

ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: THE IMPLICATION PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Following the outbursts of violence in previous elections in Nigeria, fears have been expressed that the 2015 general elections would be marred by a more electoral violence that may even announce the obituary of the Nigerian state. The situation is not helped by the spate of violence that has already rocked the nation at the current stage of electioneering where all forms of violent expressions have been recorded. The argument is that if the campaigns stage could be as violent as it is that there is much likelihood of more deadly mayhem at the elections proper. This paper therefore, explores the implication of electoral violence for the 2015 elections; arguing that violent-prone elections could be a dangerous platform for the disintegration of the country, especially now that insurgency is taking an excruciating toll in the country. It concludes that Nigeria would be doing itself enough good by doing all it could to avoid violence at the polls because the current capacity of the country cannot carry a full-fledged war. It also proffers solution.

Introduction

The unbridled quest for power by man in his ever unstoppable search for relevance and advantage has indeed, generated so much tensions and hostilities. Thus, for most developing democracies of the Third World especially, Nigeria, electoral violence is not only a recurrent decimal, its frequency, character and dimension are quite frightening. It is now becoming a national character of the Nigerian state in such a way that both the Nigerian state and her citizens are held hostage by this smashing political reality in which both are unfortunate willing conspirators. From independence to date, electoral violence in Nigeria has improved in sophistry just as the politicians and their cohorts have remained resolute in this destructive enterprise.

According to IFES Reports (2007), there were 967 incidents of electoral violence in the 2007 elections. Cases of abduction and kidnapping, murder and killing protest, disruption, intimidation and physical attack and well as poster defacing all featured in the incidents. 300 people were killed on issues relating to 2007 elections. Deadly election-related and communal violence in northern Nigeria following the April 2011 Presidential voting left more than 800 people dead (Human Rights Watch (2011)).

With the benefit of hindsight and after a pain-staking research, CLEEN Foundation, in its ‘Third Security Threat Assessment’, projected that electoral violence is most likely to occur in 15 Nigerian most volatile and high security risk states during the 2015 general elections (CLEEN in Ibe, 2014).

Interestingly, all the violence linked to elections is mostly perpetrated by the youth who are not only in the service of the politicians but financed by them so long as they do their biddings. With the benefits of their vigour, seeming lawlessness and lackadaisical attitude to the Nigeria Project, the youth are willing ready-made weapons in the hands of the political leaders who think less of the development of the state and more of their parochial interests. Little wonder why the recurrent destruction of the state through electoral violence is of less concern to them.

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. It could be seen as any violence (harm) or threat of violence (harm) that is aimed at any person or property involved in the election process, or at disrupting any part of the electoral or political process during the election period” (International Foundation for Election Systems, 2011). Electoral violence could be before the election, thus involving all such activities that inflict any form of injury to the democratic system and its constituent and could be during voter registrations, campaigns and actual voting. Such violence could also be a post-election phenomenon which comes consequent on the manipulation of election results, rejection of results, etc.

Election-related violence according to Ladan (2006) could be categorised into physical and psychological. Physical election violence including physical attack, resulting into assault,

battery, grievous bodily harm or death, disruption and other campaign, 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 the 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 the media (especially state-owned) to inflict psychological violence on the opposition and the 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 ruler to intimidate the masses into electing particular preferred candidates.

Conceptually, one is worried by the prevailing animalistic attitude of the Nigerian politicians who go all out for power with all the arsenals within their reach. This could be situated in the power analysis which sees the struggle for power as consistent, persistent and a desideratum. The struggle for power therefore, remains a battle for the strong and like in every war situation, nothing is spared. The situation is not helped by the Nigerian situation where wielders of political power are not only above the law, but loot state treasury without qualms. They also allocate state resources as they want and move around unchecked as demigods. This really serves as motivation to violent political behaviours because political office must be won at all cost. The prevailing Nigerian political culture is not helping matters as well.

Incidence of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

The incidence of electoral violence in Nigeria is as plethora as they are intimidating. Electoral violence in the First Republic of Nigeria's civil democratic realities showcases a nation in absolute hostage situation. The NIPSS Report (in Ibrahim, 2007), shows that only the 1959 and 1979 elections had taken place without systematic rigging and outright violence. Those two elections had one point in common: They were held in the presence of strong arbiters, the colonial state and the military, that were not participants and desired free and fair elections. On the 1951 elections, former Governor of Northern Nigeria Mr. Bryan confessed that he was involved in its manipulations so that the Northern Peoples' Congress could win 90% of the votes (in Okonjo in Iyayi, 2008:6). The 1964 and 1965 elections were not better as violence, manipulations and malpractices hijacked the electoral process. Elections results were violently contested leading to the popular uprising known as "Operation Wetie" in which hundreds of people were killed or wounded.

Western regional elections of 1965 were worse than the 1964 elections. The NNDP which was in power perfected its rigging strategy in such a way that Returning Officers deserted their posts after accepting nomination papers from government candidates. Despite all these, an opposition candidate won, the results were simply reversed, and the government candidate was announced on the government owned radio as the winner (Osinbajo, 2009). The most notorious example of this travesty was the case of a man who won the election in one of the *Owo* constituencies. His NNDP opponent was declared the victor. He thereupon announced that he had decided to join the NNDP. A few days after this announcement, the Electoral Commissioner declared him the successful candidate and quietly dropped his opponent (Arikpo in Osinbajo, 2009).

Although under the supervision of the military, the 1979 elections were not without electoral manipulations and violence. One may not forget in a hurry, the heat and confusion generated by litigations against it of which the legal interpretations of 2/3 percent of the 19 states of the federation were paramount. The parties, especially the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was hell-bent on misinterpreting the constitution to its favour. Through its national 'landslide Victory' slogan, the ruling NPN taught other political parties in the 1983 elections the bitter lessons of elections through manipulation of voter registration and registers, purchase of voters' cards, intimidations, monumental riggings, and of course, deportation. Alhaji Shugaba, a strong opponent of the NPN was deported from the country by the government on grounds that he was an illegal alien to create chance for NPN to concretize its return bid. Iyayi (2008) adds that in Modakeke, a suburb of Ife, South-West Nigeria, voter registration jumped from an original 26,000 voters to 250,000 thus, making the voting population there more than the voting population of the whole of Ife.

In the early 80s, the old Anambra State, made up of the present Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi States became a hell of a mess with the return to the country of the former Biafran leader, Chief Emeka Odimegwu Ojukwu, the Ikemba Nnewi and the subsequent efforts by the ruling NPN to recapture the state from its ruling NPP. Jim Nwobodo was the state governor while Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe was the party's National Leader and Presidential Candidate. First, it became a war of words but later degenerated into indescribable battles fought at different fronts:

Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was taunted by the Dr. Alex Ekwueme's cohorts in the NTA (Nigerian Television Authority), a federally owned news media that in other climes should cater for the well-being of generality of its citizens irrespective of political affiliations. Governor Jim Nwobodo was also taunted as "Ochomma I of Igbo land"-number one fashion governor of Igbo land. Not to be outdone, Chief Nwobodo created the Anambra State Broadcasting Service (ABS) and used it to fire back at his opponents. Chief Christian Onoh was called "ono okpa" and Chief Emeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu was called "edi afu onu", due to his beard. The politics of 2nd Republic in the old Anambra state was very nasty and full of all kinds of vulgarity. Physical and verbal attacks were the other of the day... Nwobodo's status as a divorcee was made a campaign issue. His adversaries were saying that "if he cannot rule his family, how can he rule a state" even when Nwobodo has demonstrated in the first term that he could effectively rule the state (Nwokoye, 2009: 3).

With the formation of Jim Vanguard and Ikemba Front, the battle became more violent as mayhem was visited on the state and its people, prominent of which was the famous battle at Nkpor Junction in which lives were lost, people injured and property destroyed.

One is not unmindful of the deadly confrontations between the erstwhile Anambra Peoples Forum (APF) led by the multibillionaire politician, Sir Emeka Offor and the government of Dr Chinweoke Mbadinuju of Anambra State. Different violent confrontations and clashes were recorded, as the government was almost grounded. Rallies and the government's programmes were disrupted by the APF which almost ran a parallel government. All efforts by Dr Mbadinuju to secure a return ticket were violently punctuated as dangerous weapons indiscriminately brandished and used.

The mayhem unleashed by political thugs on Anambra State following the 2003 elections in which Dr Chris Ngige, a serving governor was confronted and engaged to the extent of been kidnapped in an unprecedented political fisticuffs that set the entire state ablaze. Weapons were randomly used without qualms. Subsequently and in broad day light, political thugs

invaded Awka, Onitsha and Nnewi destroying whatever was in sight. According to *Vanguard* (in Edike, Ojeifo and Okoli, 2004:1);

A band of thugs yesterday went on the rampage in Awka and Onitsha, triggering fresh terror in Anambra State. They torched and bombed public buildings including parts of the state governor's office and the deputy governor's office. Also burnt were the three-storey building housing the State Independent Electoral Commission (ANSIEC) where vital electoral materials were stored, two transmitters of the Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS) in Onitsha and Enugwu-Ukwu, near Awka. The building housing the State Education Commission was not spared with missiles hauled at it, leaving several parts damaged in addition to several cars parked within the premises and ANSIEC adjacent to it. Many vehicles were vandalised or burnt in Awka metropolis by the hoodlums numbering about 200. They were said to have swooped on the city from the Onitsha end of the Enugu-Onitsha Expressway armed with explosives suspected to be bombs, pump action guns, axes, cutlasses and other lethal weapons. When *Vanguard* visited the Government House, some unexploded explosives suspected to be bombs were seen in front of the governor and deputy governor's offices as well as in front of the press unit.

In 2012, two Commissioners and an Advisor to Ebonyi State's governor barely escaped an assassination attempt when they were attacked at a petrol station by gunmen; a bystander was not so lucky and was killed in the gunfire (AOAV & NWGAV, 2013). Sobechi (in Adele, 2012) aptly reported that in Izzi Local Government of Ebonyi State suspected thugs loyal to a political party unleashed terror on St. Stephen's Catholic Church, Iziogo in the local council. What however snowballed into the violence was that an ANPP Chieftain and the Senatorial Candidate for Ebonyi North Senatorial District, Fidelis Nwankwo went to St. Stephen's Catholic Church on that Sunday in company of his colleagues, Senator Ucha, the ANPP governorship candidate and Emma Uguru, the House of Representatives candidate for Izzi/Abakaliki Federal Constituency. The thugs broke into the home of the Catechist, burnt his motor cycle, destroyed the yam barn and inflicted cuts on one person. In all, five motorcycles were burnt (Sobechi, in Adele, 2012).

On the eve of the National Assembly elections held on 9 April 2011, a bomb attack at the INEC Office in Suleja, Niger State, killed at least 10 people and injured several others. There were also bomb explosions in the Northern city of Maiduguri, Borno State, where the Boko Haram Islamic militant group is most active (Ploch 201:7 and Bekoe, 2011 in Orji and Uzochi, 2012). A few months before the 2011 general elections, over 200 persons had lost

their lives in communal unrests in Plateau State (Amnesty International 2011: 6). Furthermore, there were reports of election-related assassinations of political candidates and their supporters, and clashes between party supporters (Orji & Uzodi, 2012).

Enugu witnessed attack targeted at opponents of the state government. Such attacks by members ranged from disruption of meetings and gatherings, destruction of posters and billboards of aspirants. Former aspirant to Enugu West Senatorial Zone of the PDP, O. A. U Onyema and Chief Anayo Onwuegbu severally had their Billboards and posters destroyed by their opponents. In another development, in the build-up to the battle to control the soul of the PDP between Chime and his opponents, former Military Administrator of old Imo state, Commodore Anthony Oguguo and former Adviser on Local Government Affairs to Chimaroke Nnamani, Chief Sam Ejiofor had their homes invaded by political thugs. (Adele, 2012)

Causes of electoral Violence in Nigeria

In their classical submissions on the ‘Current Incentives to Electoral Violence in Nigeria’ Inokoba and Maliki (2011) aptly summarises, thus:

- State institutions promote violence
- There is a culture of impunity in Nigerian society
- Political leaders at all levels perpetrate electoral violence with impunity
- The absence of institutional and legal solutions against electoral violence
- Inadequate documented and public knowledge of electoral system and violence
- Prebendal politics as a the basis for electoral violence

Generally, electoral violence could be caused by the following factors:

- Hate Campaigns
- Rigging of elections
- Thuggery
- Abuse of power
- Electoral corruption and fraud, etc.

Implications of Electoral Violence for 2015 Elections in Nigeria

As a matter of fact, the impact of electoral violence on Nigeria’s general elections is grave just as its consequences are capable of truncating the dreams of millions of the citizens of this country, especially, when it is borne in mind that violence has not in any way contributed to

the development of any polity. The Country Director, IFES, Shalva Kipshidze, captures this more vividly when he stated *inter alia* that “Violence will not, it has never changed an election result... If it is not fair, if it is clearly not fair, the courts are the place to go. And I think everyone here knows that courts in Nigeria have overturned election results in the past where elections were not conducted fairly”. His stand was collaborated by the Chairman of INEC, Professor Attahiru Jega, who, on recognizing the calamity that could be generated by such, added that the Commission would do its best to ensure that the election would be free, fair and credible:

We are aware of importance of a violence free election. We have learnt from the 2011 post-election violence. The Commission is preparing much better than it did four years ago. We will continue to explain to the public the challenges we are facing and will request the support of stakeholders wherever necessary.

The necessity of free and fair elections can never be overemphasized bearing in mind what its opposite could do to a developing democratic system like Nigeria. There is no doubt that electoral violence in the 2015 elections would lead to the election of the wrong persons which would be dangerous to the entire polity. Election of the wrong people into political offices in Nigeria is a launching pad to poor leadership that cannot drive home the vision of the country especially; at the critical situation the country finds herself. Wrong leadership is evil and evil leadership is a forerunner to destruction and underdevelopment. Nigeria cannot afford this by playing into the hands of electoral violence.

This is possible because violent electoral activities scare away a good number of the electorate from participating in the process. Apathy is one of the worst negative experiences of a democratic experiment. It gives the few evil politicians the opportunity to vote or declare their unpopular candidates winners where the opposite should have been the case. Violence is destructive to both men and women. The situation becomes more critical as a good number of the voters in Nigeria are women. Violence forces people to stay away from exercising their franchise as they prefer to stay indoors than falling into the deadly hands of the political devils. This is unhealthy to the credibility of the 2015 elections. The situation in which a serving President was attacked in Katsina and Bauchi states, and bomb detonated in an APC rally arena in Port Harcourt at electioneering campaigns are already-made signal to many people that they are not safe and thus, should not participate in the elections.

Electoral violence is also capable of launching the country into more chaos or total anarchy. If one could recall the extent of the pre and post-election violence in the 2011 elections, one wonders the extent this year's could go if this is not curbed through credible elections. Post election violence is capable of entrenching the nation into uncontrollable situation that could lead into more maiming, deaths, destruction of private and public property and the experience of Kenya in her 2011 elections could be a child's play. This is so because violence begets more violence. The evil consequence of violence is violence and the peoples' reaction to regime violence is violence. This would be aided in great magnitude by the already existing menace of Boko Haram whose activities are already touching the sensibility of our collective existence.

Ultimately, the ongoing electoral violence, if not nipped in the bud now, could be a free and unmitigated gateway to the disintegration of the country as scientifically predicted by the US State Department. The country is already at the brink of total collapse and gradually moving to the status of a failed state. Thus, any serious challenge beyond the nation's controlling capacity becomes a clarion call 'to your tent, oh Israel' but God forbids because the problems that go with such disintegrative process is terribly overwhelming. What is happening in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Central African Republic, etc is just a tip of the iceberg.

The way forward

There is no way we could talk about the way forward in the current political dilemma without talking about the role the inability of the state to execute to the latter, the provisions of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended and the Electoral Act as they concern electoral offenders and perpetrators of electoral violence. According to Section 227 of the Constitution, "No association shall retain, organize, train or equip any person or group of person for the purpose of enabling them to be employed for the use of display of physical force or coercion in promoting any political objective or interest or in any such manner as arouse reasonable apprehension that they are organized and trained or equipped for that purpose". This provision is also collaborated by Section 81 of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) which prescribes punishment for contravention of Section 227 of the Constitution. It provides that any political party or association that contravenes the provision of section 227 of the Constitution commits an offence and is liable on conviction to: (a) N500, 000 for the first offence; (b) N700, 000 for any subsequent offence; (c) N50,000 for everyday the offence

continues. The Act continues that any person who aids or abets a political party in contravening section 227 of the Constitution, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of N500,000 or imprisonment for a term of 3 years or both. A critical insight into these provisions shows that there is nothing wrong whatsoever with the laws on electoral violence but the implementation. Nigeria has been noted to have one of the best and highest number of laws in the whole world but the worst in their implementation. Lai Mohammed once emphasized that what the:

nation needs was actually the political will to deal with electoral offenders in the interest of all and sundry. We have heard that in the past. But will political will to persecute them be there? It is one thing to make laws; it is another thing to ensure compliance (Nigerian Compass, Thursday, September, 2, 2010).

The way perpetrators of electoral violence go scot-free is really embarrassing. It could be recalled that at his inauguration, the former President, Musa Yar'Adua, accepted before Nigerians that the election that brought him to power was fraudulent. As a matter of fact, he should have been arrested and prosecuted, yet he was left to lead the country. Chris Ubah, the erstwhile political godfather and financier of political leaders in Anambra state was also said to have accepted responsibility for the 2004 mayhem: abduction of a sitting governor and destruction of public property, yet, today, he is said to be canvassing for votes for the exalted office of the Senator of the Federal Republic. Senator Omisore has not totally cleared his name from the suspicions generated by his alleged role in the killing of the former Attorney General, Bola Ige, yet, he was cleared to vie for the office of the Executive governor of Osun State, etc.

As perpetrators are punished so should the sponsors of such horrendous acts be brought to book. The present situation where only the direct perpetrators are arrested and later released without even mentioning their sponsors does not and cannot support violent-free elections in 2015 general elections. Both the perpetrators and sponsors must be punished according to the law.

Ordinarily, the law empowers INEC to arrest and prosecute electoral offenders. On a serious note, INEC is technically handicapped to do the job and that is the reason no serious conviction has been done in this direction. Most often, INEC staff are too busy with the demands of their office than the arrest and prosecution of electoral offenders. There is need

for an institutional framework charged with the sole responsibility of such prosecutions as established in some other countries. It could come in the form of Independent Electoral Offences Tribunal with impeccable law officers. If not for any other thing, the fear of being paraded and the embarrassments that come with such appearances could also serve as deterrents.

Hate campaigns during electioneering must be outlawed. The words used by candidates at campaigns must be issue-based. The idea of referring to opposition parties as ‘Mere Cockroaches’ is not only disguising but really inciting bearing in mind what happened in Rwanda when husbands labeled their wives as ‘Cockroaches’, while sons and daughters also proudly called their parents ‘Cockroaches’ and vice versa. It became an unprecedented genocidal engagement that turned the whole country upside down. The purported calls by the wife of the President, Dame Patience, for people to stone anyone that said ‘Change’ is really disturbing. Enabling laws must be put in place against this and the electoral Umpire, INEC, should call the parties to order. The current outbursts from Lai Mohammed, Kani Fayode and Olisa Metu could be too dangerous for our collective existence. The first and second Peace Accords between the leading candidates are okay but may not go beyond the letters because they are of minimal legal consequences.

Weapons availability and cheapness of small and light weapons also give the youth the courage to engage in violent political activities and intimidations while at the same time, instill fear in the people who should have challenged them. In some areas, automatic weapons are so cheap they can be bought in exchange for a chicken or a few pounds of rice (Global Policy, 2015). It was that kind of courage that those youth numbering about 200 invaded and burnt down Awka in the full glare of the people. Anambrarians watched helplessly as those hoodlums unleashed mayhem without being challenged. This is why the political thugs could go into the polling stations and take away ballot boxes. Obviously, it wouldn’t have been possible if they were not armed. Definitely, the people would have challenged them.

Bearing in mind that over 97% of electoral violence is perpetrated by the youth, the issue of youth unemployment should be vigorously addressed. While commending the current skills acquisition programme, SURE-P etc of government, one may be tempted to state that these

are not enough for a population in which about 70 million people are not gainfully employed. Little stipends for electoral violence is an enough attraction in this situation.

Enlightenment campaigns must be intensified so as to educate the people on the dangers of violence as well as discourage them from such.

The people on their part can also petition the International Criminal Court (ICC) in glaring cases of electoral violence sponsorship and perpetration. Former Ivorian President's wife, Mrs Gbagbo, was recently sentenced to 20 years imprisonment by the Court for her role in the country's electoral violence. The President of Kenya, Odinga, is also standing trial at the Court on election-related violence. If such happens in Nigeria, it will serve as a preventive therapy to the already overdosed political gladiators in the country.

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