

# ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC: EFFECTS ON DEMOCRATIC PROCESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

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## Abstract

*Election remains one of the essential hallmarks of any democratic experiment. It is a yardstick through which conformity to democratic norms of any government can be measured. It is equally a platform for people to choose the kind of leaders they want to govern them. This is however achievable if the election is free and fair and devoid of violence. A violent electoral atmosphere robs citizens the opportunity of choosing the leaders they truly desired. This paper therefore, examined the effects of electoral violence on democratic process and sustainability in Nigeria's fourth republic. The remote causes of incessant cases of electoral violence were examined, and it was revealed that factors such as desire to achieve electoral victory by all means among politicians, hate campaigns, abuse of power by those occupying political offices among others are the causes of electoral violence. Findings also revealed that electoral violence negatively affect democratic process and by extension democratic sustainability. The paper recommended that for electoral violence to be eradicated, Nigerian politicians must be ready to play the game according to the rules, and adopt issue-based campaigns among other recommendations.*

**Keywords:** election, violence, democracy, democratic process and democratic sustainability

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## Introduction

For a stable democratic society, election remains the most essential means of transition process from one civilian administration to another. In any ideal democracy, elections have become a vehicle that drive representative democracy which is being practiced across the world. For this modern vision of democracy (i.e representative democracy), elections is the primary means of selecting political decision makers and rulers. And based on this fact, for any political system to be adjudged an ideal democratic state, it must evolve a mechanism for conducting free, fair and credible elections that is devoid of violence. The centrality of election to any democracy has captured the attention of scholars in the field of politics, this is why Ojo (2007), described election as the 'hallmark of democracy' while on the other hand Chiroro (2005) described it as the 'heart of the democratic order'. Therefore, the conducts of credible

elections constitute about 80% of democratic process.

Electoral process in Nigeria since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by violence, as such, it has become a long-standing feature of the democratization process in the post-colonial Nigeria, its power and magnitude thus constituting a major threat to the survival of democracy. 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. Some scholars like Agbaje and Ajetumobi (2006) have argued that violence has become infused in political processes in most new democracies in Africa especially with respect to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And this can be proven further, according to the 2008 Amnesty International Report, that the violent struggle for power, even in states which do not descend into armed conflict, still remains an important component of political life.

Electoral violence is not a new occurrence in Nigeria, it is traceable to the first republic especially during the 1964/65 elections. The three dominant political parties at that time were ethnically based, and each of them wanted to maintain the wide followership they enjoyed within their regions. Elections at this time were characterized by wide scale murder, kidnapping and arson (Olowoju et al, 2019). This wide scale violence precipitated the military to stage a coup that toppled the first republic. In the second republic, electoral violence rear its ugly head especially during the 1983 general elections. There were outbreaks of violence when the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was declared the winner in the then Ondo and Oyo states which was previously being controlled by the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), (Olowoju et al 2019). The elections that usher in the aborted third republic were supervised by the military administration of General Babangida. The tunes of the electoral process were dictated by the military and as such, the elections recorded low cases of electoral violence. This paper therefore, examines the effects of electoral violence on democratic process and sustainability in Nigeria and as such, the paper is divided into five sections. Section one introduces and gives background information, second two looks at the cases of electoral violence in Nigeria's fourth republic, section three examines the causes of electoral violence, section four deals with effects of electoral violence on democratic process and sustainability, while section five concludes the paper. The paper is qualitative research, and as such it relied majorly on secondary source of data.

### **Cases of Electoral Violence in Nigeria, 1999-2023**

Since the birth of the fourth republic in 1999, seven general elections and a number of bye and rerun elections have been conducted. The 1999 general elections usher in the fourth republic. The elections recorded minimal cases of electoral violence. This might be as a result of the fact that the elections were supervised by the military. The 2003 general elections was conducted by the administration of Former President Olusegun Obasanjo who was contesting for second term in office. The election was marred by wanton cases of irregularities including

rigging, maiming and assassination of perceived political opponents. The International Human Rights Watch Election Observers reported that the Nigeria federal and states elections of 2003 and local government elections of 2004 were marred by serious cases of violence which left many people dead and many others seriously injured. In April and May 2003, one hundred people lost their lives and many others injured during federal and states elections, (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Some of these violence were alleged to have been perpetrated by members and supporters of the ruling People's Democratic Party. In some polling booths, voters were intimidated and threatened by armed political thugs in order to falsify the results of the elections. The atmosphere of violence invalidated the results of the elections in many areas. In 2004, local government elections took place in most states of the federation. These council elections too were characterized by serious cases of violence and intimidation, as well as widespread fraud and rigging.

The 2007 general elections was hoped to be better compared to the previous elections. However, there were palpable tensions in the country even before the elections days. These tensions were not unconnected with the statement credited to Former President Olusegun Obasanjo who was reported to have said that the 2007 general election is going to be "do or die" affair. This particular statement set the stage for electoral violence which made the 2007 elections one of the worst if not the most worst election in Nigerian history. Violence were coordinated by godfathers, governors, local government chairmen and candidates for legislative houses who recruited followers, thugs and assassins armed with sophisticated weapons and unleashed them on their opponents and on the society, (Nwolise, 2007). The gross irregularities and wanton cases of violence that characterized the 2007 general elections was affirmed by the Late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua who was the major beneficiary of the elections, and who after the inauguration of his government, set up a committee to review the country electoral process. In addition to this, the wanton cases of electoral fraud against the 2007 elections led to many post-election litigations that were filed before various election tribunals.

When the 2011 general elections was

approaching, one would believe that Nigeria and indeed Nigerians must have learnt some lessons in the conduct of election, having been practicing democracy for uninterrupted period of twelve years, however, the wide scale bloodletting that followed the 2011 presidential election confirmed that violence is fast becoming an enduring attribute of Nigeria's electoral process. Violence began with widespread protests by supporters of the opposition candidate, Muhamadu Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change (C.P.C), following the announcement of Former President Goodluck Jonathan as the winner of the presidential election. These protests degenerated to violent riots or sectarian killing in the Northern states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara. It was reported that over 800 individuals lost their lives and 65,000 others were displaced (USIP, 2011).

There were palpable tensions across the country when the 2015 general elections was approaching. These tensions were not unconnected with the experience of Nigerians during and after the 2011 general elections. In addition to this, there were predictions by prophets of doom that 2015 general elections will plunge the country into severe anarchy that will threaten, if not destroy her unity (Akpan and Onya, 2019). These tensions and apprehensions were also premised on the fact that the two leading candidates that contested the 2011 presidential election which plunged the country into chaos were equally the leading candidates for the 2015 presidential election. These tensions were however doused when eminent personalities in the country headed by the Former Head of State, General Abdulsalam Abubakar and Professor Bolaji Akinylemi formed the Peace Accord Committee and committed the leading candidates into signing Peace Accord before heading to the poll. This Peace Accord coupled with the display of sportsmanship by Former President Goodluck Jonathan who lost the election led to the relative atmosphere of peace that followed the conduct of the 2015 presidential election. This relative peace was not however without some pocket of crises in some states of the federation especially during governorship and house of assembly elections. [Nwabughio \(2015\)](#) reported that in the south-south and south east, particularly Delta, Rivers and Akwa-Ibom states, no proper election took

place, results sheets were allegedly confiscated and results fabricated, giving the PDP unimaginable figures, while allocating paltry figures to APC to portray it as non-existence in the two geo-political zones. Cases of electoral violence was so bad in River State that Former Governor Rotimi Amaechi had to set up a commission of inquiry to look into the cases of violence which engulfed the state before and during the 2015 elections. The Chairman of the committee Chika Odinkalu in the committee's reports reported that 83 properties were alleged to have been destroyed. A total of 275 violations involving killings, injuries to persons or destructions were reported (Akpan and Onya, 2019).

2019 general elections marked the sixth round of general elections that were conducted since the inception of the fourth republic in Nigeria. The elections began with the presidential and national assembly elections that were conducted on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2019. The election was earlier scheduled to hold on the 16<sup>th</sup> February, 2019, but was shifted by one week as a result of logistic challenges which INEC claimed to have faced at that time. The governorship and state assembly elections was held two weeks later. The spate of violence which characterized Nigerian electoral process spilled over to 2019 general elections. Although, the presidential and national assembly elections appeared to be peaceful, but not without reported cases of electoral violence. On the day of the election, February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, electoral violence claimed the life of an ad hoc staff in Rivers State. This was confirmed by INEC Chairman, Prof. Mahmud Yakub. The Chairman reported that the said ad hoc staff was killed by political thugs, while other electoral officers sustained various degrees of injuries (Onimisi and Omolegbe, 2019). In another place in Rivers state, six persons were allegedly killed by political thugs while one suspected ballot box snatcher was shot dead in a polling unit at Ikot Udom Ossiom village, in Ukanafun local government area of Akwa-Ibom state (Oladele, et al, 2019). There were reported cases of violence in some states of the federation during the March 9 governorship and state assembly election. In Enugu state, stray bullet was reported to have killed an electoral observer while observing electoral process in Umuida Community (Premium Times, 2019).

There were reported cases of disruption of election, snatching of ballot boxes, killing and maiming during the election in states like Imo, Ondo, Nasarawa, Taraba and Katsina states.

The Civil Society Situation Room (CSSR) reported that there were ninety-six verified cases of electoral violence leading to three hundred and sixty-one deaths between November, 2018 and February, 2019. This report put the daily average of Nigerians lives that were lost to election related violence at 3.5 within a period 104 days (CSSR, 2019, Obiam, 2021). Human Right Watch while giving account of the 2019 general elections reported that there were atmospheres of tension across the country before the elections occasioned by the ravaging security situations in the North East and North West geo-political zones of the country. According to the SBM intelligence, which monitored socio-political and economic development within the country, reported that 626 people were killed during the 2019 election cycle, starting with campaigns in 2018 (Human Right Watch, 2019).

When the 2023 general elections was approaching, there were tensions across the country. The tensions were not unconnected with the fact that violence has become an enduring characteristic of Nigeria's electoral process. This was evidence from the various crises that were reported across the country before, during and after the conduct of the elections. On 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2023, the day of the presidential and national assembly elections, two persons were alleged to have been killed in Ndi Agwu community of Abam, in Arochukwu local government area of Abia state by unknown gunmen. The intention of the gunmen was however not stated ( Sahara Reporters, 2023). Also, February 28, the Rivers State collation officer, Prof. Charles Teddy Addias threatened to discontinue with the results collation alleging that his life and that of his family were being threatened.

There were serious cases of violence during the gubernatorial and state assembly election across the country. In Cross River State, an ad hoc staff of INEC, Miss Glory Effiom Essien was said to have been hit by stray bullet after some gunmen opened fire while she was in a boat heading to Bakassi for election duty. This incident was confirmed by the Resident Electoral

Commissioner in the state. He however said that the victim survived the incident after undergone treatment at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital (Vanguard, 2023). Also, more than 50 political thugs were reported to have invaded the INEC collation centre in Ogoja state constituency, disrupted the collection of results, vandalized the place, carted away electoral materials and inflicted injuries on electoral officials. Similarly in Lagos State, precisely in Aguda, Surulere local government area, a woman, Mrs. Jennifer Efedo was reported to have been stabbed on her face by thugs who disrupted the voting process. The thugs who were said to have been armed with dangerous weapons went about snatching ballot boxes, attacking voters and preventing those suspected to be opponents from voting (Punch, 2023). Despite the gains recorded by INEC in its efforts at conducting free and fair elections, especially with the introduction of BVAS machines, cases of electoral violence across various states of the federation rubbished the credibility of the elections and called to question the results emanated there from.

### **Causes of Electoral Violence**

To unravel the misery of electoral violence in Nigeria and proffer workable solutions to the menace, it is pertinent to examine its causes. Scholars have therefore attempted to examine the remote causes of recurring violence that followed every electoral process in the country and have therefore been able to identify the following factors as some of the causes. Inokoba and Maliki (2011) summarized the causes of electoral violence thus:

- State institutions promote violence
- Culture of impunity in Nigerian society
- Absence of institutional and legal frameworks against electoral violence
- Inadequate documented and public knowledge of electoral system and violence
- Excessive monetization of politics

In addition to the above causes, the following has been identified as contributing factors to electoral violence in Nigeria;

1. **Hate campaigns** – In an ideal democracy, electoral campaigns should be designed in such a manner that those seeking to occupy political offices appealed to the conscience of the electorates through their programmes and



policies which they dish out during campaigns. Political parties and their candidates supposed to captivate the interests of the electorates through their programmes and policies which they tell the electorates during campaigns. In Nigeria however, electoral campaigns are anchored on hate speeches against the opposition, and as such, insults, lies and tantrum are hauled against the opponents thereby attracting harsh reactions which may lead to violence from the other side.

2. **Desire to achieve electoral victory by all means** – Nigerian Politicians see politics as investment and whatever they invested must be recouped in multifold. This informed the reason why they often desire to achieve electoral victory by whatever means whenever they go into poll, and by so doing, they usually chose violent paths by recruiting political thugs who they use to disrupt electoral process, subvert the will of the people and corner electoral outcomes into their favour.
3. **Abuse of state power** – Attempts by those in power to use state machineries to achieve electoral victory may also result to electoral violence. Oppositions that do not have access to state power may result into recruiting political thugs to counter those with state machineries in order to ensure that their chances at the poll are not subverted.
4. **Lack of institutional and legal frameworks to punish the perpetrators of electoral violence** – Perpetrators of electoral violence usually get away with their acts without being punished. This accounts for the reason why perpetrators and sponsors of electoral violence usually don't show remorse for their actions and returned to the same acts whenever they go to the poll.
5. **Low level of internal party democracy** – Some of the issues that degenerated into electoral violence were as a result of the internal wrangling within political parties. Most of the political parties in the country lack democratic culture which should serve as their control mechanism. Members often result to conflicts on petty issues that are

supposed to be resolved through democratic means. They usually disagree and fail to allow due process on issues that are not favourable to them.

6. **Godfatherism** – The Nigeria's democratic practice is characterized by politics of godfathers and the godfathers waded so much influence that they determine who get what, when and how within the system. The interests of the godfathers supersede any other interests and whenever other interests are in conflict with the interests of the godfathers, such conflicts are usually settled via violence ways.

### **Effects on Democratic Sustainability**

One of the beauties of democracy is that it is a system that allows for participation of every citizen in its process. This is however only achievable in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility, people tend to run away from anything that will endanger their lives. Therefore, when electoral process becomes more violent, people run away from it and when this happens, democracy which is widely regarded as government of the majority becomes minority affairs. The effects of electoral violence on democratic process and sustainability can be felt in the following ways:

- **It builds lack of trust in the democratic process and institutions of the state** – The beauty of democracy is that leaders occupied political offices through the conscience of the people as expressed via elections. When electoral process therefore turned violent, people develop lack of interest and trust in it, the leadership and the institutions that the leaders are chosen to manage.
- **Electoral violence results to violation of human rights** – In any democratic government, rights of citizens are preserved and respected, including right to freely chose whoever that people want to rule over them. In an atmosphere of violence however, such rights are not only being supplanted but also trampled upon.
- **Destruction of lives and properties** – One of the primary responsibilities of any government is to secure the lives and properties of the people. However,

government usually failed in this responsibility during electioneering process. This failure is not unconnected with the fact that election period in Nigeria is usually regarded as period of tension where protection of lives and properties of people cannot be guaranteed. This is evident in the number of lives and properties that has been lost to election related violence.

- **Promotion of electoral frauds** – An atmosphere of violence during electioneering process gives room for electoral frauds. Politicians usually create this atmosphere of violence during elections when they discovered that the outcome might not favour them. Creating this atmosphere of violence will allow them to rig the election and corner the outcome to their favour.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has examined the effects of electoral violence on democratic process and sustainability in Nigeria fourth republic. It was revealed that that electoral violence is fast becoming an enduring characteristic of the electioneering process, but, it is detrimental to the continuous practice of democratic system of government in the country. Therefore, every efforts must be made to eradicate it. The following recommendations were therefore suggested as way out of the menace:

Every participant must conformed to the rule of the game. Those at the helms of affairs should not use their positions to corner electoral fortunes. Winners and the losers alike should display the spirit of sportsmanship when they win or lose election.

Electoral campaigns should be seen as an avenue for those seeking political offices to dish out their programmes and policies and captivate the interests of the electorates rather than an avenue to insult and throw tantrums at opponents.

Perpetrators of electoral violence must be seriously frowned at; government should provide the institution and legal frameworks that will give severe punishments to electoral offenders, including those that engaged in violence during elections.

Party affairs should be conducted on the basis of laid down rules and democratic process.

This it is hoped, will enhance party cohesion and reduce internal party conflicts.

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