

Political Violence In Nigeria: 2023 Presidential Election In Perspective

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Abstract

Election is one of the fundamental features of democracy; It is the ultimate expression of the popular will of the people and it allows inclusivity and popular participation as all eligible citizens who duly registered as electorate choose the leaders of their own choice among many contestants for the good governance and development of the societies. General elections are conducted in Nigeria every four years which produce the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Members of the National Assembly, State Governors and the Members of the State Assemblies. However, elections in Nigeria have been tortuous, violent- ridden and far from being free, fair, credible and peaceful over the years. It is usually marred with manipulations, killings, arsons, ballot box stuffing, ballot box snatchings, multiple voting, gangsterism and recently introduced vote buying and vote selling. This study focuses on electoral violence as it manifested once again in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria using the group conflicts theory/Karl Marx's dialectical materialism. It also relies on secondary data for its analysis. We objectively looked at its devastating and baleful effects on the entire nation, electorate, officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission, security agencies, its outcome and the image of the country in the comity of nations. We therefore recommended among other things that mechanism should be put in place to fast track the accreditations, voting, counting, collations and announcement of presidential election results within forty eight hours and ensuring the neutrality of the monitoring security agencies for not just for free and fair elections, but also violent-free elections in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Democracy, Election, and Political Violence*

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I. Introduction

An election is a process by which people choose their leaders. It is a formal way for citizens to have a say in how they are governed. Elections can be held to choose a single person or multiple people to hold public office. The most common type of election is a single-winner election, in which one candidate is elected to hold office. Other types of elections include multi-winner elections, in which multiple candidates are elected to hold office, and referendums, in which voters are asked to vote on a specific issue. There are a number of different ways that elections can be conducted. In some countries, elections are held using a first-past-the-post system, in which the candidate with the most votes wins the election. In other countries, elections are held using a proportional representation system, in which the number of seats a party wins in parliament is proportional to the number of votes it receives. The way that elections are conducted can have a significant impact on the outcome of the election. For example, a first-past-the-post system can make it difficult for smaller parties to win seats in parliament, while a proportional representation system can make it easier for smaller parties to win seats.

Elections are an important part of democracy. They allow citizens to have a say in how they are governed and help to ensure that government officials are accountable to the people they represent. It is important to understand the different types of elections and the different ways that they can be conducted so that one can make an informed decision when voting.

However, since Nigeria's independence in 1960 elections in Nigeria have been riddled with violence, all the legislations that have been put in place to forestall this menace have been ineffective because of inordinate drive of the Nigerian politicians to win elections at all cost, this is not unconnected with the enormous pecuniary rewards attached to these offices.

Electoral violence is a major concern in Nigeria, and the 2023 presidential election is no exception. There were a number of reports of violence in the lead-up to the election, including attacks on voters and political party officials, as well as the destruction of property.

Worried by this perennial ugly situation, the National Peace Committee, chaired by a former military leader, General Abdulsalami Abubakar in September, 2022 rallied presidential Candidates of all political parties to sign a peace accord to adhere strictly to peaceful and unprovocative electioneering process and put the electoral act 2022 in focus in all their doings (Punch, 13th Feb. 2023)

Electoral violence has a number of negative consequences for Nigeria. It undermines the credibility of the electoral process, discourages people from voting, and can lead to instability and conflict.

The 2023 presidential election was a critical moment for Nigeria. The outcome of the election has a major impact on the country's future. It is important that the election's aftermaths be properly managed by the elected government. The Nigerian government and the international community must take steps to prevent electoral violence and to hold those responsible for violence accountable. This study focuses on political violence as it manifested once again in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria and to achieve this, the paper is divided into six sections. Section 1 is the introduction, section 2 bothers on definition of concepts while section 3 discusses the theoretical framework. Section 4 gives a brief history of political violence in Nigeria; section 5 discusses violence in the 2023 presidential election while section 6 gives a summary of effects of political violence on the system and section 7 contains the conclusion and recommendations.

II. Conceptual Clarification

Democracy: It connotes a representative form of government with participatory decision making and accountability and guarantees of human and civil rights without whose exercise the political system of democracy could not function. It does not connote good governance or efficiency or lack of corruption, except to the extent that periodic elections act as a rectifier of ineptitude or malice in government behavior. (Agagu, 2006) Democracy is a form of government where the people have the power to make decisions. This power can be exercised directly, through referendums and town hall meetings, or indirectly, through elected representatives. In a democracy, the people are free to express their opinions and to criticize the government. The law applies equally to everyone, regardless of their social status or political affiliation. Democracy is not perfect, but it is considered to be the best form of government because it gives the people a voice in their government and protects their basic rights and freedoms. Democracy is a complex system, and there are many different ways to implement it. However, all democracies share the same basic goal: to give the people a voice in their government and to protect their basic rights and freedoms.

Election

An election is a process in which people vote to choose a person or group of people to hold an official position. The positions that are elected can vary depending on the country or region, but they often include positions in government, such as the president, members of parliament, and mayors. Elections can also be used to choose representatives for organizations, such as trade unions or sports clubs. Election is central to the democratic process; it is the soul of democratic method (Odion- Akhaine, 2011)

There are many different types of elections, but they all share some common features. Firstly, elections are usually held at regular intervals, such as every four years. Secondly, elections are typically open to all citizens of the country or region, although there may be some restrictions on who can vote, such as age or residency requirements. Thirdly, elections are usually conducted by a government agency or independent body, and the results are announced publicly.

Election is an important part of democracy because they allow citizens to have a say in who governs them. By voting, citizens can express their preferences for different policies and candidates. Elections can also help to hold government accountable, as they can be voted out of office if they do not perform.

Political Violence

For political violence, the definition of political violence by Anifowose (1982) is adopted.

The use or threat of physical act carried out by an individual or individuals within a political system against another individual or individuals and /or property, with the intent to cause injury or death to persons and/or damage or destruction to property; and whose objective, choice of target of victims, surrounding Circumstances, implementation, and effects have political significance, that is, tend to modify the behaviour of others in the existing arrangement of power structure that has some consequences for the political system. (Anifowose 1984:4)

Owing from the above definition, political violence tend to be used by political actors to influence the electoral process and the outcome of elections. Violence associated with elections have often generate casualties which had always affected the unarmed civilians and few politicians. Some of the cases that were reported prior to the election include the murder of an APC ward chairman in Kaduna State in April 2022 (Ibrahim Hassan

Wuyo), the PDP candidate for Ideo North & South Federal constituency in Imo State was murdered in his residence in January, 2023 (UdoraOrizu, This Day Live, 2023). A former PDP leader in Abia State was also killed in Ohafia Local Government Area in March, 2022 (Sunday Nwakanma, Punch Nigeria, March, 2022).

Of a fact, the Nigerian polity is characterised by political polarisation which has deeply divided the country. This polarization has created an atmosphere of tension and mistrust, which has made it easier for violence to erupt. Also, Nigeria's electoral institutions are weak and often corrupt. This makes it difficult to hold those responsible for electoral violence accountable. This factor has entrenched the culture of impunity in the country in which those who commit electoral violence are often not punished. This makes it more likely that people will resort to violence to achieve their goals since they know they would escape the wrath of the law.

Moreover, according to Abegunde (2007:144), electoral violence that have been witnessed in Nigeria stemmed from the political culture in which every contestant in the political process always wants to win, but is not ready to accept defeat. Thus, losers in any election usually become frustrated and aggrieved at the winner and are ready to inflict injury, or death to, persons and destruction of property. Also, the custom of fighting to attain and preserve power and influence which was a fundamental determinant of pre-colonial warfare and communal expansion by the African power elite is another causal factor for political violence. They gradually began to fall back to the use of violence as a path to attain power and keep it. Furthermore, thuggery which is one of the characteristics of the Nigerian politics is responsible for violence during and after elections as it has become a means of sustaining power by politicians and also a means to livelihood to the thugs. The end-product of thuggery is violence because they usually achieve their aims through it.

Electorate

The term "electorate" refers to the body of eligible voters in a particular geographical area or political jurisdiction. It represents the individuals who have the right to participate in the democratic process by casting their votes in elections and selecting their representatives.

The electorate refers to the eligible voting population within a specific area or political jurisdiction. It represents individuals who have the right to participate in democratic processes by casting their votes. The electorate is responsible for choosing representatives and shaping the composition of the government and equally have the power to influence the direction of governance through their electoral choices.

In democratic systems, the electorate plays a vital role in expressing citizens' preferences and influencing political outcomes. Political parties and candidates focus their efforts on engaging with the electorate to secure support and win votes. They employ various strategies, such as mobilizing voters and communicating their policy platforms. It is important to recognize that the electorate is diverse, encompassing various demographics and social groups. Factors like socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, and religion can influence the preferences and voting behavior of different segments within the electorate. Understanding the characteristics and concerns of the electorate is crucial for political actors to effectively engage with and address the needs and aspirations of voters.

Political parties, candidates, and campaigns focus their efforts on engaging with the electorate to secure their support and votes. This involves strategies such as mobilizing voters, conducting political campaigns, and communicating policy platforms to attract the electorate's attention and garner their support.

III. Theoretical Framework

This paper is premised on the Group Conflict/ Karl Marx's dialectical materialism because they both shared the same perception on the nature of the society and political violence in human societies. The group conflict theorists identify political violence during elections as a product of the struggle for power among groups within the society because political power is conceived as the major source of economic power, thus, the contest into political offices is always a "do or die" affair especially in the Nigerian society. Aliegba (2004) corroborates this when he stated that conflict is an aspect of the social interaction that usually arises from the pursuit of divergent interests, goals and aspirations by individuals and groups in defined social and physical environments. Groups and individuals pursue their own interests struggling over the access and control of societal scarce resources which often times result into political violence. Attention is given to class, race, gender, ethnic and religious inclinations because they are perceived as grounds of the most pertinent and lasting struggles in the society which often lead to tension for political succession and sharing of the scarce resources.

In the same vein, Marxist theoretical perspective share same assumptions as Abba (2010) observes that dialectical materialism is premised on man; inherent motivations of economy and struggles to get, control and maintain political power at all cost justify the choice of this theory. This attest to the incidents of political violence witnessed in Nigeria out of a political culture in which every contestant in the political process always want to win but not ready to accept defeat because of the belief that access to political power enhances the

attainment of economic pursuits. This clearly reveals the age-long manipulation of violence by the Nigerians in their quest for political power. This assertion was supported by Obasanjo (2002 cited in Lawal, 2007:169) *we fight, and sometimes shed blood to achieve and retain political power because for us in Nigeria, the political kingdom has for long been the gateway to the economic kingdom.*

IV. Brief History Of Political Violence In Nigeria

Records had shown that violent conflicts had characterised the Nigerian polity even in the colonial era. The women's riot of 1929, the Egbo uprising of 1931, the general strike of 1945, the Enugu Colliery Strike of 1949 and the Kano riot of 1953 are all manifestation of the tension that had been in the Nigerian societies. (Anifowose, (1982) cited in Ikyase & Egberi 2015). Thus, political violence has become deeply entrenched in the Nigeria political system because over the years her electoral process has been characterised by different forms of violence which do occur before, during and after elections. Since independence in 1960, there had been incidences of political violence which at times nearly torn the country apart. These include the Action Group crisis of 1962, the census crisis of 1962/63; the Federal election crisis of 1964, the Western Region election crisis in 1965 which led to the first military coup; the 1983 General election crisis following the landslide victory of the National Party of Nigeria in Oyo and Ondo states that were seen as the stronghold of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). The ensuing violence was spontaneous and accompanied by arson, assassination and a complete breakdown of law and order. The June 12, 1993 presidential election also had its own records of violence in different forms and degrees of violence which have characterized the Fourth Republic. It was reported that clashes between supporters of the then ruling PDP and the CPC Congress for Progressive Change claimed an estimated 800 lives after the declaration of President Goodluck Jonathan as the President-elect in the 2011 elections; a number of NYSC corps were killed in the mayhem in Bauchi, Gombe and others while hundred have reportedly died in 2015 & 2019 elections (EU Report, 2011 in Alfa & Otaida, 2012; Adebayo, 2022).

The recruitment of political thugs for electoral purposes has been prevalent in the history of electoral politics in Nigeria. They are hired by politicians to intimidate voters during elections, harass and attack opponents, INEC officials or protect politicians; who in turn protect them from interrogation by the state security institutions. Some politicians are reported to have links with cult groups especially in Southern Nigeria (Sahara Reporters, July, 2022). This culture of thuggery has not only been imbibed as part of the country's political behaviour, it has become one of the major causes of political violence which have bedevilled the Nigerian politics.

These incidences of violence have always affected the unarmed civilians (NYSC corps that were killed during the 2011 post-election violence) and few politicians. Some of the cases that were reported prior to the 2023 general elections include the murder of an APC ward chairman in Kaduna State in April 2022 (Ibrahim Hassan Wuyo), the PDP candidate for Ideato North & South Federal constituency in Imo State was murdered in his residence in January, 2023 (Udora Orizu, This Day Live, 2023). A former PDP leader in Abia State was also killed in Ohafia Local Government Area in March, 2022 (Nwakanma, Punch Nigeria, March, 2022). INEC that is saddled with the responsibility of organizing, conducting and supervising, as well as registering eligible voters and political parties has also had its share in the violence that always followed elections in Nigeria. INEC offices across the country have been subject to looting, arson, attacks as well as harassment, abductions and assassination of electoral staff. Violence which has characterised the Nigerian polity is a direct consequence of the politics of intolerance, repression and oppression, exclusion, frustration and bitterness.

V. Violence in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

The 2023 presidential election was finally held on the 25th of February, 2023 despite the pessimism of many Nigerians regarding the seriousness of the Federal government to conduct the election and the state of preparedness of the election umpire, Independent National Electoral Commission because of the twin problems of scarcity of the naira and unavailability of premium motor spirit (petrol) that caused untold hardship to the people. Party factionalism was a major problem for the 2023 elections as parties continued to dwell on personalities, not ideologies which is typical of Nigerian politics. Defections associated with the 2023 elections were more inconsequential than in the past elections, particularly 2015 and 2019 when even the presiding officers of the National assembly defected to opposition party. Most notably, presidential candidate, Peter Obi defected from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to run under the banner of the Labour Party. The 2022 Electoral Act enables political parties to conduct primaries through direct and indirect voting or by consensus 180 days before Election Day. However, transparency of the party primaries did not largely improve from 2019 as most parties opted for indirect nominations or voting-by consensus, preventing INEC and citizen observers from monitoring the full primary voting process. The high price of nomination forms alone limited the number of candidates able to viably compete in the primaries, including those representing marginalized groups. Intra-

party conflicts that arose from the primaries continued to play out in the courts and during the campaigns as INEC and various party factions challenged the final party lists.

More, so abuse of incumbency by various political office holders distorted the playing field and there were widespread allegations of vote buying. (IRI/ NDI, 2023) Media provided an extensive coverage of the campaigns of the three leading political parties, while disinformation interfered with voters' right to make an informed choice of candidates. The Naira cash and fuel scarcity negatively impacted the campaign environment. Related protests and social unrest, mostly in South-West and South-South, intensified shortly before the elections adding to insecurity. At least nine people were killed and many injured in clashes between police and protesters (IRI/ NDI, 2023). This was despite the signing of the peace accord by the presidential candidates of the parties prior the election (Premium Time, 2023). The APC had to suspend campaign activities in Lagos, Oyo, and Ondo, citing the cash and fuel crisis. Several attacks were geared toward candidates and party supporters in which unarmed civilians were not left out. For the most part, however, these attacks remain unclaimed. Unidentified armed groups were responsible for at least half of all violence against party members in the run-up to the election, suggesting that the perpetrators of this violence can often act with impunity.

Members and candidates of the APC and PDP were most hit by these attacks. In one of the deadliest reported incidents, the PDP candidate for Ideato North and South federal constituency in Imo state was killed in his residence in Akokwa community in January 2023. Female politicians were not left out because they also had their own share of these attacks. A former PDP leader in Abia state was among four people killed in Ohafia Local Government Area (LGA) in March 2022, while an LP leader in Kaura LGA of Kaduna state was murdered in November 2022 after gunmen raided her house.

Here are some specific examples of electoral violence that were reported in the lead-up and during the 2023 presidential election and accompanied by devastating consequences.

- In Lagos state some electorate were attacked and threats issued to them before and during the election by a former Lagos state NURTW boss, Mr Musiliu Akinsanya (Premium Time, 2023)
- In January 2023, gunmen attacked a political rally in the southern state of Imo, killing at least five people.
- Hoodlums attacked Ojoto Local Government Secretariat of Anambra State and burned the building housing the INEC office (Obianeri, 2023:7).
- A member of the APC in the Ilesa-East Local Government of Osun State was killed in front of his father's house in Ilesa (Bamigbola, 2023:14).
- In February 2023, a group of armed men attacked a voter registration centre in the northern state of Kano, injuring several people.
- In March 2023, a mob attacked a polling station in the south-eastern state of Enugu, destroying voting materials and preventing people from voting. In Rivers State, gunmen attacked a convoy of election officials, killing one person and injuring several others.
- In Kano State, a mob attacked a polling station, setting fire ballots and voting materials on fire.
- In Imo State, armed thugs attacked a group of voters, killing two people and injuring several others.
- In Kogi State, 101 INEC officials were kidnapped by armed men.
- In Plateau State, a clash between supporters of two different political parties left at least five people dead.
- Hoodlums attacked Osun Representative supporters where 15 people were inflicted with machete cuts and had to be treated in Osogbo (Bamigbola, 2023:9).
- Three security ades were killed by gunmen while they were proceeding as an advanced team for the PDP national campaign rally in Abia. (Ochei 2023:4).
- Supporters of the New Nigerian People's Party (NNPP) and All Progressives Congress (APC) clashed in Gwale LGA of Kano State where the NNPP presidential candidate, Rabiun Kwankwaso comes from (ACLED, 2023).

In the south- east violence were taken to new dimensions as INEC offices were set ablaze and valuable equipment destroyed and some carted away; convoy of politicians and aspirants were attacked, billboard destroyed, campaign venues razed, campaign offices burnt down, and many people lost their lives in the process.

VI. Effects of Political Violence

Political violence has negatively impacted the Nigerian political system since the colonial era and it is unfortunate that we are yet to evolve a polity void of these avoidable violent conflicts that have characterised our electoral process. The effects are made manifest in all facets of the human society- social, economic, religious, cultural and political. It had led to wanton destruction of lives and property especially the active population (youth) who are usually recruited as political thugs by the politicians. These are the people who are to contribute immense to the progress of the country through their potentials and energy but are wasted all in the name of fighting the cause of a political party /candidate(s)/ ethnic group(s). Division among communities due

to ethnic or religious tensions are also consequences. The violent conflicts which usually accompany the conduct of elections in Nigeria has also led to the increase in the level of insecurity of lives and property. This has majorly discourage foreign investors to come to the country which would have improved industrialisation and invariably reduce the rate of unemployment among the youth. Another resultant effect of this insecurity is low voters' turnout during elections and more importantly apathy towards the entire political process. This is made manifest in the low turnout of the electorate to collect their Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs). For instance, it was reported that 303,955 PVCs were awaiting collection in Ondo State as February 17, 2023 few day to the presidential election. Also well-meaning Nigerians are discouraged from participating either as candidates/ electorate because they do not want to lose their lives to the conflicts that always accompany our elections. Thus, the political process is left in the hands of a few who can manoeuvre their way in the violence to their advantage and the process is invariably dominated by incompetent persons who have nothing good to offer the country.

Other adverse effects of such violence include injuries to civilians and security personnel, eroding democratic values and citizens' trust in the electoral system. Additionally, electoral violence disrupts economic activities, weakens institutions- education, health, economic religious & cultural-; promotes electoral fraud, and damages Nigeria's international reputation. Humanitarian consequences, such as displacement of populations, can also arise. To address this issue, a collaborative effort among the government, political parties, civil society organizations, and the international community is essential to ensure peaceful, transparent, and inclusive elections in Nigeria.

VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

As earlier pointed out, since independence in 1960, violence has been an integral part of the electoral history of Nigeria. In the first republic, violence that erupted in the defunct Western region house of assembly 'operation wetie' occasioned the failure of the republic which led to the first military coup of January 15th 1966. Likewise, 1983 elections were also marred by violence particularly in the Western parts, Ondo and Oyo states to be precise. The violence include: assassinations, ballot box snatching, ballot box stuffing, looting, brigandage and arsons were widespread which equally led to the failure of the second republic with the coup d'état of 1983 led by Major – General M . Buhari. Since the outset of the fourth republic in 1999 all the elections of 2003, 2007, 2013, 2015, 2019 and 2023 none of them can be divorced from violence. On the final note however, Nigerian elections have been immersed in violence in her electoral history, apart from that of 1979 and 1999 that were midwived by the retiring military governments, the 2023 is the least violent in all the past elections in Nigeria. Nigerians must strictly adhere to the provisions of the electoral act of 2022 which we believe would change the wrong narrative.

Recommendations

As patriotic Nigerians and scholars who have studied and participated in Nigerian political process, the following pragmatic and workable recommendations are made.

- Independent National Electoral Commission should develop a system that will make it possible to conduct and announce the results of presidential election within forty- eight hours as against what recently happened in the last elections,
- The elected officers should be paid salaries comparable to other public and civil servants to avoid do-or-die attitude as employed by politicians during elections in Nigeria.
- Nigerian government should declare a state of emergency on the economy so that it can create jobs to accommodate the army of unemployed youth used by politicians as thugs, to cause mayhem during elections.
- INEC should ensure images are uploaded to its IREV portal immediately as they are received.
- Political actors should fully adhere to their Peace Accord commitments, including seeking redress of electoral complaints that may arise through proper legal channels and abide by the outcomes of judicial proceedings.
- Parties and candidates should discourage supporters to desist from embarking on any acts of violence, particularly during and after the collation and announcement of results.
- Security forces should prioritize the maintenance of law and order in areas likely to be targets of strategic election violence.
- The international community should publicly sanction government and party officials who orchestrate, tolerate, or encourage electoral violence.

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