

# Democracy, Election and Electoral Violence in Nigeria: Focus on 2019 General Elections

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**Abstract:** *Democracy as a form of government has become very popular among nations of modern world that it has become a household name. One of the main attributes of liberal democracy is the periodic and regular competition for political power with the governed as free agents exercising their free and unfettered choice among competing platforms. Elections are therefore a significant and crucial pillar in the democratic process since they underscore the principles of political participation, accountability and legitimacy. However Nigeria has witnessed various degrees of electoral violence since the return of democracy in the country in 1999. The main aim of the study was to provide an analysis of 2019 general elections in Nigeria with the attendant electoral violence. The study also aimed at identifying the root causes of electoral violence. The research design was descriptive and the framework of analysis adopted was Frustration-Aggression Theory and documentary method of data collection was used for the study. Some of the causes of electoral violence in Nigeria include rising rates of unemployment, struggle for power, ignorance, social division and more so, high level of corruption in governance in the country. The government should as matter of urgency start addressing the causes of electoral violence to save our hard earned democracy and allow the citizens to participate in the electoral process, government should avoid corruption and provide jobs to the teeming youth of the country.*

**Keywords:** *Democracy, election, electoral violence, ethnic politics, insecurity, Nigeria*

## Introduction

Democracy has been in use in the tradition of western political thought since ancient times. It is derived from the Greek root “demos” which means the people “kratos” stands for “rule or government”. Thus, literary democracy as a form of government has become very popular among nations of modern world that it has become a household name. Almost all countries of the world look forward to electing their members to occupy one office or the other and the citizens are encouraged to take part either stand for election (contesting) or voting for those that are contesting. One of the main attributes of liberal democracy is the periodic and regular competition for political power with the governed as free agents exercising their free and unfettered choice among competing platforms. Elections are therefore a significant and crucial pillar in the democratic process since they underscore the principles of political participation, accountability and legitimacy. There is therefore a symbiotic relationship between democracy and election. However, Nigeria has witnessed various degrees of electoral violence since the return of democracy in the country in 1999. In both the 23rd February, 2019 Presidential and 9th March, 2019, Gubernatorial elections in the country, very disturbing electoral violence was recorded in Lagos, Zamfara, Kebbi, Kano, Nasarawa, Benue, Plateau, Ekiti, Bauchi, Kwara and Oyo States with scores of lives lost and property destroyed (CSSR, 2019). Nigeria’s history is replete with narratives of how its electoral process has been marred by massive rigging of elections, violence and the subversion of the will of the people. Sometimes, the violence is intra-party, and most of the time, it is inter-party. These acts of violence include murder –Pa Lawani, Bola Ige former Justice Minister, targeted attacks on suspected opponents, arson-burning of party houses, kidnapping, religious uprising- Sharia uprising that engulfed different parts of northern Nigeria between 2000 and 2007, Party clashes- intra and inter party clashes PDP and the then ACN in Ogun State 2007 elections, cult clashes- River and Edo states. Shooting, stabbing, kidnapping for ransom, and rioting especially against government policies and programmes.

## Methodology

The work is a qualitative research and the design is descriptive, while documentary method of data collection was adopted this has to do with examination of historical documents, textbooks, magazines/newspapers, journals and content analysis was used as method of data analysis.

## Conceptual Analysis

### Democracy, election and electoral violence

In the view of Bernard (1998) “democracy” is perhaps the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs”. Perhaps a more helpful starting point from which to consider the meaning of democracy is Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, delivered

in 1864. At the height of the American civil war Lincoln extolled the virtues of what he called “government of the people, by the people and for the people”. By this, it becomes very clear that democracy links government to the people. Dicey in his work, *Laws and Opinion in England* (1905), treated democracy as a form of government under which majority opinion determines legislation. According to him, “it would be unwise in a democracy to enforce laws not approved by the people”. Bryce (1921) sees democracy as a form of government in which the people rule by expressing their sovereign will through the votes, the test of government being the welfare of the people. Seely (1995) describes democracy as a form of government in which everybody has a share. Democracy according to Appadorai (2004) may be described as a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power directly or through representatives periodically elected by them. According to Agu (2015) democracy can therefore be seen as a system of government in which the eligible citizens irrespective of their social status directly or indirectly take part in deciding who should hold one office or the other at a regular interval.

## **Election**

Democratic government is government by “consent of the governed”, election gives practical meaning to this notion of “consent”. Election is also an integral part of a democratic process that enables the citizenry to determine fairly and freely who should lead them at every level of government periodically and take decisions that shape their socio-economic and political destiny; and in case they falter, still possess the power to recall them or vote them out in the next election. According to Schumpeter (1942) election is the very heart of democracy. He goes on to state that it is an “institutional arrangement”, as a means of filling public offices by a competitive struggle for the peoples vote. This was why Rose (1978) and Dye (2001) aptly defined election as a major instrument for the recruitment of political leadership in democratic societies; the key to participation in a democracy; and the way of giving consent to government ; and allowing the governed to choose and pass judgment on office holders who theoretically represent the governed. According to Olisa et al (1991) elections are the mechanisms for selecting people into public offices or other private positions. In the views of Gauba (2007) election is the process by which the members of a community or organization choose one or more persons to exercise authority on their behalf. The provision of election in democracy is intended to ensure that the government will exercise its powers with the consent of the governed. In other words, election lends legitimacy to the authority of the government. Election is therefore a process through which members of a group, club, societies, Communities and organizations choose some of their members to hold offices at regular intervals.

## **Electoral violence**

There is no agreeable definition of electoral violence. This is because of the contentious issue of ‘violence begets violence’ developed by Frantz Fanon in the era of anti-colonial struggles. The Fanonian argument is predicated on the fact that ‘violence provokes violence’. So those who retaliate to the first violence of political opponents do not agree that they are perpetrating violence. They simply argue that they are countering violence. From the array of definitions available, one can glean an operational definition. According to Balogun (2003) operationally, electoral violence connotes all forms of violence (physical, psychological, administrative, legal and structural) at different stages engaged in by participants, their supporters, and sympathizers (including security and election management body staff) in the electoral process. These forms of violence take place before elections, during elections and after or post-election, and could also be intra- or inter-party. However, prevalent forms of political violence in Nigeria exude in political assassinations, arsons, violence-prone campaigns, thuggery, election-related ethno-religious crisis, snatching of ballot boxes and so on and so forth.

According to Abah and Nwokwu (2015) state that political/electoral violence is the use of force or threat of it to change the voting behaviour pattern of electorates during elections. In modern times, electoral violence generally involves political parties, their supporters, journalists, and agents of government, election administrators and the general public and includes threats, assault, murder, destruction of property and physical or psychological harm (Fisher 2002; IFES, 2011).

## **Theoretical framework:- The Frustration-Aggression Theory**

This Theory which Dollard et al (1939) initially developed, has been expanded and modified by scholars like Berkowitz (1962), Yates (1962), Anifowose (1982), Gurr (1970) and Lupsha (1971). The thrust of this theory is that aggression is a product of frustration which arises from a gap between what one wants and what one eventually gets. In the words of Davies (1962) frustration is induced by the difference between “expected need satisfaction and actual need satisfaction”. This implies that frustration is inevitable consequences of the chasm between one’s current status and one’s aspirations. Theorists who rely on this explanation use psychological theories of motivation and behaviour, as well as frustration. In an attempt to explain aggression, scholars point to the difference between what people feel they want or deserve to what they actually get, Feierbends (1969) the “want –get-ratio” and difference between expected need satisfaction”. Where expectation does not meet attainment, the tendency is for people to confront those they hold responsible for frustrating their ambitions (by resorting to electoral violence). Taken as given therefore, the origin of the current electoral violence in Nigeria should be located in the state collapse occasioned by corruption and maladministration

and its resultant poverty and unemployment. In the view of Anifowose (1982) the feeling of discontent arising out of the comparison between what Nigerians enjoy and what they think they ought to have. This line of thought is encapsulated in Ted Gurr (1997) relative deprivation which refers to the discrepancy between what men seek and what seem attainable in the long run, the greater the discrepancy, however marginal, between what is sought and what seem attainable, the greater will be the chances that anger and violence will result. This must have explained the high level of electoral violence that has been bedeviling the country since the return to democracy in 1999. The main explanation that Frustration-aggression theory provides is that aggression is not just undertaken as a natural reaction or instinct as realists and biological theorists assume, but it is the outcome of frustration where the legitimate desires of an individual(s) is denied either directly or indirectly (political or economic exclusion) or by the indirect consequences (widening socio-economic and political gap between the politicians and the masses) or the way the society is structured, (ethnicity, marginalization, economic and political exclusion etc) the feeling of disappointment (deprivation) may lead to such a person(s) to express his /their anger through violence that will be directed at those he/they hold (s) responsible or people who are directly or indirectly related to them hence resort to electoral violence. In situation where feelings of frustration become widespread (as in Nigeria) among the population and the feeling is that the people are getting less than they deserve as a result of corrupt leadership, marginalization, widespread poverty among the people and the situation they found themselves. Nigeria is richly endowed with natural and human resources but Nigerians continue to suffer untold hardship as a result of bad leadership and their poverty driven political and economic environment. This kind of environment tends to be useful in the hands of political actors who manipulate the situation during election to cause political violence. This has been the situation in all the elections held in Nigeria since 2003 till date, the country has faced and continues to face different degrees of electoral violence.

### **Democracy, elections and electoral violence in Nigeria historical perspective**

Nigeria's democracy, elections and electoral experiences since 1999 up to the most recent general elections in 2019 have remained sad memories of political violence. In fact, violence has saturated the political atmosphere in the country. For instance, the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 elections were marred by widespread fraud and unprecedented political violence. The election violence in 2007, 2011 and 2015 led to severe damage to the political atmosphere in Nigeria, including loss of lives and property worth billions of Naira (Abah and Nwoku, 2015). In Nigeria, democracy and elections have been accompanied with electoral violence since independence. It may be physical, emotional/psychological and otherwise with the sole intent to intimidate and harass voters to change their minds before, during and after voting. This suggests that, democracy, elections and electoral violence cut across different segments of the electoral process commencing from the registration period to post-election period. Most often, electoral violence is always aimed at altering, influencing or changing by force the voting pattern or manipulating the electoral results in favour of a particular candidate or political party (Ugoh, 2004). Electoral violence is one major problem that has affected the Nigeria's democratic sustainability and achievement of good governance (Gberevbie, 2014). The nation's democratic history is replete with instances of electoral violence. All the general elections conducted since independence in 1960 till date has been violence-ridden – 1964/1965, 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. According to Osaghae (2015) the first post-independence election organized by that government led by Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa/President Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1964 and 1965 were characterized by widespread complaints of fraud, violence and intimidation. According to Anifowose (1982) protest in the wake of the regional elections especially in western region in 1965, which in some areas degenerated into a violent exercise in competitive rigging, led to widespread violence and inter-communal rioting that claimed more than 200 lives and later in January 1966, the military struck and the fledging Nigerian democracy was thwarted by the action of its very own practitioners. From 1966, the military held sway until 1979 when they handed over to another civilian government headed by Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN). The Shagari-led government organized a civilian to civilian transition election but again like its First Republic counterparts repeated history and massively rigged the 1983 general elections (especially in western states where it was a battle between the then Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) and National Party of Nigeria NPN in Ondo State) through very violent means in connivance with the election management body, Federal Election Commission (FEDECO) and security forces. The outcome of the elections sparked off massive protests in different parts of the country –Lagos, Ondo, Kano, Kaduna Benue, Anambra, Jos, etc and brought the country to halt. That again set the stage for the second wave of military intervention in the nation's politics on December 31, 1983. The military from then remained in power until May 29, 1999 after several attempts to democratize. Suffice it to say that between independence in 1960 and 1999 when civilian rule was restored, Nigeria produced only two elected governments and both were overthrown in military coup d'états before completing a second term in office. The 1999, 2003 and 2007, 2011, 2015 2019 general elections that brought President Olusegun Obasanjo and later late President Umaru Yar' Adua, President Good Luck Jonathan and President Mohammedu Buhari to power were marred by such widespread violence and fraud. In the same vein, the 2003 elections were more pervasively and openly rigged than the flawed 1999 polls, and far more bloody. That election was described as the "most fraudulent election" in the history of Nigeria. These events set the stage for the 2007 elections which both domestic and foreign observers succinctly described as the worst in Nigeria's history ranking among the worst conducted anywhere in the world in recent times. For instance, the US-based National Democratic Institute (2007) stated in its post-election statement that the electoral process "failed the Nigerian people". The Human Rights Watch (2007) which monitored the election in its report said the Nigeria's failed April 2007 polls cast a harsh and very public light on patterns of violence, corruption and outright

criminality that have come to characterize Nigeria's political system—and on the extent to which officials and institutions at all levels of government accept, encourage and participate in those abuses.

### **Causes of electoral Violence**

According to Obasanjo (2002; P.14)

*We fight and sometimes shed blood to achieve and retain political power because for us in Nigeria, the political kingdom has for long been the gate way to economic kingdom.*

Therefore, the understanding of an average Nigerian politician is to use all available means to win election or resist your opponent from winning. Some of the factors responsible for electoral violence in Nigeria include:

#### **Ignorance**

Ignorance is referred to as the inability of one to evaluate and distinguish between what is happening around him. Gboyega (2004) is of the view that an ignorant person is an easy prey to exploitation. Therefore, a political ignorant person does not know his right and freedom. He is neither informed about the law that protects him nor where to seek redress. This has contributed to unprincipled political leaders to deceive the populace in carrying out their selfish interest. It is on this facts that the youths who lack good education and without jobs are co-opted in to cause violence during and after elections.

#### **Resource-Based Competition:**

As Adetula (2010) noted “while electoral violence may occur before or after electoral competition, at their base are protests and agitations over socio-economic issues,” with regard to election-related violence, these agitations play out on two levels. First, competition for political seats among elites can be incredibly fierce. Prospective politicians may be wealthier and better educated than most of their country- men, but they too suffer from a dearth of alternative job prospects. Second, politicians and party bosses bent on mischief have a ready supply of recruits from an aggrieved, resource- deprived population.

#### **Social Division**

Too often, leaders across Nigeria exploit and exacerbate the country's many social divisions to deadly effect during elections as the leadership employ divisive tendency despite political mandate to equitably govern all inhabitants, the leadership has regularly and inflexibly promoted the notion that land ownership and other rights belong only to certain residents. Sometimes the leadership makes no apology for advancing the notion that members of his ethnic group are rightful “indigenes” who need not share the advantages of residency rights and who should resist religio -political domination by other ethnic groups. For instance the introduction of sharia laws by some state governors in northern parts of Nigeria almost brought the country to halt. During this period hundreds of citizens of Nigeria died in ethno-religious and communal fighting. Oftentimes leadership fans the embers of ethnic, religious, and socio-economic diversity and this has led to political violence.

#### **Lack of Internal democracy /Poor party politics**

According to Ntalaja (2000) in Nigeria, democratic process no doubt has been bedeviled with poor party politics, as a result of not only ethnicization of party politics, poor political leadership, excessive westernization of the concept “democracy” party indiscipline, lack of clear cut party ideologies, the politicization of higher echelon of the military profession among others but also and worrisomely, lack of internal party democracy this is usually demonstrated during party primary elections. The process of electing/ selecting party candidates to stand for general elections by various political parties has been more of warfare within the parties and this has often translated to the general elections.

#### **Struggle for Political Power**

Nigerian society is a highly plural and divided, where the elites that dominate politics are factionalised along ethnic, religious and regional lines with a warped value system that places great premium on social status and wealth acquisition. The implication of this state of affairs for politics and the pursuit of public office during election season is very grave, as competition is always fierce and zero-sum. The perception of public offices as an arena and instrument of accumulation and distribution of wealth through patron-clients relationship exacerbates this phenomenon. Osaghae (2015;p.57) argues that:

*In a civilian dispensation, most businessmen join the party in power to gain access to contracts and other forms of accumulation...all this explains the desperation and opportunism with which political power is sought and used...reliance on patronage networks for retention of political power and legitimacy means that any segment of*

*the elite or political party which loses control of political power at the federal, state or local levels, loses the wherewithal to compete for power. This is the major explanation for the war-like approach to elections.*

The bifurcation of the public realm in the wake of colonialism in Africa between what Ekeh (1975) called the ‘primordial and the civic public’ which are governed by contrasting sense of morality have led to a situation where the civic realm constitute an arena for inter-group struggles for the resources of the state. The civic public realm where the state belongs according to this theoretical construct is perceived as amoral and a prized booty to be captured and pillaged for individual and group benefit by any of the contending forces that gains ascendancy at any point in time. While the primordial public realm is moderated by high ethical and societal norms and morality, the conduct of elections in Nigeria is therefore perennially hobbled by the trauma of abiding ethno-regional and religious polarities and mistrust.

#### **Prebendal Politics**

According to Richard (1999) this is the phenomenon of seeking public office by all means and utilising such offices to amass illegitimate wealth for personal and group benefit. Prebendal politics in Nigeria focuses on, in his words, ‘the centrality of the state as the locus of the struggle for resources for personal advancement and group security’. Holding political power and having access to political offices not only allow the politicians and the political elites to perpetuate themselves against the democratic wishes of the people, but it also enable them to dole out state resources in a clientelist network of patronages and corruption. According to Momoh (2014) the centrality and primacy of the state as an arena for primitive accumulation of wealth has resulted in a situation where the stakes are phenomenally high during elections, physical, structural and psychological violence are deployed to achieve electoral victory. This is essential because ‘Primitive Accumulation of Votes (PAV)’ is meant to serve as the basis of Primitive Accumulation of Power (PAP), which in turn serves the Primitive Accumulation of Capital (PAC).

#### **Corruption**

Democracy demand high level of moral standard. The success of democracy also depends upon the high moral standard of the people as well as of the government. Where there is dishonesty, black-marketing, hoardings and smuggling and where the ministers and public servants are corrupt, the question of success of democracy does not arise. There is therefore lack of high moral standard among many public office holders in Nigeria hence political violence.

#### **2019 General Elections**

Experiences have shown that since 1999, the question of who wins in any election in Nigeria has remained how one is able to mobilize and harness ethno-religious and regional sentiments based essentially on very parochial primordial factors sustained mostly by political intimidation and all manner of electoral frauds. For instance, in both the 23rd February, 2019 Presidential and 9th March, 2019, Gubernatorial elections in the country, very disturbing electoral violence was reported in Lagos, Zamfara, Kebbi, Kano, Nasarawa, Benue, Plateau, Ekiti, Bauchi, Kwara and Oyo and Rivers States with scores of lives lost and property destroyed (CSSR, 2019). The Nigeria elections in 2019 were marred by political violence, some of it by soldiers and police officers. Human Rights Watch (2019) interviewed 32 people, including voters, journalists, election observers, activists, and Independent National Electoral Commission officials in Rivers and Kano states, and documented 11 deaths specifically related to violent interference in the election process during the February 23 presidential election and subsequent state elections. The national and state elections in February, March, and April 2019 contributed to the general insecurity across the country. The politically related violence reported in many states was in contrast to the relatively peaceful 2015 elections that brought Buhari into his first term in office. According to a report by SBM Intelligence (2019) which monitors sociopolitical and economic developments in Nigeria, 626 people were killed during the 2019 election cycle, starting with campaigns in 2018. Kano state, in northwestern Nigeria, has the highest number of registered voters in the country. Rivers state, in the Niger Delta, receives the largest share of crude-oil-based national revenue, representing significant electoral value to any political party. The history of elections in both states is replete with violence by state security agencies and criminal elements. Human Rights Watch focused its research on both states in view of projections and reports of violence during the 2019 elections. Despite police claims of increased security measures to ensure peaceful voting, there seems to have been little or no police response to reports of threats and acts of violence by hired political thugs and soldiers against voters and election officials. According to Human Rights Watch (2019) Voters and election officials said that policemen either fled or stood idly by, fueling allegations of complicity, as perpetrators stole election materials, disrupted voting, and harassed voters. Witnesses said that the police also shot live rounds of ammunition and used teargas to disperse people protesting voting disruptions. Witnesses said that after a soldier was killed in the town of Abonnema, in Rivers state, on elections day, soldiers shot at residents, killing an unknown number of people. They also carried out sweeping arrests and arbitrarily detained several people. “The soldiers were on a rampage, shooting at anyone around,” said a 37-year-old man who witnessed the episode. “As I made my way to flee, I saw people dive into the river, many with gunshot. Nigeria’s military guard the campaign headquarters of President Muhammadu Buhari in Abuja, The Nigeria elections in 2019 that brought President Muhammadu Buhari back into office for a second term were marred by political violence, some of it by soldiers and police officers. The politically related violence reported in many states was in contrast to the relatively peaceful 2015 elections that brought Buhari into his first term in office.

## Conclusion

This work democracy, election and electoral violence analysed the level of violence that accompanied the 2019 general elections. Historically elections conducted in Nigeria have been dotted with different degrees of violence. Electoral violence has remained the feature of struggle for power among the contending members of the political elite since independence in 1960. The 2019 general elections recorded violence in different parts of the country including Lagos, Zamfara, Kebbi, Kano, Nasarawa, Benue, Plateau, Ekiti, Bauchi, Kwara and Oyo and Rivers States with scores of lives lost and property destroyed. This has undermined democracy and democratic governance in the country. The neo-colonial nature of the Nigerian economy, serves as the major catalyst for the struggle for the control of the scarce resources amongst the politicians. The nature of politics in Nigeria predisposes the politicians to violence because there is high stake in politics and therefore it is approached with “do or die affairs”, since those who control the machinery of government also control the economy and its benefits. The contest for power often bred anarchy, instability and violence largely due to the actions of the politicians who manipulate the political cum electoral processes and structures in order to gain or retain power. The intensity of the struggle for political power and its attendant benefits among the politicians has led to persistence political and electoral violence which in turn threatens turn our fragile democracy. There is, therefore, need to ensure that this ugly trend is curbed by educating the youth that the politicians usually arm during election about the danger of political violence and also jobs should be provided for the teeming youths of this country and politics made less attractive.

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