Electoral Violence and Democratic Consolidation: 
The Experience of Nigeria

by

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Abstract
The problems of violence in the electoral processes, with particular reference to Nigeria were investigated in this research. The aggression and State fragility theories were employed. The authors were of the opinion that most of the elections in Nigeria have been marred by violent destruction of lives and property, rigging and other fraudulent practices which have made the citizens to get discouraged with the electoral processes. The activities of godfathers were highlighted and the problems they have created in the belief system of the people that without their presence, no individual could win elections on their merits in Nigeria were examined. It was concluded that proper application of the rule of law and strengthening bureaucratic structures will go a long way in combating violence and fraud in Nigeria’s general elections.


1. Introduction
Elections and electoral processes are the methods by which governments change hands from one level to another and from one administration to another. Elections play a central role in the success of democracy and by extension the success of the country’s democracy depends on peaceful and successful election.

It is through election that the power which is entrusted by the people to their representatives is transformed with authority, that is, right to govern. Elections accord government, the legitimacy or acceptability it requires from the people to govern successfully and through it accountability is enforced (Istifamus, 2003).

The history of Nigeria’s democratic experiments demonstrates the opposite of what elections ought to be. Elections and electoral processes have generated so much animosities which have in some cases, threatened the corporate existence of the country.
A case in point is the annulment of the June, 12 1993 presidential elections. Most of these violence and crises often instigate military incursion into the Nation’s Political process and governance. The first election in 1964 held barely after four years of independence, was marred by boycotts, malpractices and violence. As a result of the above-mentioned development, the military took over the administration of the country in 1966. Democracy remains the most popular and fascinating form of government to all people and government throughout the world because of its emphasis on the right to political participation through elections (Alapiki, 2004). Since the enthronement of democracy in May 1999, the conduct of the general elections has remained very disturbing and worrisome. Different institutions and international observers have characterized the Nigerian elections as rigged and marred by violence. In fact, most Nigerians accepted the past elections only to ensure peaceful co-existence and to engender regime change. The general elections in Nigeria have been adjudged as choice less, exercises in which the outcome are often determined before the election date (Kohnert, 2004) The consolidation of Nigerian democracy through conduct of credible election in Nigeria have remained a mirage.

Credible elections remained the choice of modern democracy and the frequency, fairness and openness of such elections are crucial to the political stability of the polity. The extent to which elections advance democratic order depends to a large extent on its credibility and fairness. The existence of a veritable electoral system is crucial for the sustenance of democracy. It makes democracy a living organism for proper participation in election. Electoral system is made up of complex rules and regulations that govern the selection of officials for political office (Nnoli, 2003). It provides citizens with the freedom to choose their rulers and to decide on public policy.

Under the democratic system, citizens who are legally qualified to exercise their franchise are provided with opportunity to choose political alternatives and to make decisions that express their preferences. In a multi-party dispensation, this choice is made up of several parties and candidates competing in the electoral market. In democracies, election performs several functions. It is an instrument through which the voting public compels accountability from elected officials and it facilitates political recruitment. It enables citizens to make enlightened choices, and it confers moral authority on political leaders.

Elections play an important role in a democracy hence elaborate arrangements are usually put in place to ensure that people fully exercise their freedom to choose their representatives. This further requires that transparency and equity are the hallmarks of the activities of government. The evidence should be clearly seen through the process, from the registration of political parties and voters, to the casting of votes, collation and announcements of results. In other words, elections must reflect the wishes of the people as clearly expressed through the voting pattern. However, this has not worked well since the inception of this democratic government. In fact, since Nigeria became independent in 1960 till date, general elections in Nigeria have been characterized with violence and electoral fraud.
The issues of electoral fraud and violence have occurred in all general elections in Nigeria. Most of these elections particularly the 1979 and 1983 elections were marked with killings and destructions of properties worth billions of naira. The 1999 general elections were characterized by widespread and monumental electoral malpractices and irregularities. This made the opposition party, the All Nigerian People Party (ANPP) to challenge the authenticity of that presidential election in court. The outcome was merely accepted in order to allow the military government to get out of office. (Kohnert, 2004). The elections of 2003 could be compared to that of 1964 and 1983 elections in Nigeria which had widespread violence. The level of violence was high and there were widespread inter-party clashes, political assassinations and community unrest in already volatile areas. The 2007 general elections equally witnessed widespread violence at both intra-party and inter-party level. The level of violence was such that even declaring an intention to contest election was enough risk to one’s life.

The 2011 general election witnessed a widespread violence in the election process. The post-election violence was so unprecedented that observers doubted the survival of the Nigeria state. According to the Human Right watch on the outcome of the 2011 election in Nigeria;

Deadly election and communal violence in Northern Nigeria following the April 2011 presidential voting left more than 800 people dead. The victims were killed in three days of rioting in 12 Northern states. The violence began with widespread protests by supporters of the main opposition candidate Mohammadu Buhari, a Northern Muslim from the congress for progressive change, following the re-election of the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta in the South, who was the candidate of the ruling People’s Democratic Party. The protests degenerated into violent riots and killings in the Northern States of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara. Relief officials estimated that more than 65,000 people were displaced. According to Christian Association of Nigeria, at least 170 Christians were killed in the post-election riots, hundreds more were injured, and thousands displaced.

The major aim of this research was to highlight the very serious electoral violence that Nigeria has witnessed since independence to the extent that it might be right to postulate that Nigeria’s democracy is synonymous with electoral violence and fraud: a feature that is not healthy for our democratic process.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the aggression theory which explains the nature of man. The two contrasting views of human nature discussed in the classical writings of Thomas Hobbs and Jean-Jacques Rousseas will be used to lay the foundation and the understanding of electoral violence universally and in Nigeria in particular. Thomas Hobbes stated in
leviathan (1651) that humans are naturally brutish and societal laws and their enforcement are consequently required to curb our Natural aggressive instinct. On his own part, Jean-Jacques-Rousses (Milliband, 1977) conceptualized the Nobles Savage, who is naturally happy and good and the restriction imposed by society leads to aggressive and corrupt behavior. These two basic opposing views and ideals emerged in psychological theories of human aggression. Also, this pessimistic Hobbesian view of innate aggressive instinct is found in Sigmund Freud’s psychological theory of 1960 which emphasized the role of external factors in producing aggressive behaviors.

Looking at the above theories, the Hobbesian view is that violence occurs because of nature. We are created or made to be violent. In other words, electoral violence is a function of the nature of man, which is meant to be aggressive even at elections.

Rousseau on the other hand, disagrees that Nigeria’s electoral violence can only be violent due to the influence of external factors. It is the examination of these external factors that reveals the reason the elections are violent.

Another theory that explains the nature of electoral violence in Nigeria is State fragility theory. This explains that certain institutions account for the reason for electoral violence. The Nigerian institutional functionalism accounts for the presence of violence by examining the relationship between institutions and political participation (Biegon, 2007). Huntington (1968) stated that, political disorder is more likely to occur in societies marked by high level of political participation but with low or weak processes of political institutions. What this means is that the type and nature of institutions determine the phenomenon of violence. In other words, violence can occur when the state fails in its responsibilities to the people or when it does not respond to popular demand. This is the situation in Nigeria and violence is more likely to occur as a result of poverty which is a means of expressing anger and frustration.

Finally, the structuralism theory is on the social stratification and configuration of power relations among social forces within the state. These stratifications can also engender violence as a way of expressing dissatisfaction for the nature of the state. The views of the structuralism theory are based on the premise that if the state is not properly organized it can lead to violence. The nature of the state is a very important factor that can breed violence.

In the case of Nigeria, the birds that lay the golden eggs are excluded from the share of the wealth. The Niger Delta states where the oil is produced are neglected, while the proceeds of the oil are used in developing Abuja and other states. This is a very serious structural factor that engenders violence. In other words, where certain percentage of people is excluded from participation and benefits of the nation, such excluded population is bound to react and express their grievances. Following from Roseau’s explanation, Nigeria lacks good governance and there is deprivation of the economic resources of the nation and irresponsible leadership. These factor engenders violence.

Another theory that has explained the occurrence of violence is the Marxist theory of the state which tries to refute or counteract the Liberal theory that states that the state is an independent force which is neutral and takes care of every member of the society. The Marxists are of the opinion that the state is an instrument of class domination
and primitive capital accumulation and dominant class with their foreign collaborators (Lenin, 1984). Miliband (1997) opined that the state is a source of economic power as well as major means of production. The state is the apparatus for class domination and reproduction of economic power that shapes and determines the nature of the contest for its control. All these characters or values inherent in the state, makes electoral process and political struggle perpetually fraudulent and violent. This theory provides an insight to the reasons there are much struggle and fraud in Nigeria’s electoral processes. It also provides insights to the role of the political elite in the political processes.

3. The Problem of Godfatherism

This is a recent and a dangerous emerging trend in the Nigerian political process. It is a situation in which an intending candidate must depend on a particular person or group of influential and very wealthy personalities called godfathers in order to win an election. The danger and implications of this is that contestants no longer rely on their popularity with the electorates but on wings and caprices of the said godfather for success. According to Abioye (2007), godfatherism is a term used to describe the relationship between a godfather and a chosen godson. It is a kind of politics where by influential person in a popular or ruling party will assist someone usually a godson to emerge as the candidate of the party at all cost. He will help him to emerge victorious in the election irrespective of whether he is a popular candidate or not (Aleplika, 2007). Ebohon and Oghoator (2012) posited that in Nigerian Politics, the godfather performs certain services for his client with the aim of enriching himself and consolidating his political base at the expense of his client and larger society. This has become a pestilence to the practice of true democracy in Nigeria. Godfatherism has become a factor in Nigerian politics in that very few politicians can achieve success without the rigging influence and support of the godfathers. It is the desire of the politicians to rule at all cost, and this has resulted in political offices in Nigeria been sold to the highest bidder. They decide who emerges as the governor, legislators and senators. They ensure that they get into political offices by all means. They are ready to kill and destroy the opposition and influence the judiciary and the state security operatives like the police and the SSS. They have thugs who are ready to accomplish their evil and wicked desires. Electoral frauds and violence are perpetuated at every elections resulting in the deaths of women and innocent citizens. Ballot boxes are snatched, falsified and inflated election results are declared. The case of Anambra State after the 1983 Governorship election where Dr. Chris Ngige decided not to obey his godfather, Christ Uba is very instructive. In the crises that resulted, the governor was abducted by ordinarily civilians who forced him to relinquish and resign his position as the governor of the state. Also, in Enugu state during the tenure of Governor Mbadinuju, the schools were closed for more than one year, on the ground that there was no money to pay the teachers. Meanwhile, he was using the state money to service his godfathers. As long as these political sons continue to pay homage to their godfathers, their stay in office is guaranteed regardless of their performance or the people’s interest. The implication of this is that the electorates complains are not considered relevant. This
translates into bad governance resulting in failure in socio-political and economic transformation of the societies (Obioye, 2000).

4. **The Nature of Nigerian State and Electoral Violence**

The problem of electoral crisis in Nigeria could only be understood when situated within the context of Nigerian character. In Nigeria, those that control the state play a dominant role in the national economy which leads to corruption and electoral manipulation and fraud. The resultant effects are the problems of underdevelopment, poverty and misinterpretation of what politics ought to be.

They see the state as a primary institution for wealth accumulation that provides power domination and control (Jega, 2000). This made the state not only the biggest spender of resources but also the largest employer of labour.

This character of the Nigerian state encourages state control of opportunities in commerce and a wide range of jobs in every administration. Eguen (2005) asserted that this political power becomes a license to wealth and means of the security. It is within this context of the role of the state in the political economy that one can explain the scrambling of Nigeria’s governing elites for state power as seen in the naked manipulation of the electoral processes with all kinds of wickedness and impunity. This process explains the reason the political elites struggle to capture the political space in order to use it for their own ends. Politics becomes a do or die process, and he who gets elected, has captured all and treats the state like a conquered territory. This makes the Nigerian political process very expensive and costly as the candidates spend a lot of money and even sell their personal belongings in order to win elections of all cost. The election in Nigeria has become a very big business empire and it has become very difficult to prosecute electoral offenders because most of the offenders are protected by the parties and powers that be.

5. **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Since the introduction of elective principles in Nigeria by the Clifford constitution of 1922, Nigerian electoral processes have been marred by violence and confusion. It was expected that since this country have moved from one government or regime to another, these episodes of electoral violence should have stopped and the Nigerian society moved from a lower level to a higher one. But the opposite is the case. This is the resultant effect of the political discord sown by the British government for their own selfish end. However, one would have expected the people of Nigeria to understand one another overtime and unite for the better (Ola, 2007). The divide and rule policy, that is, playing one ethnic group against another, robbed Nigerians of a common ideology and identity derived from Nation Building. Also, this divide of rule policy paved the way for different kinds of leaders we have today and it also gave room for the emergence of different kinds of political parties we have today.

These kinds of political parties have given room to the type of electoral processes we have and the kind of politicians that have emerged thereof. The Nigerian political terrain has fallen below expectation and it has moved from acts of violence to even more
vicious ones. The political elite have often converted the jobless poor and unemployed youths into readymade thugs for the perpetuation of these evil and violate actions. If we examine the political history of Nigeria for the past fifty years, it will reveal that electoral processes in Nigeria have never had peace and it has resulted in the death of so many innocent Nigerians.

A closer examination will reveal that there were repeated scales of violence and religious disturbance between Christians and Muslims on the other hand and north versus south on the other hand. Typical examples were the Kano riots and the Jos crisis (Clampham, 2002). This has often resulted to sectional violence with particular reference to the case of middle belt regions (Benue and Jos areas). The nature of electoral violence in Nigeria has defiled all imaginations and discussions in the sense that it involves political party, their supporters, journalists, clergymen and in fact government agents or law enforcement agents (Fischer, 2002) This presupposes that electoral violence cuts across different strata of the society. Electoral violence is not peculiar to Nigeria. For example, in the eighteenth century England and America, there were cases of electoral violence in which forces and intimidation and killing were used as means of winning elections Hayton, Cruickshanks and Handley (2002). The Nigeria situation is gradually taking a very dangerous trend as innocent children and even youth coppers sent to serve their nation were murdered in cold blood. The state should understand that election is not a do or die affairs.

The truth is that the way a state is built amongst others; determines the pattern it operates. For peace to reign in Nigeria there is need for a total rearrangement of the total apparatus of the state, starting from the leadership. To a large extent, the way the country’s constitution is built breeds confusion and demands amendments. Particularly where one part (the North) is greater than the West and the East

Those who make decisions in Nigeria must make sure that impartiality is enthroned. It is this that determines the credibility of the electoral body. The independent electoral body must be very impartial so that elections in Nigeria must be free and fair to restore confidence in the electoral process. The citizens have lost hope in the electoral process. They believe that those who win elections in Nigeria are those who belong to the party in power and who are supported by the godfathers. It is when elections are totally impartial that we can say that elections are credible and fair.

The adoption of resource control policy can bring about peace and solution to Nigeria’s crisis. This is a situation where the federating states are allowed to control the national resources within their areas of location, and make an agreed contribution towards the maintenance of the common services at the centre (Azaike, 2003) This suggestion is in agreement with the 1963 independent constitution which provided for the principle of derivation until the military struck on 15th January, 1966. The agitation of the people of the Niger Delta region, which has now received the support of the other regions, particularly Eastern and Western regions is that derivation should be the basis of Nigeria’s federalism so that peace can reign in Nigeria. Thus, the issue of resource control and restructuring should be properly handled to stop the regional agitation.
There should be policies enacted to combat corruption and abuse of office. This is one of the greatest challenges Nigeria is facing in its search for enduring democracy and sustainable development. Fedia and Fadia (2009) opined that the scandals and cases of corruption, kickback, bribery, extortion, lying and deception by government all over the world particularly Nigeria is prevalent. It has its effect in the contribution of wealth and leads to malfunctioning of institutions. It also has exacerbated the problems of poverty, ignorance and underdevelopment. This is one of the major reasons of conflict in Africa and even the military overthrow of democratically elected government and the encouragement of some military personnel in pursuit of their personal ambition. The resultant effect of this is conflict. Whoever would want to stop conflict should equally stand to fight corruption. One of the major reasons people go into politics, these days, is because of the associated embezzlement of funds and corrupt practices. It has become an industry in Nigeria and perhaps the easiest way to become very rich and influential in the society. Thus, if appropriate legislation is made and money involved reduced together with the reduction of the salaries of the legislators, there will be peace in Nigeria’s electoral process and elections will be free and fair. For now, many people have lost confidence in the Nigerian electoral process in the sense that it is not free and fair.

There should be policies to improve the living standards of the people. Most Nigerians live below living standards recommended by the World Health Organization. Most times, you discover that poverty breeds confusion and conflict. Equally, most times the youths who are jobless and hungry, find themselves involved in all kinds of conflict such as kidnapping and political thuggery during elections and selling of votes. Some of them have no value for life and are ready to kill with the least provocation. If they are gainfully employed, they will not abandon their jobs to be following these godfathers and the politicians as thugs and selling of their votes.

Another way this violence could be controlled is for the government to manage the question of marginalization and exclusion of certain groups of people or states from the share and benefits of the national cake. If all efforts and actions fail, dialogue and proper legislation should be used to tackle this electoral violence in Nigeria.

6. References


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