

The Bloody Path to *Government House*: “Do or Die” Electoral Politics and Cycles of Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract: In Nigeria, elections - the only available process of political leadership choices and succession - do perennially leave a sour taste in the mouths of the electorate. Nigerians haplessly bemoan human and material losses engineered by hoodlums sponsored by rival camps in vile tussle for the control of their destiny. Successive elections have come to depict chaos, violence, and confusion. Almost in all cases where the competition is keen, caution is thrown to the winds, as the competitors revel in orgies of mayhem, arson and killings, and such other conducts which brazenly abbreviate societal peace and progress, sacrifice patriotism and nationalism on the altar of entrenched personal interest. Given such a picture as history has repeatedly painted with grim outlines, elections are often heralded by palpable tension and held amidst open brigandage, culminating in voter apathy which had quite invariably aided endemic mal-administration. This essay contends that Nigerian politicians have routinely succeeded not only in wrecking monumental damage on peoples' psyche, but have also made good governance in the country quite illusory. Yet, aside open confrontation or physical violence, there are collateral losses in the form of psychological and institutional violence unleashed on the whole electoral process, and by implication, democratic governance in the country.

Keywords: Politics, Violence, *Do or Die*, Election.

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL NOTE

Election violence is regarded as a sub-category of political violence that is primarily distinguished by its timing and motive. It is a coercive and deliberate strategy used by political actors – incumbents as well as opposition parties – to advance their interests or achieve specific political goals in relation to an electoral contest. It may take place in all parts of the electoral cycle: in the run-up to elections, on the day of elections, and in the immediate post-election period. Election-related violence is not limited to physical violence but includes other coercive means, such as the threat of violence, intimidation and harassment (The Nordic Africa Institute, 2012:3). These acts of violence usually characterise presidential elections in many of these African countries. As in many parts of the world, Presidents in Africa wield substantial power. The influence that comes with the office makes it very attractive. Herein lies the problem, especially if an incumbent president who is eligible for re-election attempts to utilize all means necessary to win an additional term.

A summation of the array of definitions in the literature see political violence as the use or threat of physical act or a considerable destructive use of force carried out by an individual or group of individuals within a political system against another individual or group of individuals and/or property, with the intent to cause injury or death to persons and/or damage to property, and whose objective, choice of targets or victims, surrounding circumstances implementation and effects have political significance, that is intended to modify the behaviour of others in the existing arrangements of a power structure; or directed to a change in the politics, systems, territory of government and hence also directed to changes in the lives of individuals within societies (Honderich, 1989; Anifowose, 1982; Edigin and Obakhedo, 2010).

Electoral violence, according to Burchard (2015:12), encompasses any intimidating or harassing action that is directly related to the electoral process. It may take place prior to an election, on Election Day, or immediately after an election has taken place, often as a result of the announcement of the outcome. The definition of electoral violence includes a range of behaviors that includes: the distribution of hate-speech leaflets, the forced displacement of specific groups of voters, political assassinations, and targeted violent attacks. It also encompasses protests and riots that occur as a direct result of elections. Although seemingly disparate acts, these behaviors have one thing in common- they are meant to affect the outcome of an election through force.

Like the state, politics in much of post-colonial Africa tangentially negates its essence. For instead of being the occasion in which disparate interests are aggregated to define common interests and to pursue collective goals, politics is perverted into a relentless war of all against all. As politics degenerates into warfare, it also throws up governmental forms and leaders appropriate to its character, hence the high incidence of military and authoritarian rule (Ake, 2000:91). In many African states, acts of violence and intimidation and harassment of voters are a common part of elections. Their deplorable actions have caused considerable damage to property and have led to the loss of many innocent lives (Edwin, 2010:144). As such, it is often the case that elections in the continent are approached with much trepidation (Biegon, 2009:5). In Nigerian elections, results come in two separate columns. One records the votes cast at polling stations; the other the number of people killed around the time of the election. Thus, violence is an integral part of Nigerian politics (The Economist, April 14, 2011). Elections in the country have historically been akin to organised crime. This is because during Nigerian elections, multiple actors pursue pre-determined outcomes through common enterprise rather than allowing the people's vote to determine the country's political leadership. This behaviour is unlawful, criminal and unconstitutional. Such enterprise violates the constitutional rights of Nigerian citizens to participate in their own government and to determine who governs them by casting their individual ballot. Yet, the country has historically condoned such behaviour; indeed, the political, judicial and legal authorities have been both unwilling and unable to ensure accountability for them (National Human Rights Commission, 2014:7).

As a matter of fact, elections have always been contested with a zero sum-game mindset by political gladiators, a situation that made one observer describe rigging as synonymous with Nigerian elections (Kurfi 2005 cited in Bolaji, 2015:50). The electoral process has been overtaken by a collective indifference. It exists at all levels and creates a pervasive climate of electoral impunity. In its 1986 report, the Justice Babalakin Commission of Inquiry into the then Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), pointed out that "since 1952 when direct elections were first held in Nigeria, accusation of wrongdoing designed to alter the results of elections have accompanied every election in the country" (Babalakin Commission Report, cited in National Human Rights Commission, 2014:28). Ahead of the 2007 elections, former President Olusegun Obasanjo had declared: "this election is a do-or-die affair for me and the PDP. This election is a matter of life and death for the PDP and Nigeria", setting the tone for an acrimonious election that was widely acknowledged as lacking in credibility (National Human Rights Commission, 2015:27). Also, Nigeria's 2011 General Elections were marked by unprecedented election related violence, with an official death toll of nearly one thousand persons and property valued at over 40 Billion Naira destroyed (ibid).

Historically, violence is a major feature of political life everywhere around the world. Only that politics-related violence varies in intensity, trends and dimensions from one political system to another. As a matter of fact, comparative political scientists agree that from time immemorial, violence has been a constant of human societies all over the world, and in particular, today's world is awash with violence (Ayeni-Akeke, 2008). Since Nigeria's independence, Nigerian politicians have become habituated to fraud, corruption, intimidation, and violence, as if they consider these the necessary weapons of political winners. Nigerian voters have been denied the chance to count and be counted and, disturbingly, the trend has worsened (Onwudiwe and Berwind-Dart, 2010:2). Career politicians permanently long for power and the attendant perks of office much to the detriment of a larger populace. It is almost always either they have people's votes or people's lives! So terminally fixated on winning the mechanisms of control, the elements have little or no regard for the sanctity of human life. Just as the incumbent seeks to hold onto power at all costs, even when his failure in the expiring tenure is as glaring as the day, the aspirant him/herself schemes to attain the office just for the kill, using all manner of artifice, purporting to be on the side of the people and ever willing to 'serve' them. For the two desperate sides, the end often justifies the means! Given such a picture as history has repeatedly painted with grim outlines, elections are often heralded by palpable tension and held amidst open brigandage, culminating in voter apathy which had quite invariably aided endemic mal-administration.

This has led to a situation where electoral contests are seen as a *do or die* affair where contestants employ fair and foul means to win. Results declared in those situations are usually unacceptable to the opposition, and the country moves dangerously towards the precipice of confusion and anarchy after every round of elections (TMG, 2004:21). Such observations represent a stunning turnabout for Nigeria, Africa's most populous and richest country, and reflect the deep frustrations of millions of Nigerians. This essay therefore, seeks to respond to seven distinct questions: Is Nigerian electoral politics permanently sentenced to irredeemable realm of violent contestation? What are those factors that propel this phenomenon? Can these variables be tackled within the framework of legality, leadership or technology? Are Nigerian voters prepared for and ready to accept the needed reform/change in view of the primordial sentiments with which they are associated over decades? How can they choose life, through their votes, over and above violent acts that diminish their worth and often even shorten their existence? Will the expected reforms be generated internally or reinforced by external forces or a combination of both? Can the insatiable lust for power by the political elite and its concomitant violent outcomes be tamed through these reforms? The essay argues that Nigerian politicians have routinely succeeded not only in wrecking monumental damage on peoples' psyche, but have also made good governance in the country quite illusory. Yet, aside open confrontation or physical violence, there are collateral losses in the form of psychological and institutional violence unleashed on the whole electoral process, and by implication, democratic governance in the country.

2. CONTEXTS AND CONTENTS OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Since electoral processes are intrinsically about the attainment of political power, often in high-stake contexts, elections — as a process of competition for power — can be catalysts of conflict. For Norris (cited in Burchard, 2015:13), “electoral violence, while not an Africa-specific phenomenon, is more pronounced on the continent. Globally, it is estimated that violence occurs in roughly 19 percent of elections, with riots and protests accompanying approximately 14 percent of elections”. Some studies on electoral violence identify the election campaign as especially prone to violence. One suggests that in Africa more victims are claimed during campaigns than any other period during the elections (though obviously some elections see more violence during other phases) (Alston, 2010). According to some studies, Election Day claims fewer victims than the period three months before Election Day or the period three months after. This may be due to the presence of observers and the attention, both national and international, focused on the election at that time. That said, the same study identified Election Day as the most violent single day (Alston, 2010). Again, this is a global figure: there is considerable divergence among different countries' elections and even among different elections in the same country. For example, violence associated with the 2007 elections in Nigeria occurred predominantly during the campaign and on Election Day. The 2011 elections in the same country, however, which were assessed by observers as more credible than the previous ones, sparked violence in the post-election phase. According to some estimates, violent protests in the north against the results of the presidential election left more than 1,000 dead and 74,000 displaced (IDEA, 2011:15).

Violence has become part of the political culture in Nigeria such that all elections are virtually violence-ridden. That violence is manifest in all the three states of the election process: pre-election, during elections, and post-election period. Violence during elections is reflected in these: lack of security of elected posts, partisanship of traditional rulers, abuse of responsibility by election officials, institutional weaknesses (as seen, for instance, in the role of the police), the “winner takes – all” syndrome, which makes political contest a “do-or-die” affair, and the lucrative nature of political offices. Since election outcomes in Nigeria greatly determine access to power and to the enormous resources controlled by the state, electoral contests often extend beyond the electoral space and are conducted in ways that undermine the rule of law. In this way, elections are inevitably akin to war, and therefore, prone to manipulation and violence (Orji, 2014:123). According to Iyayi (2004:9), elections in Nigeria have shared a number of common characteristics. First, they have been particularly characterised by massive fraud, the intimidation of political opponents and controversy. The governments in power have had their own designs and used the instruments of the state in penetrating electoral brigandage, thuggery, violence and warfare. Secondly, while there has been continuity in violence and warfare, there has been lack of continuity in the political organisations through which both violence and warfare have been conducted.

Election violence can rise to mass atrocities, including crimes against humanity, which are international crimes. Election violence is also a crime under Nigerian law. It violates the rights to life, safety and security of the person and to democratic participation- all recognized and guaranteed under Nigerian law. As explained by Omotola (2008:56), Election Day violence includes the snatching of ballot papers or boxes, assaults on opposition agents or parties, and harassment or intimidation by security agents. In the aftermath of an election, electoral violence may take the form of violent protests

against electoral rigging, whether real or imagined, and of the state's deploying its apparatus of force in response to the protest, thereby further fuelling the violence. This essay contends that Nigerian politicians have routinely succeeded not only in wrecking monumental damage on peoples' psyche, but have also made good governance in the country quite illusory. Yet, aside open confrontation or physical violence, there are collateral losses in the form of psychological and institutional violence unleashed on the whole electoral process, and by implication, democratic governance in the country.

The contest for political power is extremely fierce, not so much for the love of the country but for power since political power is tantamount to the control, usurpation and unlimited access to state fund and resources. The political elite and would be are bent in employing any means to obtain party tickets just to get elected. This craze has brought to the scene, the phenomenon of godfatherism (Adeola, 2015:226). It is worrisome therefore, that electioneering in Nigeria is seen as an equivalent of war and political parties/gladiators, as the combatants. In fact, the horrendous language being used to describe election by the media in Nigeria creates fear in many prospective voters. Words like "violence", "war" and "battlefield" have been entrenched in news reportage, feature stories and columns as if they are irreversible permanent features of the country's electoral process.

The psychological dimensions of this violence are inflicted upon people by the aggressive, abrasive and anarchic conduct of candidates and their supporters both during campaigns and on Election Day. The ways in which campaign posters are massively produced and indiscriminately pasted, even on road traffic signs and on public building, etc as well as the manner by which convoys of reckless drivers, conveying candidates and their supporters to and from campaign rallies, obstruct traffic, cause accidents and injure pedestrians, are clear illustrations of this phenomenon, which although subtle are nonetheless quite devastating in the totality of their impact on peace, order, good neighbourliness, stability, human rights and well-being of society. They constitute psychological violence in the sense that they insult as well as assault the people's and society's moral sense of decorum, respectability and integrity, and they as well cause anxiety and apprehension among the public any time campaign rallies are scheduled (Ladan, 2006:5).

Electoral violence is distinct from other forms of politicized violence in that actors use the existing electoral framework in order to achieve their goals. For example, a coup d'état, a common form of political violence, is focused at the elite level and involves the forced removal of a party or individual from political power. Actors generally have no regard for existing laws and as such it is an unpredictable and extrajudicial act. Electoral violence, however, works within existing and established timelines to achieve the acquisition of political power. Electoral violence also shifts the focus from elite level actors to include voters as potential targets of violence. Although sometimes unplanned (as has been the case in countries such as Guinea and Senegal), electoral violence is often times mobilized by political actors (as in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria). Because of this strategic purpose of electoral violence, political institutions can either constrain or encourage its employ (Burchard, 2015:12). Ethnicity, religious and cultural cleavage, fundamentalism, group identity and traditional ethnic hatred often exacerbated by elite manipulations have frequently been considered as factors contributing to electoral conflicts in Africa. Also, the availability of weapons, especially the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, contributes to violent conflicts, electoral conflict and post-election conflicts (Dudouet and Schmelzle 2006:4-5). The administration of elections and tone of election campaigns assume a special resonance where diversity is based on ethnic, racial, religious, regional or class lines. They become highly charged "do or die" affairs for a host of reasons.

3. ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND PRECIPITATING FACTORS

The causes of electoral violence are multifaceted, and can be divided into two broad categories: first, structural factors related to the underlying power structures prevalent in new and emerging democracies, such as informal patronage systems, poor governance, exclusionary politics, and the socio-economic uncertainties of losing political power in states where almost all power is concentrated at the centre; second, factors related to the electoral process and the electoral contest itself, such as failed or flawed elections, election fraud and weak or manipulated institutions and institutional rules governing the electoral process (The Nordic Africa Institute, 2012:2).

In societies where the structural conditions of elections create high incentives for violence, the institutional and administrative arrangements in place for regulating the electoral contest can play a key role in either mitigating or instigating election-related violence. The design of the electoral system, for example one that encourages broad-based and inclusive strategies for mobilising voters across existing cleavages in society, is more likely to alleviate the risk for political polarisation. Conversely, systems that are more exclusive, such as the first-past-the-post and winner-takes-all

systems, are more likely to encourage violent behaviour, especially in divided societies. The current trend of establishing post-election power-sharing governments in Africa is a direct consequence of these exclusive systems. While power sharing agreements are sometimes deemed temporarily necessary in order to prevent (more) violence, they may set a dangerous precedent for the continent in the sense that every election, legitimate or not, is violently contested in order to force a power-sharing agreement (ibid: 3).

Motives for violence could have included skewing the playing field, limiting political space, preventing candidates from running, weakening the opposition, or a desire to retain power and stay in office. This was especially the case after the strong showing of the opposition during the previous elections. The enabling conditions include the lack of checks on the executive, the weak rule of law, partisan security forces and judiciary controlled by the incumbent, a permissive or disinterested international environment -or at least lack of scrutiny - and a weak or fearful civil society and media. The effects of the violence include undermining the credibility, quality and inclusiveness of elections; as a result, the opposition struggled to muster support, campaign or compete fairly. The violence also deepened distrust between parties. The urge to win-at-all cost and the huge democratic governance deficits currently on display give credence to the notion that election is a mean to power, which is then used to plunder the commonwealth by the elected politicians. Politics, elections and leadership are seen as means to wealth. And so all seems fair to politicians in their quest to win including, but not limited to using ethnicity and religion as vehicles for mobilisation of supports and votes.

Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic, the Nigeria electoral and political landscape has moved from violence to greater violence. The level and magnitude of electoral and political violence has risen and the political elites have often converted poverty ridden unemployed Nigerian youths into ready-made machinery for the perpetration of electoral violence. This is linked to the political system and institution that in theory has failed to political participation and in practice has seen the political elites forming bulk of the sponsors and perpetrators of electoral violence (Aniekwe and Kushie, 2011:1). An examination of the political antecedents reveals evidence of political and electoral violence in Nigeria before 1999. There were repeated scales of violence and political and/or religious rift between the Christian and Muslim on the one side and North and South on the other side. Cases of Kano Riot, Jos crisis amongst others are still fresh in our memory. According to Campbell, this has often resulted to sectarian violence with particular reference to the geographical centre formerly called the middle belt and the Niger Delta (Campbell, 2010).

Five key causes can be identified as responsible for electoral violence in Nigeria. Among these are historical context of state creation in Nigeria; the structural imbalance of the Nigerian federation; the nature and character of the Nigerian state and its ruling elites; inter-ethnic competition; and the role of the military and militarisation of the polity (Report of the Electoral Reform Committee, 2008). As succinctly captured by Alemika (2011:9) elections in the country, since independence, were generally characterised by:

- manipulation of the decisions and activities at the various stages of electoral process by the governments and politicians;
- corrupt inducement of electorates;
- violence during voter registration, party primaries, campaigns, polling and collation of votes;
- rigging through the stuffing, snatching and destruction of ballot boxes and falsification of results;
- partiality and corruption by electoral and security officials;
- manipulation of electorates through the activation or mobilisation of ethnic, religious, regional and other primordial sentiments;
- ineffective electoral dispute resolution mechanisms resulting in the perpetuation of a culture of electoral fraud and violence. The police require pro-active plan for anticipating and handling these forms of conflict. Assassination of opponents
- Disruption of voter registration in areas where the perpetrators lack political support
- Disruptive behaviours, including use of weapons, to scare away supporters of opponents from registering during voter registration in order to undermine the strength of opposition during elections

- Killing, harming and intimidating persons trying to vote during elections in order to destroy ballot boxes in areas where the perpetrators lack supporters or in order to snatch ballot boxes so as to stuff them with ballot papers illegally obtained and thumb-printed
- Disruption of opponents' rallies and campaigns
- Threats of violent attack against individual political opponents by politicians invoking power of incumbency as well as ethnic, religious and regional sentiments
- Destruction of campaign billboards and posters of opponents
- Abuse and manipulation of the security and law enforcement agencies by the incumbent government to disperse the rallies and campaigns of opponents under the guise of not securing approval or likelihood of breach of public peace
- Psychological violence – inducing, manipulating and directing the security and law enforcement agencies to harass opponents through serial arrest and detention on the basis of false accusations with a view to demoralise, interrupt and disrupt the campaign activities of opponents, and
- Intimidation of opponents and voters in area of low support through partisan deployment of highly armed security and law enforcement agencies by incumbent government under the guise of preventing breakdown of law and order during election.

The winner-takes-all disposition among political actors informs allegations and counter allegation of malpractices during and after successive elections. Allegations of ruling party's penchant for the indiscriminate deployment of military personnel to harass and intimidate voters, snatch ballot boxes and rig out other contestants in previous elections have also provoked anticipatory violent reactions (Muheeb, 2015:7). Nweke (2006:41) posits that "the emergence of political violence in Nigeria is sourced through the nature of party formation, which was ethno-regionally based. This was followed by the regionalization of Nigeria as created by Richard Constitution of 1946". The whole process of campaigning, voter-registration, and elections, constitutes phases of minor or major political violence. During voter-registration, men and women were killed in many parts of the country because they were either trying to smuggle the voting machine to where they can manipulate it for their selfish interest or because they were trying to defend the voting materials from falling into the hands of the violent members of the political elite and their petty supporters. Equally, in the course of political campaigns, party members attack and even kill opponents (Ani, 2012:5). Motsamai (2010:3-4) identifies some challenges to the conduct of democratic and peaceful elections in Africa which aptly illustrate the nature of electioneering in Nigeria:

- Protection of incumbency: Elections, by their very nature, are uncertain and competitive processes. Violence ensues in situations where there is a strong possibility of changing existing power relations and the incumbents are unwilling to cede power. This has been the case in Africa, as elections are often associated with tension and the eruption of social antagonism over the control of the state. Much can be attributed to the dominance of one party and an intolerant political culture as regards relating with the opposition. In the context of authoritarian regimes the strategic intent and practical consequences of violent acts are designed, in many ways, either to vitiate the elections altogether or to influence voting behaviour through threat or intimidation.
- Absence of a tolerant political culture and the entrenchment of a dominant-party system: The conduct of democratic and peaceful elections requires a tolerant political culture, which seldom exists in former one-party state systems and/or dominant-party systems in Africa. In most rigid democracies or hybrid regimes political intolerance and repression are rife. In the context of authoritarian regimes, the strategic intent and practical consequences of violent acts are designed in many ways either to vitiate the elections altogether, or to influence voting behaviour through threat or intimidation.
- The design of the electoral system: The structure of an electoral system can either exacerbate or de-escalate electoral conflict as it has a direct impact on identity and ideology. The extent to which a system is regarded as fair and inclusive may determine the possibility of post-electoral conflict. Violence often occurs when elections are 'zero-sum' events and 'losers' are excluded from participation in governance.
- The management and administration of elections: The roles of election management bodies (EMBs) are vital during the electoral cycle as, if the EMB is suspected of a lack of impartiality the credibility of the electoral process is diminished and there are high levels of violence when the results are announced. Further, it is important for EMBs to have conflict

prevention and management systems in place to enable them to handle any incidents of violence that may emerge at any stage in the electoral cycle.

Nigeria's ethnic, sectional and religious diversities ought to serve as source of national unity, cohesion and integration but unfortunately this has over the years constituted serious threat to peace, security and national development because the elites have always tended to manipulate these identities for their parochial interests (Golwa, 2013:3). Thus, the fault lines of ethnicity, region and religion run deep in Nigeria. Virtually every part of the country has memory of injury or feelings of injustice, which they often feel will be best addressed if one of their own wields power at the centre, preferably as the president. Similarly, there is a pervasive fear that the president of the country will abuse the powers of his office to privilege his region, ethnicity or religion—if not to punish or deliberately disadvantage others. All these sentiments are always whipped up thus making the electoral process in Nigeria acrimonious and violent (Adibe, 2015: 3).

Electoral violence is not being met with strong criminal codes in the country. Weak penalties or punishment for violators of electoral process give room for more crimes to be committed. Penalties or punishment are intended to achieve correction, retribution and deterrence. Weak governance and corruption can also instigate electoral violence. Corruption can set the stage for structural violence. Weak governance and corruption make people feel desperate enough to seek any means of revenge against political authority including violence. Public revenues are not only stolen, but are often used to pay for the services and weapons used for electoral violence. Also, small arms proliferation is on the increase. These weapons perpetuate violent conflict and create new cycles of violence and crime. The weapons also undermine the work of humanitarian and relief organizations and militate against sustainable development.

There are equally the incumbency-based political violence manifests when a sitting governorship candidate unleashes the might of the machinery of the state on other political aspirants. Sometimes, it would be the incumbent governor versus their disgruntled godfathers or the populace. There is equally the executive-based violence, which manifested mainly as governors versus deputy governor's violence, as well as the federal executive versus the state executive violence. There were equally the executive versus the legislative based conflict manifested in state assemblies versus the state executive governors' violence as well as local government chairman versus councillor's violence and also the national assembly versus the federal executive violence (Ani, 2012:10).

It is observable too that many Nigerians have a wrong notion of governance especially politicians. They see governance as an avenue to amass wealth with ease. This notion makes them to see politics, which is a process to produce those who will govern the state as a matter of life and death. In a civilized world, governance is a call for selfless service, a call to join the think-tank to think out ideas, make policies and draw programmes and implement the same with a view to building a nation state whose citizens will enjoy in full measure human rights and freedoms, meet their basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, education, health and security and human needs like recognition of everyone's humanity, encouragement for self-initiative, self-reliance, free thinking and inquiry, development of one's talents to the fullest extent possible. This cannot be possible where people engage in warfare in the name of politics (Ideyi, 2008). Also, as a result of loss of confidence in justice administration, there is a great deal of reluctance or refusal by some politicians to follow due process through the law courts in seeking redress to election grievances. Losers in elections among such politicians are more intent to embrace or resort to self-help and vengeful tactics in settling their grievances. This was one of the primary causes of post-election violence in the April 2011 Presidential Elections as well as other previous elections.

4. ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The costs associated with electoral violence are high. Even in situations in which the human death toll remains low, election violence may have a critical impact on the electoral process, the outcome of the elections and their perceived legitimacy. In the long run, it may have a negative effect on the prospects for democratic consolidation and on perceptions among the population of democracy as a political system. Electoral violence may also create a humanitarian crisis and halt or reverse socio-economic development programmes. In extreme situations, it may increase the risk of armed conflict or civil war. Election-violence can also go beyond the societies where it occurs and affect neighbouring states by displacing large border populations, introducing a humanitarian crisis, and increasing the circulation of arms as well as armed violence, which may contribute to instability in already volatile regions (The Nordic Africa Institute, 2012:3). Electoral violence slows the consolidation of democratic norms; reduces the prospects for long-term, durable peace and stability; and undermines economic growth by limiting the purchasing power of citizens.

While the sub-Saharan Africa made great strides towards democratization in the 1990s and early 2000s, according to Freedom House, election violence in these countries did not decrease over that same interval. In fact, recent elections in the region have been at least as violent as those in the early 1990s, even as election support through diplomacy, monitoring, and aid continues to rise. The 2011 elections in Nigeria illustrate this paradox: while they were more transparent and less corrupt than past elections, the country still experienced the most intense election violence in its history (Claes, 2015).

The predisposition and reckless mindset of Nigerian politicians generally tend to believe that political power, through elections, has to be “captured”, and this has to be done by hook or by crook; and by any means necessary! To them, winning election is, literally, “a do-or-die” affair. Any wonder then, that our political arena increasingly resembled a bloody battlefield, with maiming, killing, burning, and unimaginable destruction of lives and property (Jega, 2015:17). Thus, the average Nigerian has been so profoundly frustrated, disappointed and devastated by the crude manifestations of the mechanics of Nigerian electoral politics, so much so that they have become either apathetic and indifferent, or exceedingly cynical or skeptical. In his historical analysis of elections in Nigeria, Iyayi (2004) submits clearly that the controversial elections of 1965 produced the coup d’état of January 1966. Again the flawed elections of 1983 produced the military coup on December 31, 1983. Finally, Babangida’s flawed elections of 1993 produced the Abacha palace coup of that year and paved the way to his memorable dictatorship. It shows clearly that where election fails to determine the direction of political change as envisioned by the electorates, there is the tendency of resorting to undemocratic means of redressing such electoral malfeasance.

The credibility of governmental institutions hinges on accountability that is founded on the entitlement of citizens to freely choose their government or change it. This freedom requires the rule of law, including an effective administration of justice. For this reason, the conduct and organisation of elections is regulated everywhere by laws. Where these laws are not observed, the returns from elections become illegitimate and unlawful. In other words, any exercise of political power other than through the free choice of the electorate in a free and fair election is illegitimate (National Human Rights Commission, 2014:17). In 1983, the Nigerian Supreme Court maintained:

The essence of democratic elections is that they be free and fair and that in that atmosphere of freedom, fairness and impartiality, citizens will exercise their freedom of choice of who their representatives shall be by casting their votes in favour of those candidates who, in their deliberate judgment, they consider possesses the qualities which mark them out as preferable candidates to those others who are contesting with them. The voters must be allowed to freely go to the polling booths and cast their votes unmolested. Free and fair election cannot, therefore, tolerate thuggery or violence of any kind; corrupt practice, personation, threats, undue influence, intimidation, disorderly conduct, and any acts which may have the effects of impeding the free exercise by the voter of his franchise (Ojukwu v. Onwudiwe, 3 EPR 850 at 892).

The effects of election-related violence are not confined to contesting parties. When such violence spreads, it engulfs communities, as during the post-election period in Kenya in 2007–2008 and Côte d’Ivoire in 2010. Displacement causes major disruption to economic and social lives of communities. A great deal of trauma and post-stress disorder is generated, especially among victims, including many women and children (more than 1 million in Côte d’Ivoire in 2010–2011). Thus the multiple consequences of election-related violence are felt far beyond the parties and actors directly involved (UNECA 2013:153). Brinkerhoff (2005:4) notes that electoral Conflicts and resultant wars destroy basic infrastructure, disrupt the delivery of core services (e.g. health, education, electricity, water, sanitation) and impede the day-to-day routines associated with making a living. In the worst-case scenarios, they lead to widespread suffering, massive population dislocation, humanitarian crises and epidemics, which overwhelm the already inadequate effectiveness of governments.

Significant election violence has always had serious implications for the security, stability and continuity of elective governance in Nigeria. The violence that accompanied and followed first the federal elections in 1964 and the Western Region elections in 1965 cascaded into the events that led to the overthrow of Nigeria’s first experiment in elective governance in January 1966. In 1983, the violence that followed confectioned “landslide” of the then National Party of Nigeria, especially in the states of south-west Nigeria (Adesina, 2012 cited in National Human Rights Commission, 2015:27). It was perhaps the immediate trigger for the overthrow of the government of President Shehu Shagari on the last day of December 1983.

When people feel unable to express their electoral preferences, they find refuge in criminal activities as a platform of protest. The UDHR embodies the same principle, cautioning that “it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law” Further, when elections are rigged with impunity, they throw up office holders that are unaccountable to the people. Persons holding stolen mandates are not under an obligation to provide accountable leadership and are under no pressure to engage in activities that will enhance the peoples’ wellbeing. Their major concern is to satisfy the insatiable greed of their godfathers and patrons and oil the wheels of the rogue system that brought them into power (National Human Rights Commission, 2014:22).

Electoral manipulations and violence have become so prevalent in democratic dispensation in Nigeria such that the social, political and economic powers of those involved have made it both national and international concern. The effects are manifested in the colossal loss of human lives and property in every election cycle. For instance, under a subhead of the capital side of the 2016 Appropriation Bill is the sum of N2.5 billion for rehabilitation of public properties and places of worship that were damaged during the 2011 election as a result of violence and civil disturbances. Ironically, five years after the violence and civil disturbances that followed that election, those who suffered one loss or the other are still being compensated, while none of the persons, who perpetrated the act of violence or their sponsors have been brought to book. This is despite the fact that not all the losses could be quantified and compensated for. Though institutions or individuals who suffered some loss in terms of material and properties could have a sigh of relief with the compensation, but that cannot be the case for the families who lost dear ones (Salau, 2016).

It could be said, therefore, that the level of impunity being exhibited by political actors in defiance of the law remains Nigeria’s biggest national security challenge. It is the root cause of corruption and of several forms of violence, including militancy, insecurity, insurgency and electoral violence in the country. Electoral impunity deprives the people of their right to freely choose their leaders and determine how they should be governed. A denial of this fundamental right allows illegitimate power to thrive, undermines the rule of law, corrupts the public good and rewards perverse interests. Lastly, it should be emphasised that an election that is marred by election related malpractices such as corruption and irregular processes kills the confidence of the public and builds scepticism around the nature of leaders who arrived through a ‘failed’ process and their ability to independently serve their electorate and be held accountable.

5. ELECTORAL REFORM AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AS ANTIDOTE TO VIOLENCE

It is worrisome that the hope of democratic consolidation through citizens on the ballot box as well as improved electoral process is seriously challenged by volatile nature of the political system (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Oyeboade (cited in *The Guardian*, September 4, 2014) observes that while the founding fathers could generally be considered as having imbibed the democratic ethos, "today's practitioners of the art continue to advertise their discomfort with the tenets of ballot box democracy and more often than not, evince characteristics of desperados - intolerance of dissent, blackmail and abuse of opponents, naked and crude diktat, a winner-takes-all mentality, obdurate lust for power, jumping the gun, faceless media campaigns and so on." Similarly, the issue of effective sanctions for breaches of election laws, rules and procedures poses an important challenge to the credibility of elections in Nigeria. The debate in Nigeria with respect to the administration of electoral justice relates not only to the inadequacy of existing provisions on electoral offences, but also the seeming inability to prosecute and secure convictions of electoral offenders (Okoye, 2013:18).

Effective law enforcement is essential for the governance and wellbeing of orderly society. Generally in Nigeria, rules are inconvenient and enforcement happens to losers, non-persons or politically ostracized (Odinkalu, 2010:35). As a matter of fact, the weakness of the electoral law has seen the gradual perversion of the electoral process under the present democratic dispensation in Nigeria. The litmus test for democracy in Nigeria will be the extent to which the electoral process, through the electoral law, is able to engender fair, participatory, and inclusive electoral participation by the people. If the electoral law is weak, deficient, or poorly enforced, the electoral process will be easily subverted (Oluyemi-Kusa, 2001:29). Thus, it will take a lot of political will and a strict law enforcement mechanism to ensure that political parties abide by the election laws.

Electoral reform in Nigeria has, historically, been a central dimension of, and an important subset of the constitutional and political history of the country, touching on the legal framework for electoral governance in the country. The history of electoral politics in Nigeria and efforts to reform it shows that electoral reform has essentially focused on sanitizing the

legal and political framework of electoral governance in the country, not only to secure its sanctity and legitimacy but also to build confidence in it, to protect the people's electoral mandate and enhance the legitimacy of political succession (INEC, 2012:8).

For elections to be credible, the various stakeholders must play by the rules of the game and must have some level of fidelity to the law. In other words, the laws regulating the conduct of elections and the conduct of all the political actors must be clear and not subject to arbitrary ambiguity and self-contrived lacuna (Okoye, 2013:12). The issue of effective sanctions for breaches of election laws, rules and procedures poses an important challenge to the credibility of elections in Nigeria. The debate in Nigeria with respect to the administration of electoral justice relates not only to the inadequacy of existing provisions on electoral offences, but also the seeming inability to prosecute and secure convictions of electoral offenders (ibid:18). A research conducted by the Nigeria Watch revealed that between June 2006 and May 2014, there were about 915 cases of election violence resulting in about 3934 deaths. A further breakdown of the figures showed that the North Central geopolitical zone had the highest casualties among the country's six zones, recording 1463 deaths. It was followed by the North West with 911 deaths and the South-south with 644 deaths. The South East had the least figure of 152 deaths, the North East and South West recorded 319 and 386 deaths respectively (Salau, 2016). It has been recommended that a separate electoral offences tribunal with prosecutorial powers be created. In January 2015, Professor Jega (cited in Downie, 2015) stated that, of the more than a thousand persons arrested for offences in the 2011 elections, about two hundred have been prosecuted

Human Rights Watch (2003) makes some recommendations that are very germane to this essay: there should be prompt and impartial investigations and prosecutions of those suspected of having committed political violence, including those who help to arm or organize the immediate perpetrators. Police must ensure public safety by responding impartially to security threats, without excessive use of force. INEC should manage elections in an open manner according to established procedures so that all political parties can be confident that the rules have been applied in a fair-minded way. Political parties should suspend members who engage in political violence, regardless of party hierarchy, and are urged to adopt and publicize non-violence and respect for human rights as key principles of their party platforms. According to Alemika (cited in Salau, 2016), security agencies should be adequately equipped to enable them adopt measures for preventing and controlling violence during political campaigns and elections as well as safeguard the security of electoral officers, materials, polling stations and documentation of results.

Generally, for democracy truly to take root, Nigeria must promote more effective systems of checks and balances among its government institutions, safe-guard human rights and liberties at all levels of society, and guarantee public accountability. According to Diamond (2002), Nigeria is much more likely to survive as one nation if it survives as a democracy- and learns to make the institutions of democracy work. However, as pointed out by Oromaregake (2013 cited in Bolaji, 2015:75), for institutional reform to work well: 'it must be pursued along with attitudinal and behavioural reform. From historical insight, the institutional foundations of elections in Nigeria fail not because they are inherently corruptible or incapable of doing the right thing, but because the main political actors design them to fail so that they can advance their self-interests.' Thus, a critical component of democratic institutionalization is voter education. To get the electorates informed about issues around elections and governance so they can make relevant choices and contribute to democratic process meaningfully. Once this is not the case, the electorates are left in limbo and disempowered (Human Development Initiatives, 2014:63).

The importance of citizenship education as it relates to credible elections can be seen in the fact that democracies require active, informed and responsible citizens, that is, citizens who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and their communities and contribute to the political process. As noted by Downie (2015), ordinary citizens can advance electoral democracy by maintaining the impressive commitment shown during the elections. However, their civic responsibility should not end at the polling booth. In 2015 for instance, they displayed the power to hold elected officials accountable by voting them in or out of office. Building on that experience, they can, through active engagement and vigilance, further strengthen the connection between democracy and good governance.

Falana (2009) however, argues that the quest for a credible, enduring democratic culture must then go beyond electoral reforms, laudable as these reforms might be. There is a compulsive need to devise a mechanism for preventing politicians

with executive powers from rubbishing the electoral conventions of the land, or at least make it unprofitable for them to do so. To do this, we must remove the basis of political desperation, of political 'do-or-die'. This entails preventing any group of people from having too much power and access to national resources, privileges which they then hesitate to relinquish and would rather preserve than respect any electoral and institutional conventions. Falana notes further:

It is hard to imagine how electoral reforms can succeed when an executive power fueled by the desperation and greed that follow logically from the enormous resources controlled by the state can override any electoral convention. We seem to be putting the cart of electoral reforms before the horse of constitutional reforms...electoral reform is laudable but it is meaningless in the face of a dogged determination on the part of a political group to maintain the status quo and their privileged access to state resources and power. This is why electoral reforms must not skirt or precede the fundamental issue of the structure of the Nigerian state: the fact that the federal government controls too much resource revenue and has too much power over its distribution. This is the root of political desperation, which has doomed our presidential electoral contests till date.

In spite of the above skepticism, it is important to note that critical stakeholders in the country can actively engage the government in bringing about the desired change through different advocacy, and if need be, aggressive strategies. A vibrant, engaged civil society can highlight authoritarian abuses and build domestic and international momentum for change. Robust civil society organizations can also lead peaceful mass mobilizations critical to keeping the public involved and sustaining a commitment to difficult reforms over the longer term. During transitions, a credible and independent media is vital for exposing injustices, demanding accountability, and explaining social and economic dislocations to a skeptical and suffering public, thereby giving vulnerable, young democratic governments time to deliver positive change.

6. CONCLUSION

Political scientists have established a link between the integrity of elections and the outbreak of electoral disputes and violence (Norris 2014). Fundamentally, there is no doubt the fact that electoral violence remains a major source of political instability in a democratic society with palpable threats of deconsolidation. Thus, managing election-related violence is critical in building strong governing institutions and creating durable peace. As rightly observed by Burchard (2015:20), violence is a blunt, imprecise tool. In some cases it can create new grievances and can spiral out of control. Additionally, because it masquerades as a part of the democratic process, it can have serious deleterious effects on democratic development in terms of attitudes and behaviors of the people it is meant to protect. Electoral legitimacy is established when all involved, elite and electorate alike, consent to the rules of the game and accept electoral outcomes with the belief that the agreed-to rules have been followed. When electoral systems, laws and constitutions are manipulated in order to favor one group over another or exclude another group, such "including" or "excluding effects" can generate violent conflict (Mueller 2011).

Corruption and vote-rigging can frustrate voters, and even trigger violent rioting and protests. But a more strategic and sustained focus on factors like gender inequality, poor leadership, refugee movements, or the free flow of arms has a better shot at ensuring peaceful elections. Addressing these underlying drivers of violent conflict and changing the behavior and attitudes of violent thugs or mischievous politicians, requires multi-year commitments. First, violence prevention must begin at least 18 months before Election Day. Conflict experts should identify brewing sources of frustration that could motivate frustrated people to take up arms, pinpoint armed groups, and identify likely hotspots of election violence. The second phase should feature timely and informed prevention. If marginalized youth tend to commit violence, for instance, development actors could invest in education programs to encourage high school dropouts to engage constructively in the election process as local volunteers or monitors. If analysts or monitors anticipate that extremists will wreak havoc during an election, a well-trained and -equipped police and military can help guarantee election security, so long as they display professional conduct, are held accountable for any abusive behavior, and prioritize defending the electorate over guarding the elite (Claes, 2015).

On a general note, playing politics with an issue as sensitive as security is akin to a ticking time bomb. It often explodes, resulting in monumental loss of lives and properties and further destabilises the polity. Therefore, all stakeholders in

Project Nigeria must avoid actions that pander towards short-term political expedience and should, instead, focus on working towards bequeathing a worthy legacy to the next generation. All political actors must eschew the politics of exclusion, horse trading and high stakes power play often predicated on personal aggrandizement and sacrifices the interests of the people on the altar of political expedience. It is, therefore, incumbent on all political actors to subordinate their personal ambitions to the overriding cause of Project Nigeria. Those who profess to be democrats must act in a manner consistent with democratic ethos. They must walk the talk and come to terms with the imperative need to pursue their grievances through lawful means (Dakas, 2013:39).

Since the transition from military dictatorship to the current civil dispensation, Nigeria's quest for effective democratic governance has been confronted by many challenges. The integrity of the electoral system is a major issue facing Nigeria's new democracy. It is known from past history that turbulent elections have been a source of political crisis in Nigeria. Controversies surrounding elections have seriously undermined the legitimacy and stability of democracy in the country (Falana, 2009). There is no doubt that the electoral system and other institutions of democracy need to be deepened and made less amenable to manipulation by politicians. Such institutional reforms could render the self-interested and illegal interventions of powerful politicians, especially the president, less injurious to our democracy, if not completely impotent (ibid).

Nigeria is a country in transition to democracy, which is still striving to nurture a democratic political culture after many years of military rule, and amidst the anti-democratic tendencies that rule has fostered. Nigeria's electoral system is therefore, work-in-progress, desirous of un-seizing, continuous improvements through reforms. In this context, it can be said that, among the main tasks, is national commitment to implement reform measures, aimed at incremental positive changes that are substantive as well as sustainable (Jega, 2015:23). It should be noted however, that the answer to non-productive laws is not more laws but rather a holistic interrogation of the existing laws and the environment for which it is meant to operate to identify deficiency in law on one hand and prevailing societal and attitudinal inadequacies that stifle the application of the law on the other hand (Ilo, 2010). It has been observed that external pressure tends to influence national reform agendas in Africa, whereby international partners may push governments and legislators to engage in reforming the electoral framework. Such pressure may be linked to vital donor support. Even though, Nigeria has benefited tremendously in this regard, it is the position of this essay that the country should not wait for external pressure to do the right thing- in this context, the implementation of the existing recommendations on the electoral reform.

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