

ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA:

The Historical Perspective of Nigerian Elections

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Elections are an important determinant of the quality of a Democratic Government. In every democracy, election is the essential ingredient that allows transition from one administration to the other. It is the means and process by which the electorate decides who and which group or political party administers the affairs of their country based upon their perceived conviction on the agenda or programmes, otherwise known as manifestoes, presented by the political parties involved.

Elections have been the usual mechanism by which modern representative democracy has operated since the 17th century. It is a form of government in which eligible

citizens may participate equally – either directly by voting for the passing/rejecting of laws or running for office themselves, or indirectly through elected representatives – in the proposal, development and establishment of the laws by which their society is run. Democracy is defined as a social system of administering a nation-state where political parties and independent candidates compete for elective positions in a free and fair election atmosphere and in which the citizens are legally empowered to choose those who will run the affairs of the state in a given period. Democracy can also be said to be a political system that exists to the extent that its most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes, and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote.¹

Nigeria has had elections which have been tainted with real and perceived electoral fraud which has sometimes led to an implosion of the democratic system. It is pertinent to note that violence only begets violence and real or perceived electoral fraud is actually violence on the electorate who

¹ Huntington, 1991:7, in O Donnell, 2001.

most times respond even more violently attacking each other, killing, maiming and destroying private and public property.

Electoral Violence is any act of violence committed in the course of political activities, including pre, during and post election periods, and may include inciteful speeches, threats, assault, murder, destruction of property and physical or psychological harm. Electoral violence must involve specific victims, perpetrators and occurs within a specific period of time.

Electoral violence can occur at different stages in the election process starting pre-election period (voter registration) to post election period (after results have been declared).

- a. **Pre-Election Period**
- b. **Campaign Period**
- c. **Election Day Violence Result Conflict**
- d. **Post Election/Result Conflict**

INTERNATIONAL PROVISIONS FOR ELECTIONS

Internationally, there are provisions for the conduct of elections and these include;

Article 21(3) in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which constitutes the legal basis and

the core principles legitimating international support for elections and electoral assistance

Article 21(3) specifies that “The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this peoples will, shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures”.

Agreement about the general standards

which should govern the conduct of elections are further specified in Article 25 of the **United Nations International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights** (ICCPR of 1966), namely:

- 1) Periodic elections.
- 2) Universal suffrage.
- 3) Equal suffrage.
- 4) Right to stand for public office.
- 5) right to vote.
- 6) Secret ballot.
- 7) Genuine elections.
- 8) Free expression of the will of the people.

These standards are also understood as embodying rights to self-determination, after Article 1(1) which specifies that “all peoples have the right of self-determination”. Since it came into force in 1976, the

Covenant creates binding legal obligations for the 167 member countries which endorsed the treaty including Nigeria.

The African Charter on Democracy, Election and Governance (ACDEG) calls on state parties to recognize popular participation as inalienable rights of the people:

Article 4 of the ACDEG provides;

“State parties shall commit themselves to promote democracy, the principle of the rule of law and human rights. State parties shall recognize popular participation through universal suffrage as the inalienable right of the people”

Article 3 provides;

“Effective participation of citizens in democratic and development processes and in governance of public affairs”

Objective 10 of the Charter provides;

“Promote the establishment of the necessary conditions to foster citizen participation, transparency, access to information, freedom of the press and accountability in the management of public affairs”

NIGERIAN CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria established and gave the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) the

responsibility of organizing elections into various political offices in the country amongst other responsibilities.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF NIGERIAN ELECTIONS (1959 – 2011)

THE 1959 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 1959 federal elections were the first nationwide direct election to be undertaken in Nigeria. **Parliamentary elections** were held in Nigeria on 12 December 1959. The result was a victory for the Northern People's Congress (NPC), which won 134 of the 312 seats in the House of Representatives. In general the 1959 federal election was regarded as free and fair partly because the colonial government of the day was preparing to hand over political power to Nigerians on the 1st of October 1960 and had no desire to perpetuate itself in governance.

THE 1964 GENERAL ELECTION

From a multi-party structure which marked the 1959 pre-independence elections, Nigeria was to witness the emergence of a two-party system in the 1964 general

elections: the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) and the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). Indeed, the desire of the government to succeed itself and the rupture occurring between the coalition partners, the split in the Action Group (AG) and the controversy engendered by the publication of the 1963 census figures, made re-alignment of political forces inevitable².

The 1964 General election was characterized with a lot of problems. Agencies of regional government sometimes connived with the electoral officers to prevent opposition candidates from complying with the nomination process. The permits for party meetings or processions were often denied opposition parties on flimsy excuses and a more ominous obstacle was the assassination of opposition candidates or their nominations to ensure that there was no contested election in the constituency³.

In the end, the 1964 General elections returned the government of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) to a second term in office but were characterized by widespread complaints of fraud, violence

² Kurfi .A. (2005), *Nigerian General Elections: My Roles and Reminiscences*, Ibadan, Spectrum Books

³ Kurfi .A. (2005), *Nigerian General Elections: My Roles and Reminiscences*, Ibadan, Spectrum Books

and intimidation⁴. Protest in the wake of the elections, particularly in the western region degenerated into a violent exercise in competitive rigging. As a result, in January 1966 a group of five Army Majors planned and executed Nigeria's first coup d'état, citing the lingering post election violence, fraud, crisis and other alleged government failings as their justification why they struck.

THE 1979 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The preparation, conduct and supervision of the 1979 federal elections were done under the auspices of departing military rulers in the same way that the 1959 elections were carried out during the period of departing British colonial rulers. At the close of registration of political parties Nigeria's Federal Elections Commission (FEDECO) came to the conclusion that five political associations satisfied the prescribed conditions and accordingly decided to register them as the political parties that would contest the 1979 general elections. The **Presidential elections** were held in Nigeria for the first time on August 11th 1979. The result of that election was a victory for

⁴ Osaghae. E. (1998), *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Alhaji, Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) after a court battle with Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Unity Party Of Nigeria (UPN). The 1979 elections were better than the elections of 1964, particularly, as the military government which supervised the elections had no apparent vested interest at stake.

THE 1983 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 1983 general election was contested by six political parties and all sorts of strategies including: manipulation of the ballot or rigging was employed in order to win the elections⁵. Each of the opposition parties used its local power of incumbency to retain power and /or to improve its position vis-à-vis other contenders. The elections were characterized by violence, thuggery, arson, bribery and corruption, intimidation and other unwholesome acts in almost all states of the federation in order to win elections by hook or crook, at all cost.

Indeed, the height of the electoral rigging and the resultant violence in the 1983 elections was epitomized in Ondo state where the offices of FEDECO and the Nigerian police were

⁵ Kurfi .A. (2005), Nigerian General Elections: My Roles and Reminiscences, Ibadan, Spectrum Books

burnt down following the announcement of the NPN's gubernatorial candidate as the winner of the state election. Ondo State had been a UPN stronghold and the NPN had only one member in the outgoing state assembly thus, the apprehension of the electorate with the election results. At the end of that violence and crisis riddled electoral results, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) had to concede Ondo State governorship slot to the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN).

Apart from the fact that the 1983 elections were alleged to have been massively rigged in favor of Shehu Shagari and his National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the country's Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) and the security forces were widely accused of actively colluding to rig the elections. As a result a nationwide brouhaha greeted the election results and the government proved unable to quell the political chaos that ensued⁶.

Four months after the 1983 elections conducted by FEDECO, the military struck again, overthrowing Shagari's government. As in 1966, the coup plotters defended their actions by pointing to the chaotic and illegitimate 1983 elections along with massive violence, corruption and

⁶ Joseph .R. (1987), *Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise And Fall Of The Second Republic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

government superlative degree of ineptitude to meet its basic responsibilities toward ordinary Nigerians.

THE 1991/1993 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The General Ibrahim B. Babangida transition program created two political parties and foisted them on the political elites –referring to the political elites as “equal founders” and “equal joiners” of the political parties which were a little to the left and a little to the right.

Another innovation introduced by the Ibrahim Babangida military regime was the adoption of a new method of election - tagged the “open ballot system”. The open ballot system did away with the ballot box and the ballot papers and secrecy in casting the vote. Electors were simply asked to queue behind the candidates of their choice or his photograph or party symbol to signify their support for him.

However, the open ballot system was open to abuse as electors at the grass root level were sometimes subjected to intimidation and harassment for daring to openly support one candidate against another. Thus, it was eventually dropped in favor of the secret ballot system which was more expensive. In addition to the experimentation with the

open ballot system, another innovation in the 1993 elections was the so-called “option A 4” which took elections to the grass root in that any presidential hopeful had to contest elections at ward, local government and state levels before having to participate at the federal level. Alhaji, MKO Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) is generally believed to have won that presidential election which was however annulled.

In general, the 1993 presidential election was and still remains the freest and fairest election, in the history of election administration in Nigeria, whereby for the first and last time, two Muslims (Alhaji MKO Abiola and Alhaji Baba Gana Kingibe) from the Southern and Northern Nigeria respectively, were generally accepted, contested and won Nigeria’s Presidential Elections but was later annulled by the election Chief Umpire, Prof. Humphrey Nwosu on the orders and directive of the then military President, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida.

The elections were not only organized based on the recommendations of prominent political scientists and technocrats but were also one of the most elaborate and expensive in the history of Nigeria’s electoral process.

Furthermore, the two party structure of the electoral system ensured that the problem of regionalism, religion, sub-cultures and ethnicity that has become synonymous with Nigerian political culture and above all, was hitherto symptomatic of election administration in Nigeria's history was transcended.

THE 1999 GENERAL ELECTIONS

General Abdulsalami Abubakar became the military head of state of Nigeria following the sudden death of General Sani Abacha in June 1998. Accordingly, building on the recommendations of a work in progress, (the constitution evolved by General Sani Abacha regime), a transition program was announced to terminate with a hand over to an elected civilian president on the 29th of May 1999.

Three political parties: the Alliance for Democracy (AD), All Peoples Party (APP) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) were registered by Nigeria's electoral body, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to contest the elections into legislative and executive positions. As in 1979, the military rulers were not interested in perpetuating themselves in office and were desirous of

supervising the organization of free and fair elections. The APP and AD decided to contest the presidential elections on a joint ticket choosing Chief Olu Falae of the AD and pairing him with Alhaji Umaru Shinkafi of APP as his running mate while the PDP sponsored former military head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo with Alhaji Atiku Abubakar as his vice presidential running mate. Olusegun Obasanjo was the victor, although there were hitches, complaints, mishaps etc here and there but the elections were generally described as free and fair.

THE 2003 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2003 general elections were held on 19 April 2003. The result was a victory for the incumbent, now Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) whose major opponents were Muhuhamadu Buhari of the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) and former Biafran Warlord, now Chief Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA).

The elections were regarded as massively rigged and as a result not considered to be free and fair. Both international and domestic election monitoring groups including Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), the European Union

as well as a host of other civil society groups, advocacy groups and NGO's were in unison about the poor conduct of the elections. The security agents and INEC officials were alleged of bias and rigging in the elections in favor of the ruling PDP⁷.

The INEC according to the EU, American and commonwealth election Observer Team Reports, lacked transparency in all key stages of the electoral process.⁸

THE 2007 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The Nigerian general elections of 2007 were held on 14 April and 21 April 2007. Governorship and state assembly elections were held on 14 April, while the presidential and national assembly elections were held a week later on 21 April. The 2007 general election has been severally described as the worst in the history of Nigeria according to several international and local observers such as the Domestic Election Observer Group -a coalition of several civil society organizations, Human Rights Watch, the European Union (EU) amongst others. Umaru Musa

⁷ Roberts .F. and Obioha .E.(2005), Electoral Violence and the Role of the Police in Nigeria in Onu G. And Momoh A. Elections and Democratic Consolidation In Nigeria, Lagos, Nigerian Political Science Association

⁸ Ajayi. K. (2007), Election Administration in Nigeria and the Challenges Of The 2007 Elections, The Social Sciences Vol. 2 Number 2, Medwell Journals.

Yar'Adua was declared the winner of the highly contested and controversial elections.

THE 2011 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2011 election was praised by both local and foreign observers as being amongst the fairest ever conducted in Nigeria but few could have predicted the violence that would erupt after the elections. With over 1,000 people killed and millions of property, the protests made the elections one of the bloodiest ever in the modern political history of electoral violence in Nigeria.

The polls were also riddled with malpractices, logistical deficiencies and procedural inconsistencies. Reported voter turnout of about 78 per cent in the South-South and the South-East during the presidential elections exceeded the national average by at least 50 per cent, suggesting electoral fraud via organised manipulations. Yet, the polls were amongst the most credible to date.

CAUSES OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

It is imperative at this stage therefore to examine some key factors responsible for election violence in Nigeria. According to recent study, public perception of factors such as greed, electoral abuse, corruption of electoral practice or

process, rigging of elections, electoral fraud, thuggery and abuse of power.

1. **Greed:** The word “greed” has been defined as “wanting or strong desire for more power, money, possessions, etc, than a person needs”. In the context of election violence, the phenomenon of greed itself seems to be really critical and the greed translates not just from those who want to capture power and use its perquisites, but also those who are aspiring to replace them.

2. **Electoral abuses:** Abuse of electoral practices is, of course, not limited to bribery or intimidation of the individual voter. The possibilities are endless, ranging from the dissemination of scurrilous rumours about candidates, and deliberately false campaign propaganda, to tampering the election machinery by stuffing the ballot box with fraudulent returns, dishonest counting or reporting of the vote, and total disregard of electoral outcomes by incumbent office-holders. The existence of these practices depends more on a population’s adherence to political norms, civility and the democratic ethos (political culture) than on the prohibitions and sanctions written in the law books, constitution or electoral laws and guidelines.

3. **Rigging of Election:** Election rigging is a criminal conduct of subverting an entire electoral process through massive organized fraud with the active participation of officials of the electoral body. Election rigging takes place in three phases: before, during and after elections. Experience has shown that rigging can take many forms. It could be by stuffing of the ballot box with fake ballot papers before the Election Day or on the Election Day, falsification of results and forgery of figures both at polling units and collation centres, voting by unregistered person and publication of false statement of the withdrawal of a candidate.

Constructive ways of rigging elections include creating artificial scarcity of ballot papers in “safe” polling booths of the opponents, diversion or snatching of ballot boxes between polling booths and counting centres and abduction of returning officers. All these actions are usually perpetrated for gratification. Rigging an election remains the single most incendiary malpractice that can easily throw the entire election process into violent upheaval. In Nigeria’s experience, there were occasions when electoral announcement revealed as winners,

candidates completely outside the expectations of the majority of the electorate.

On such occasion, immediate blow-up and tumult can occur at the very point of collation and declaration of results. Such quakes can easily spread like bush fire throughout the country. Nothing stems it, usually, other than a military intervention.

4. Poverty/Unemployment: Poverty is the state of being extremely poor. It is a situation whereby an individual cannot meet the basic needs of life⁹. Such a person is more likely to participate in violence than a rich person in line with the relative deprivation theory¹⁰. When this poverty situation is compounded by a high level of youth unemployment, the propensity for violence increases. The crumbling of nation-states in future has been attributed to demography and environmental factors¹¹. This assertion aptly captures the situation in Nigeria, where an “army of unemployed youth” has become a tool for electoral violence. The 2002 killing and bombing in Kwara State of Nigeria was traced to this problem so also, the latent and

⁹ Maslow, A.H (1954) Electoral alignments in the Netherlands

¹⁰ Gurr, T.R (1970), Repression, Grievances, Mobilization and Rebellion

¹¹ Kaplan, N (1954) Voting as a Rational Choice,

manifest causes of 2011 electoral violence in northern Nigeria. A large number of the Nigerian Youths are unemployed and poor and thus are ready materials for unscrupulous politicians who then use them for their own selfish and wicked ends.

5. **Abuse of power:** The tendency for abuse of legal power is evident from the understanding or the possible areas of operational conflict between the activities of law enforcement agents and protection of individual rights, especially under the guise of maintenance of law and order, peace and national security. It is an abuse of legal power for any law enforcement agency or government functionary to use the power conferred upon it by law inconsistent with the purpose of the law in that society.

Accordingly, it is an abuse of the legal power for any law enforcement agency to witch-hunt innocent citizens or to allow itself to be used in carrying out personal vendetta and harassment against fellow citizens.

Abuse of legal power by all those in authority is a threat not only to the existence of law, but also to the corporate existence of society. Relying on the Rule of Law ideal, abuse of legal power wears the cloak of legitimacy as it

breeds instability and chaos in society. Hence the exercise of legal power must be in the interest of the survival of human beings, respect for human rights and promotion of peace and security, democracy and good governance.

Other causes include: ineffectiveness of security forces/culture of Impunity, weak penalties, bad governance, Corruption in the Electoral Process as well as small arms proliferation.

EFFECTS OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

The effects of electoral violence are manifold however they can be grouped into these three categories:

1. **Insecurity:** Electoral constraints breeds insecurity as it is often characterized by loss of lives and properties as it is the case in the Northern part of Nigeria. Over 50,000 people have been killed, thousands displaced and properties worth billions of naira burnt, looted or destroyed. In addition to the insecurity, there are attendant costs like increased security votes and the resources spent on repairs of damaged infrastructure. These resources could have been better spent on human and social development and such trends

adversely affect the social and economic wellbeing of the country.

It is axiomatic that development cannot occur in the absence of peace and security. The economy suffers in an atmosphere of insecurity and political instability. This is because investors are scared due to lack of security for their investment. Direct foreign investment is thus often lost in such circumstances which have contributed to the state of underdevelopment in Nigeria. It is trite that, businesses have a strong interest in peace and security in the countries in which they are operating or might wish to operate.

2. Cycle of Violence: Another effect of electoral constraint is that it has helped propagate the ongoing cycle of violence in the country. Acts of violence impact negatively on the children living in such societies. In line with the social learning theory, such children would likely end up being violent. The ongoing violence by Boko Haram in the Northern Region of Nigeria (which has witnessed considerable political violence) supports this.

Moreover, acts of electoral violence are likely to result in hostile goals like “the desire for revenge” in political opponents which could lead to conflict escalation. This perhaps explains why almost all political parties in Nigeria are involved in electoral violence.

3. Political Instability: Political instability often arises due to inability of opposition and relevant actors in governance to resolve perceived or real grievances. Electoral violence is both causative and symptomatic of political instability in Nigeria. It is symptomatic as it reflects an inchoate political system. It is also causative because it feeds the political crises that manifest regularly. Electoral violence, if not properly addressed, could ultimately lead to escalated violence or even armed conflict. Political violence is incapable of building a strong, efficient and virile democratic nation (social development). It is anti-people because issues of human rights, gender equality, cultural rights and identities are often ignored or trampled upon. These adversely affect the human security and social development of the country.

