

Electoral Violence and Democratization Process in Nigeria: A Reference of 2011 and 2015 General Elections

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Abstract: The general account of Nigeria's post-independence electoral processes has always been characterized by violence. Nigeria's 2015 general elections marked the fifth multi-party elections in the country and the second handover of civilian administrations since the inception of the Fourth Republic democratic experiment in 1999. This account cannot be analyzed without issues of electoral violence. Electoral violence had been a permanent feature of Nigeria's democratic process, except 2015 general elections where the international observers described as a "significant improvement" over the previous elections in terms of violence related cases. Electoral related violence in the country particularly in 2011 got to an unprecedented dimension resulting in destruction of lives and property worth millions of naira. This paper expatiates on electoral violence and its general implications on the democratization process in the country, with major emphasis on the 2011 and 2015 general elections. The paper argued that the high incidence of pre and post electoral violence in the country within the periods has to do with the way Nigerian politicians regard politics, weak political institutions and weak electoral management body as well as bias nature of the security agencies, etc. However, the paper examined the general implications of electoral violence on democratization process and how the country can handle the electoral process to avoid threats associated with the electoral violence. Archival analysis, which widely extracted data from newspapers, journals, workshop papers, books, as well as publications of non-governmental organizations was adopted for the study. The major significance of this study is to expose the negative implications associated with electoral violence and how it can be curbed. The position canvassed in this paper will serve as a useful political literature for political leaders, policy makers and the general reading public who may be seeking general information on the subject matter. The paper therefore, among others, recommended that political leaders and political participants should not see politics as investment or do or die affairs as well as the formulation of laws with severe sanctions against supporters or perpetrators of electoral violence in the country. The paper therefore submits that democratization in the country can only be realistic when the ideals and principles of democracy as practiced in advanced democratic societies are upheld and respected.

Keywords: democracy; democratization; elections; electoral violence

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1. 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 (2014, p. 140) “*elections have become an integral part of representative democracy that by and large prevail across the world order*”. For Lindberg (2003) cited in Adesote and Abimbola (2014, p.140) “*every modern vision of representative democracy entails the notion of elections as the primary means of selection of political decision makers*”. Therefore, it is almost impossible to talk about democracy without making implicit reference to elections. Chiroro (2005) contended that election is the center of any democratic order while Ojo (2007) sees elections as 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. Attesting to the above, Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife, former Governor of Anambra State opined that: ... *democracy is associated with elections. How have the elections gone since 1999 till date? The 1999 elections were disputed and engulfed in violence, but it was vastly better than 2003 elections. People shouted foul about the 2003 elections but that was infinitely better than the non-election of 2007. Each election has been worst, more flawed, violence than the one before it. We cannot be getting a democracy by running further away from it* (cited by Adeyemo, 2009, p. 22).

Nigerians went to the polls in April, 2011 to elect new sets of public officials in a fourth nationwide elections since the return to civilian rule in 1999. Regardless of some flaws, the elections were deemed to be the most organized, free and fair in the country electoral history (Gberie, 2011). According to Tayo (2011) despite the heavy investment in the fraud-proof voting technology, reports of politically motivated killings and the ruthless man-handling of civilians during political campaigns and rallies in some states indicated that elections are still perceived as a “door die” affair in the country. Conducting free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria is undoubtedly a big challenge, because the “political players” are not

ready to play the game according to rules. This is even worst as there are no severe sanctions for perpetrators of electoral misconducts and violence. Therefore, the 2011 general elections held in April orchestrated violence which left more than 800 people dead and more than 65,000 homeless, with more than 350 churches burnt (*Human Rights Watch*, 2014). The violence began with protests by supporters of the main opposition presidential candidates, Muhammadu Buhari, a Northern Muslim from the Congress for Progressive Change – CPC, following the re-election of the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian South who was candidate of the People Democratic Party – PDP. It degenerated into sectarian and religions killings (*Human Rights Watch*, 2014). However, some factors are traced to occurrence of electoral violence in Nigeria. It is poverty, unemployment, ineffectiveness of security forces and culture of impunity by government (Otoghile 2009; illiteracy, zero-sum politics, poor handling of elections by the electoral commission, poor handling of election petitions, lack of internal party democracy, corruption among electoral officials, unresolved ethnic differences, democratic deficit, diminishing popularity of the ruling party, internal conflicts within the main rival parties and unemployment among youths (Ikpe, 2004; Dode & Edet, 2015); selfish interest and ideological bankruptcy (Ugiagbe, 2010); among others.

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 the winning party, which eventually forms government. This however led Otoghile (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 in the country 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 the office, adopted various means to ensure that 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 accompanies it continues to threaten the deepening of democratization process. The negative effects of electoral violence in the country continues to reduce the

citizens' confidence in the democratic process as well as heighten the fears of possible democratic collapse (Duru, 2002; Edet & Asua, 2013).

Furthermore, the 2015 general elections had been concluded with the winners declared by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The election was the fifth elections in the country since 1999. Before the elections, several political leaders expressed concerns about security issues as a result of tension between the North and South on the issue of power rotation. The concerns expressed borders on the determination of the north to reclaim power and the incumbent President Jonathan from the South to seek another term in office. According to Pointblanknews (January 10, 2015) All Progressive Congress Youths – political party that had the man opposition leader as its presidential candidate engaged in violent conflict with that of the incumbent President's party, leading to burning of the ruling party's campaign vehicles. Also, the Director General of APC Presidential Campaigns, Chibuike Amaechi and Governor of Rivers State was attacked by gunmen, who opened fire on his convey while campaigning at Obio Akpor-a home town of the PDP Governorship candidate Nyesom Wike (Winsor, 2015). According to National Human Rights Commission, between January and February, 2015, about 58 people were killed in 61 incidences of election violence across 22 states in the country. As a result of rising tension and likeliness of unprecedented violence, a peace accord mediated by former Head of State General Abdusalami Abubakar was signed by the two leading Presidential Candidates-the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan and his main challenger, Muhammadu Buhari. By signing the peace accord, the two leading candidates agreed to avoid actions that could engender violence during and after the elections (*Premium Times*, 2015).

However, this study examines the implications of electoral violence on democratization process, with particular reference to 2011 and 2015 general elections in Nigeria and how the country can manage the electoral process without much threat to the democratic stability. With considerable negative effects of electoral violence on the political system, the paper, therefore proffer recommendations on how electoral related violence can be reduced as well as controlled. The study however will constitute additional literature to existing body of knowledge in the area of democratization. It will also forms relevant data bank for policy makers, election management body, academics and the general reading public.

However, based on the above, the paper intends to answer to following questions:

- a) What are the causes electoral violence in Nigeria?
- b) What are the impacts/effects of electoral violence on the democratization process in Nigeria with particular reference to 2011 and 2015 general elections?
- c) Who are responsible for electoral violence in Nigeria?
- d) In what ways can electoral violence be positively addressed?

2. Statement of Problem

Electoral violence is one of the “political monsters” that had always reduced Nigeria’s democratic experiment to undemocratic status. Despite significant improvements in 2011 and 2015 general elections, Nigeria has never satisfied the minimum conditions required for a democratic elections. No election in Nigeria has ever been free, fair, credible and devoid of fraud, intimidation and violence. In Nigeria, political contestants usually sees elections deadly serious business which contestants must win at all cost with every imaginable strategies regardless of the potential consequences. In other words, politics in Nigeria is perceived as a zero-sum game. The political players had consistently refused to play the game according to rules, largely as a result of what Duru (2002) calls “spoils of the office”. To a large extent, there is a growing debate among political analyst as to whether Nigeria is operating democratic system or a mere civil rule.

3. Methodology/Conceptual Review

The research adopted archival study to examine the relevant literature on the subject issue. Data for the research were drawn from journals, books, newspapers, workshop papers as well as publications of non-governmental organizations. However, the inferences drawn from the analysis of various literature on the subject area are justified for informed policy recommendations.

However, it quite imperative to conceptualize some major key concepts used in the study. Democracy, according to Appadorai (1974) democracy is the system in which people directly and periodically exercise the government through electing their representatives. As a political construct, it is an arrangement whereby the people of a country rule themselves through themselves. This, they do, though their

representatives voluntarily elected through popular suffrage. These representatives must be responsible to the people from where power flows and can be changed periodically through free, fair and credible elections. In other words, democracy, according to Attah (2005, p. 7) “*is a political system in which there is majority rule or a political arrangement in which political power is rested in the dignity and wisdom of most citizens*”. The above flows from the Aristotle’s idea predicated on the factor that: *The people or their accredited representatives are considered the best judge of their interests and that individual citizens in a democracy may not necessarily be of good quality, but put together it is possible that they may surpass collectively and a body... the quality of the few best* (Attah, 2005, p. 7).

While there is no generally acceptable meaning of democracy, Dahl *et al* (2003) cited in Abimbola and Adesote (2012) contended that equality and freedom remain the most important component of democracy. This however led us to the concept of democratization. Democratization entails the process of becoming a democratic as well as the entrenchment of democratic values, ideals, principles and norms in a hitherto undemocratic polity. It involves a process by which democracy expands within a state or region. According to Rummel (1996) democratization is the process of transiting to a more democratic political regime. Election is another important determinant of any democratic system. Webster’s Encyclopedic Dictionary (2006) sees election as the process of organizing systematically mass participation of citizens in choosing public officials. Roberts and Edwards (1991) cited in Omotola (2007) sees election as a method of selecting persons to fill certain public offices through choices made by the electorate; those citizens who are qualified to vote under the laws and procedures of the electoral system.

Electoral violence has however been seen as the major cog in the wheel of democratic growth in Nigeria (Ikpe, 2004). According to Fisher (2002) cited in Adesote and Abimbola (2014, p.141) “*electoral violence is an organized act that seeks to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, disinformation, physical assault, forced protection, blackmail, destruction of property or assassination*”. Igbuzor (2010) sees electoral violence as any act of violence undertaken in the course of political activities which include pre, during and post election periods. For him, such acts includes thuggery, use of force to disrupt political gathering or voting and use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters, opponents and other electoral process or cause bodily harm to any person involved in the electoral process. According to Albert (2007) electoral violence involves all forms of organized acts of threats

aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder or opponent before, during and after an election with an intention to determine, delay or influence the electoral process. However, IFES (2011) argued that electoral violence involves any violent harm aimed at any person or property involved in the electoral process or at disrupting any part of the electoral process during and after the elections.

The above conceptualization typically captured deeper ideas about the concepts used in the study.

4. Implications of Electoral Violence on the Democratization Process in Nigeria (2011 and 2015)

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 2011 general elections. While the elections was adjudged to be free and fair, with accompanying significant improvements from the previous elections, the post-election crisis remains one of the most violent in the country's history where about 800 people were killed in the three days riot that followed the presidential elections in 12 states in Northern Nigeria (*WANEP*, 2014). The riot was a pointer to the strong linkage between religion, politics and ethnicity in Nigeria. Although, Nigeria is regarded as a resilient and secular country, most of the conflicts it has been able to withstand could best be described as localized and confirmed to a region (*WANEP*, 2014). Though the 2011 general elections were generally seen as an improvement on the previous elections as both local and international observers, as they were partially fair when compared with the 2003 and 2007 general elections, though there were pre and post election violence as discussed earlier. A good example of pre-electoral violence was in Akwa Ibom State, which necessitated a presidential investigation panel to investigate the remote and immediate causes of the violence and proffer solutions to avert future occurrence (Adesote & Abimbola 2014). According to the report, Uyo and Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area of the state engulfed in the reign of unprecedented violence leading to destruction of about 200 brand new Peugeot 307 cars, 500 tricycles, Jonathan/Sambo Presidential campaign office which was burnt down, among others including loss of lives.

However, there were general concerns about the 2015 general elections as there were rising tension between north and south as well as deeply divided country along religious and ethnic lines. There were however fears of the possibility of localized conflicts snowballing into a nationwide crisis especially amidst an already freckled security and deeply tensed security environment (WANEP, 2014). The 2015 general elections had been concluded with the winners declared but the skirmishes and pocket of violence that accompanied it in several parts of the country cannot be easily forgotten. According to *Punch Newspaper* (2015) there were several incidences of political motivated killings especially in Rivers and Akwa Ibom States before during and after the elections. This included the killing of the former deputy speaker of Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, Okon Uwah, who was also APC House of Assembly candidate for Ukanafun State constituency, among others. This has however called for serious concern about Nigeria's democratic practice.

In terms of implications of electoral violence in the country, electoral violence has almost eroded the democratic gains in the country despite operating the system for about 16 years after military disengagement from politics in 1999. The way politician see politics and elections almost rubbish the ideals of democratic system and make the country merely experimenting civil rule. According to Onwudiwe and Berwind-Dart (2010) many factors that facilitate electoral violence in the country remained unaddressed and may exacerbate in future polls. According to Adesote and Abimbola (2014) the place of free, fair and credible elections in the sustenance of democratic process cannot be over-emphasized. This is so, because the quality of the elections does not only offer a government some level of legitimacy, but serves as a transitory process in stabilizing democracies. This led Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006), Omotola (2007) among others to conclude that free, fair and credible elections is a critical element of sustained and enduring democratic process. The openness and freeness of the electoral system account for the democratic status of such system. Conclusively, electoral violence has deep negative implications on democratization process in any society. This is so because democracy entails freedom, equality and transparency in the electoral process.

5. 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 or 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 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 related 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 mechanisms where necessary.
6. Civil society groups, religions leaders and other non-governmental organizations should encourage high voter turnout. This should be accompanied by credible electoral process through which peoples' vote counts.
7. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should conduct free, fair and credible elections to avert post-election violence.
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 triggers of electoral violence and in combating structural cause 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 2015 general elections cannot be overemphasized. The usage of social media should be strongly encouraged, especially during elections.

6. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has critically examined electoral violence and its implications on democratization process in Nigeria, with focus on 2011 and 2015 general elections. Elections in 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 facilitates electoral violence has to do with the 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.

The 2011 and 2015 general elections witnessed significant improvements in terms of organization, planning and conduct of the elections, according to both local and foreign of observers. This invariably restored hopes of democratization in the country. The paper therefore submits that democratization can only be realistic when the ideals and principles of democracy are upheld and respected (Schedler, 1998).

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