

## **TRENDS IN ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA**

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**Abstract:** Since the Independence era, elections in Nigeria have been characterized by high scale of electoral malpractices, money politics, electoral violence and the use of ethno-religious divide in order to influence the voting patterns of the electorates. Electoral violence is one of the strategies employed by Nigerian politicians during electioneering period. Desperate and power drunk politicians often sponsor unemployed youths and stark illiterates to carry out assaults on their perceived political opponents with a view to manipulating election results to their own advantage. This paper shall make an in-depth analysis of electoral violence in Nigeria with particular focus on the fourth republic.

**Keywords:** Election, Electoral Violence, Electoral Security.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ordinarily, electoral process is expected to contribute towards democratic consolidation in any given society. Through elections, the electorates are provided with the ample opportunity to vote for the candidates and parties that will represent their varying interests. However, in many African countries such as Nigeria, the electoral process has brought about unwarranted political instability. Nigeria, with a population of about 190 million and abundant mineral resources is being widely touted as one of Africa's brightest prospects on the global stage. Despite Nigeria's huge potential, the country has been bedeviled by series of political unrest from the first republic (1960-1966). Nigeria was thrown into a 30 month civil war (1967-1970) that claimed the lives of millions. During the course of

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Nigeria's chequered political history, different military regimes governed the country (1966-1979; 1983-1999) in her fifty eight years of independence.

On May 29, 1999, Nigerians heaved a sigh of relief after the military relinquished power to the democratically elected government led by Olusegun Obasanjo, an ex-military ruler. From that time, Nigeria has enjoyed over 18 years of democratic rule albeit, with various episodes of violence ranging from the Niger Delta militancy to the Boko Haram Insurgency in some parts of Northern Nigeria. The year 2015 served as the turning point in Nigeria's democracy as the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) upstaged the erstwhile ruling party, People's Democratic Party (PDP) at the general elections. The major thrust of this paper shall be geared towards analyzing both the pre-election and post-election violence at the 2015 general polls.

The first section is the introduction; second focuses on the theoretical contextualization of electoral violence; the third section deals with the historical account of the trends and patterns of electoral violence in Nigeria's fourth republic; the fourth section is premised upon the Nigerian state, electoral violence and democratic consolidation, while the fifth part is the conclusion.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

### **Elections**

Elections form the bedrock of a genuine democratic system. Osumah and Aghemelo (2010) see election as a process through which the people choose their leaders and indicate their policies and programme preference and consequently invest a government with authority to rule. Roberts and Edwards (1991) cited in Omotola (2007) view 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. Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary (2006) defines election as

“the act or process of organizing systematic (s) election (permitting mass participation and method of choosing a person or persons by vote for a public office position in which state authority is exercised”.

### **Electoral Violence**

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 a political process. Ogundiya and Baba (2005), see electoral violence as all sorts of riots, demonstrations, party clashes, political assassinations, looting, arson, thuggery, kidnapping spontaneous or not, which occur before, during and after elections. Fischer (2002) defines electoral violence (conflict) as any random or 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.

Similarly, Igbuzor (2010), sees electoral violence as:

*Any act of violence perpetuated in the course of political activities including, pre, during and post election periods, and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral processes.*

The above definitions are the hallmarks of electoral violence in Nigeria’s fourth republic.

### **Electoral Security**

Electoral Security is defined as “the process of protecting electoral stakeholders such as voters, candidates, poll workers, media, and observers, electoral information and campaign materials; electoral facilities such as polling stations and counting centre and electoral

events such as campaign rallies against death, damage, or disruption of the electoral processes (USAID). Furthermore, Fischer (2010), defined electoral security as “the process of protecting electoral stakeholders, information, facilities or events.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

For the purpose of this discourse, this paper will rest on Karl Marx's dialectical materialism which gives vivid explanations on electoral violence in Nigeria. Karl Marx's dialectical materialism suits Nigeria's scenario. Abbas (2010) observed that dialectical materialism is premised on 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 the people in the production processes are symbiotically connected with the nature and direction of the political struggles to capture political power in order to determine economic factors. Furthermore, this assertion was supported by Dudley (1965 cited in Etannibi, 2004).

### **Dudley said that:**

*“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”.*

In a country where over 70 per cent of the population lives in extreme poverty, politics is seen as an escape route from poverty. This is worsened by the high level of corruption among public office holders in Nigeria. Over the years, Nigerian politicians and other public office holders have promoted ostentatious lifestyles not been mindful of the sufferings of the Nigerian masses. One of Nigeria's brightest political scientists, Claude Ake (1964) asserted that: “Those

*who win state power can have all the wealth they want even without working, while those who lose the struggle for state power cannot have security in the wealth they have made even by hard work. The capture of state power inevitably becomes a matter of life and death. That is one reason why our politics is so intense, anarchic and violent”.*

Comparatively, it has been discovered that elected representatives of the people at the local, state and federal levels of government earn higher wages and allowances more than their counterparts in the developed countries. Hence, the struggle for political power through any means becomes inevitable in Nigeria’s political space.

### **Electoral Violence Prior to 1999**

Electoral violence in Nigeria is traceable to the first republic especially during the 1964/65 elections. The dominant political parties in the first republic, namely; the Action Group (AG), the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) were ethnically based parties that wanted to maintain the wide followership they enjoyed from the regions where they emerged. AG was essentially the party for the Yoruba race, NCNC was regarded as Ibo party, while NPC was predominantly an Hausa/Fulani party. During the 1964/65 elections, politicians were involved in wide scale murder, kidnapping and arson. Also, there were gross irregularities in the conduct of the elections that precipitated the military to stage a coup that ended Nigeria’s first democratic experiment.

Electoral violence reared its ugly head again during the highly controversial 1983 general elections. The elections were massively rigged for instance, in the then Oyo and Ondo states, the two Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) controlled states were declared for the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN). The announcement led to the outbreak of violence (Babarinsa, 2002). The scandalous 1983 elections caused general apathy among Nigerians. It was not surprising when the military intervened by ousting President Shehu Shagari on December 31, 1983.

The June 12, 1993 election organized by then Military President, General Ibrahim Babangida was expected to break the jinx of Nigeria's chequered political history. The campaign strategies; government's support, the enthusiasm of registered voters and the generality of Nigerians towards June 12, 1993 are yet to be surpassed. The election was supposed to put an end to the eventful regime of General Ibrahim Babangida and usher in a democratically elected government (Olowojolu, 2015). Two political parties were created namely, Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC). The June 12, 1993 was unique in the sense that the two political parties fielded two muslim candidates in the person of highly influential billionaire MKO Abiola and the affable Bashir Tofa. MKO Abiola, a Yoruba from Western Nigeria was the Presidential flag bearer for SDP while, Bashir Tofa, a native of old Northern city, Kano was the Presidential candidate of NRC (Olowojolu, 2015). Despite the choice of SDP in picking Alhaji Babagana Kingibe as running mate, Nigerians did not raise eyebrows on the muslim-muslim ticket of SDP. On the other hand, NRC picked Sylvester Ugoh, a Christian from Eastern Nigeria as Tofa's running mate. Throughout the electioneering period, religious and ethnic affiliations did not influence voting patterns of Nigerians. June 12, 1993 election widely believed to have been won by MKO Abiola remains the freest and fairest election in Nigeria's history. The hopes of many Nigerians were dashed when the military government annulled the presidential election. Shortly afterwards, nationwide protests, industrial strike action and civil disobedience engulfed the country. The post June 12 crisis led military ruler, General Babangida to abdicate his exalted position as head of state on August 27, 1993. General Babangida hurriedly relinquished power to an unpopular Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan (Olowojolu, 2015).

The Interim National Government was sacked by General Sani Abacha on November 17, 1993. In 1994, General Abacha arrested the acclaimed winner of June 12, 1993 election, MKO Abiola on the

account of treason as Abiola declared himself the president elect. Abacha's authoritarian regime expired when the head of state died on June 8, 1998 under controversial circumstances. On June 7 1998, MKO Abiola died on what was supposed to be his date of release. The newly appointed military ruler, General Abdulsalami Abubakar promised to return Nigeria to civilian rule in 1999 (Olowojolu, 2015). Eventually, the military regime ushered in Nigeria into the fourth republic. On May 29, 1999, ex-military ruler, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in as the President of Nigeria. It marked the beginning of a new era in Nigeria's history.

### **Trends and Patterns of Electoral Violence in the Fourth Republic**

Nigeria's fourth republic has witnessed the conduct of general elections in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 respectively. These elections have been deeply enmeshed in series of violence before, during and after the elections. The 1999 elections had minimal record of violence largely because the military supervised the electoral process that birthed the fourth republic.

The 2003 elections were conducted by President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration who was seeking his second tenure. The 2003 elections were characterized by manipulation, rigging, thuggery and the assassination of perceived political opponents. The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) swept the polls as it consolidated its hold on the Nigerian political landscape. After the completion of two terms as President, Obasanjo's administration conducted perhaps the worst election in Nigeria's history. Prior to the 2007 elections, the outgoing President Obasanjo asserted that the election was going to be a "do-or-die" for the ruling PDP. Animashaun (2008), argued that there were massive irregularities in the 2007 elections and it was characterized by inflation of voting figures, declaration of results where elections were never held or not conclusive, intimidation of voters as well as manipulation of the security services. Results of elections conducted in some were totally different from those announced in Abuja contrary to the provisions of the 2006 Electoral

Act (TMG, 2007). The Human Rights Watch (2007) noted that there were scores of political killings, bombings and armed clashes between rival political groups. The outcome of the 2007 elections generated a lot of controversies and wide spread condemnation from both the local and international observers. The winner of the presidential election, late Umaru Musa Yaradua admitted that the electoral process in 2007 was highly fraudulent. Shortly after assuming office as the Executive President, Yaradua instituted an Electoral Reform Committee headed by Justice Uwais with a view towards correcting the ills in Nigeria's electoral system. Some of the recommendations of the Electoral Reform Committee were included in the amended Electoral Act. It is also on record that Yaradua's administration promoted non-interference in the judiciary. This was evident in the various judgements dispensed at both the Tribunal and Appeal courts over electoral disputes. Gubernatorial elections in states such as Ekiti, Osun, Edo and Ondo that were initially declared to have been won by PDP were upturned in favour of Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and Labour Party (LP) respectively (Aniekwe, et al, 2011).

The 2011 general elections were adjudged by many observers as the most credible election organized by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) since 1999. For example, Terence McCulley, U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria praised the National Assembly election as the first-ever 'credible, transparent, free and fair general election' in Nigeria, and declared that it provided a 'historic opportunity for Nigeria to consolidate its democracy and further expand its voice on the world stage' (Agbambu and Ajayi, 2011). In the same vein, EU Election Observation Mission to Nigeria said 'the 2011 general elections marked an important step towards strengthening democratic elections in Nigeria, but challenges remain' (EU EOM, 2011).

Prior to the presidential polls, some Northern politicians including Adamu Ciroma, Iyorchia Ayu, Lawal Kaita, Bello Kirfi, Yahaya



Kwande, and Bashir Yusuf Ibrahim wrote a letter to the PDP National Chairman on 17 September 2010 requesting the party leadership to restrain President Goodluck Jonathan from contesting the 2011 elections under the party's platform. The group argued that eight-year, two-term presidency ceded to the North in line with the PDP, which began with former President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in 2007, must continue through another Northerner following Yar'Adua's death. The group warned that the failure of the ruling PDP to apply the principle of zoning would threaten the stability of Nigeria, saying; 'we are extremely worried that our party's failure to deliver justice in this matter (power-shift to the North) may ignite a series of events, the scope of magnitude of which we can neither proximate nor contain' (Abdallah, 2010, Obia, 2010). Inflammatory messages sent through the social media worsened the tensions created by religious and ethnic campaigning by supporters of President Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari (Harwood and Campbell, 2010).

**Figure 1.0 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria**



The Northern states of the country were thrown into chaos and anarchy after Dr. Goodluck Jonathan was declared the winner of the 2011 presidential election. Human Rights Watch (2011) reported that about 800 lives were lost as a result of the post election violence. Similarly, the Human Rights Watch (2011) claimed that more than 65,000 people were displaced after the 2011 post election violence. The Nigerian Red Cross Society released a slightly lower figure indicating that the violence displaced 48,000 persons in 12 states (Omenazu and Paschal, 2011).

In the run up to the 2015 elections, the security challenges had become worrisome most especially in Northern Nigeria and Abuja the Federal Capital Territory. This is largely due to the meteoric rise in the Boko Haram Insurgency. The CLEEN Foundation Security Threat Assessment published in March 2015 found that 15 states were on red alert level. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in its Pre-Election Report stated that at least 58 persons have been killed even before the conduct of 2015 general elections (CLEEN, 2015). There were changes in the political configuration of the country as could be seen in the formation of a mega opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC). Formed in 2013, APC was the amalgamation of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC); the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN); the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) and a faction of All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA). Former military ruler, General Muhammadu Buhari (ret'd) was picked as the presidential flag bearer for APC. On the other hand, the PDP which has dominated Nigeria's political space since 1999 chose the incumbent president, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan as the presidential candidate. Prior to the 2015 polls, PDP suffered setbacks due to the mass exodus of key political players to APC. Jonathan who hails from the Ijaw ethnic group in the South-South region was perceived as the candidate of the South East and South-South of Nigeria.

New measures were introduced with the view towards curbing electoral fraud and electoral violence during the 2015 general elections.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) under the leadership of Prof Attahiru Jega introduced the use of Card Readers and Permanent Voters Card (PVC) for the upcoming 2015 general elections. The technology of the Card Reader system has ensured credible elections in Ghana, Kenya and Sierra Leone (Vanguard, February 25, 2015). According to INEC, there were 66 reports of violent incidence all across the country. The violence were recorded in Rivers State (16 incidents); Ondo (8); Cross Rivers (6); Ebonyi (6); Akwa Ibom (5); Bayelsa (4); Lagos and Kaduna (3 each); Jigawa, Enugu, Ekiti (2 each); Katsina, Kogi, Plateau, Abia, Imo, Kano and Ogun (one each) (Vanguard, April 12, 2015). The European Union Election Observation Mission reported that about 30 people were killed on April 11, 2015 Election Day as a result of inter-party clashes and attacks on election sites (EU EOM, 2015).

The roles of some stakeholders and the international community in ensuring a peaceful election cannot be overemphasized. A former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi appealed to the major contestants of the presidential election to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that will commit them to control their supporters against violence after the 2015 general elections (Punch, December 22, 2014). Similarly, the National Peace Committee for the 2015 General Elections led by former military ruler, General Abdulsalami Abubakar (ret'd) facilitated peace accord between General Buhari (ret'd) and President Jonathan (Punch, March 26, 2015). Concerned that Nigeria could burst into flames, America's Secretary of State, John Kerry flew to Lagos to discuss about the 2015 elections with President Jonathan and General Buhari (ret'd) respectively (Gordon, 2015).

Overall, the 2015 general elections were adjudged to be quite successful and more credible than every other election since the

commencement of the fourth republic. The APC made history at the 2015 polls by becoming the first opposition party to defeat the ruling party in Nigeria. Thus, former military dictator, Gen. Muhammudu Buhari (retd) who had previously contested for the presidency in 2003, 2007 and 2011 upstaged the incumbent president, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan.

The finest hour during the general polls was the noble character displayed by erstwhile President Jonathan when he accepted his defeat and ensured a smooth transition process that ushered in Buhari's administration on May 29, 2015.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Indeed, the 2015 general elections re-ignited the hopes of many Nigerians who believe in the enormous potential of the country as a leader in Africa. In order to ensure to institutionalize true democracy in Nigeria, the paper has come up with recommendations.

Firstly, government at all levels should ensure that electoral offenders before, during and after the elections are arrested and made to face the court of law. This will serve as deterrence to the financiers and foot soldiers that use violence to promote their political objectives.

Secondly, Nigeria must improve on its existing security apparatuses in order to combat the dynamic and sophisticated 21st century security challenges. Recruitment of security personnel ought to be based on merit. Government should ensure that the funds made available to the security agencies are judiciously utilized for the acquisition of skills and the procurement of up to date equipment.

Thirdly, the Government should form a platform that will accommodate all stakeholders such as the politicians, the media, civil society organizations and religious institutions at the local, state and national levels in order to sensitize and re-orientate Nigerians on peaceful co-existence and the consequences of electoral violence. This enlightenment programme should be sustained in order to help Nigerians inculcate democratic norms and values.

Furthermore, the fight against corruption, which has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society, should be given top priority by successive governments in Nigeria. As long as public office holders and their acolytes continue to live in stupendous wealth, political violence will remain a central feature of Nigerian politics. Again, it is high time successive governments in Nigeria invested in rapid socio-economic transformation through diversification of the economy, increase in foreign direct investment and proper management of the vast wealth of the country. Once Nigeria can attain appreciable economic development, the struggle for political power will experience a sharp decline.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to review the trends in electoral violence in Nigeria. It identified the economic interests of politicians as the major force behind electoral violence using Dialectical Materialism as its theoretical standpoint. The outcome of the 2015 polls in Nigeria is considered as the beginning of a new chapter in Nigeria. Nigeria only needs to build on the good legacies left behind by Dr. Goodluck Jonathan's administration and INEC under the chairmanship of Prof. Attahiru Jega for a brighter future.

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