballot boxes”. The domestic and international observers agreed that the 2007 state and federal elections had fallen short of basic international and regional standard for democratic elections.

The 2011 General election was beset with massive post election violence. The announcement of the result of presidential election resulted in violent demonstrations in northern states of the country. Following President Goodluck victory at the pool, the supporters of Congress of Progressive Change (CPC) unleashed violent protests destroying properties worth of millions of naira. The house of the Vice President, Namadi Sambo was looted and raised and palaces of prominent traditional rulers in the North were attacked (Alfa and Otaida, 2012:48).

The 2015 general election was not free of electoral violence. Prior to the elections, the campaign train of President Jonathan of the People’s Democratic party was stoned with Sachet water in Bauchi State. This was in addition to the burning of campaign buses, and a case of bomb blast near a campaign ground in Potiskum, Gombo State. Sporadic gun shoots at APC members were also reported in Rivers State allegedly by PDP thugs (Muheep, 2015:15). INEC reports show that there were 66 cases of violent incidents targeted at polling units, commission’s officials, voters and election materials. These were in Rivers State (16 incidents), Ondo (8), Cross River and Ebonyi (6 each), Akwa Ibom (5), Lagos and Kaduna (3 each) Jigawa, Enugu, Ekiti and Osun (2 each), Kastina, Plateau, Kogi,, Abia, Imo, Kano and Ogun (one each (Muheep, 2015:15).

## **IMPLICATION OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE FOR DEMOCRATIC STABILITY IN NIGERIA**

An analysis of electoral violence in Nigeria has shown that our democracy is yet to be stabilized and consolidated. Electoral violence has retarded the democratization exercise in Nigeria and poses a serious threat to our democratic stability. Democracy cannot flourish where electoral violence has virtually become a way of life. According to Omodia (2009) “In Nigeria, just like most of the countries in Africa, elections especially its freeness and fairness constitute the central factor in ensuring democratic survival. This is because the lack of free and fair elections often tends to threaten the democratic process as a result of legitimacy question”. A serious implication of electoral violence for democratic stability is that it results in electing those leaders that are not credible which would be detrimental to the entire polity. Election of unqualified leaders into political offices in Nigeria is a launching pad to poor leadership that cannot drive home the vision of the country (Okoafor, 2015:8). The leadership challenges which

has contributed to underdevelopment of Nigeria can be attributed to electoral violence because we have elected unqualified leaders who go contrary to the wishes of the people whom they represent. Therefore, bad leadership militates against democratic stability and consolidation. Another effect of electoral violence on democratic stability is that it prevents a lot of people from participating in the electoral process. Violence forces eligible voters from exercising their franchise since their security is not assured. For example, in 2015 elections, many Nigerians did not participate in the electoral process. There was massive exodus of easterners living in the Northern parts of Nigeria for fear of electoral violence. Commenting on the impact of electoral violence in Nigeria, Okoroafor (2015:8) observed “a situation in which a serving President was attacked in Kastina and Bauchi states and bomb detonated in APC rally arena in Port Harcourt at electioneering campaigns are already signal to many people that they are not safe and thus should not participate in the election”, Again electoral violence discourages many credible leaders from contesting election, thus paving way for unpopular and dishonest candidates. In this context, political apathy is also a major threat to democratic stability in Nigeria.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The paper examines how electoral violence has been a stumbling block to Nigeria’s democratization process since attainment of independence. It is abundantly clear that electoral violence has undermined democratic stability and consolidation. Electoral violence militates against election of credible leaders and discourages people’s participation in the electoral process. The paper however makes the following recommendations to address the menace of electoral violence in Nigeria which would facilitate strengthening our democratic experiment.

1. The politicians should conduct their campaigns on the basis of issues rather than attacking their opponents or raising religious and tribal sentiments. The campaigns should focus on proper implementation of national economic, political, economic and social programmes.
2. There is need to reduce drastically the salaries and other benefits accurable to political office holders to make them less attractive. These priviledges associated with political offices encourage unhealthy competition for them.
3. Proper attention should be given to youth employment. The present alarming rate of unemployment easily gives the youths away as instruments of electoral violence with little financial inducement. Therefore, governments at all levels should endeavour to create job opportunities for youths in order to strengthen our democracy.
4. It is imperative to provide adequate number of policemen and other security agents near the polling booths to ensure voters security. This would help to curb electoral violence.
5. The electoral commission should make adequate preparations for the election. Election plans must be completed before the election date. All election materials must be ready and voters register must be made available and all claims and objections should be settled before the commencement of the election.

6. There is need for the government, civil society organizations and religious leaders to educate the voters on the dangers of electoral violence and importance of stabilizing our democratic process.
7. Those persons who are involved in the electoral violence should be prosecuted irrespective of their party affiliation or position. The law enforcement agents like the police and judiciary should ensure that those who sponsored electoral violence and those who executed it are punished accordingly.

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