

# Electoral Violence in 2023 Presidential Election and the Future of Democracy in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *This study provided an overview of the electoral violence witnessed during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election and its impact on the future of democracy in the country. It highlighted the historical context of Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999 and the challenges faced during the electoral process. The study also discusses the preparations leading up to the 2023 election, including the selection of presidential and vice-presidential candidates and the proactive measures taken by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to ensure a smooth electoral process. It emphasized the use of technological advancements and the efforts to expand voter registration and polling units. However, on election day, the delay in voting commencement at many polling units raised concerns about the efficiency and preparedness of the electoral Umpires. The researchers concluded by pointing out the implications of these challenges on the integrity of the election and the future of democracy in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Democracy; Election; Electoral Violence; Presidential Election

## Introduction

Nigeria, a country in West Africa, witnessed a significant turning point in its political history when it successfully transitioned back to democratic rule in 1999 (Saka, 2014). This monumental achievement came after enduring a period of military misrule that spanned from 1983 to 1999. The return to democracy marked a momentous milestone for Nigeria, as it represented the reestablishment of civilian governance and the aspirations of the Nigerian people for a more participatory and inclusive political system. After several years under military regimes characterized by authoritarian rule, corruption, and economic instability, the nation eagerly embraced the opportunity to restore democratic principles and practices. The process of democratic transition in Nigeria commenced with the conduct of elections in 1999.

(Ogbulafor et al., 2018). These elections were a crucial step towards reclaiming the power of the people and granting them the right to choose their leaders through a transparent and accountable electoral process. Although the transition to democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 was a significant milestone, it is important to acknowledge that the election process was not entirely free from challenges. There were instances of electoral malpractice and outbreaks of violence that marred the otherwise positive development. Despite efforts to ensure a transparent and fair electoral process, pockets of electoral malpractice were observed during the 1999 elections. These irregularities included voter intimidation, ballot box stuffing, vote buying, and manipulation of results in some areas.

The Nigerian populace, eager for change and eager to shape their own destiny, enthusiastically participated in this pivotal moment in their nation's history. The successful conduct of the 1999 elections paved the way for the emergence of Olusegun Obasanjo as Nigeria's new democratically elected president. Obasanjo's inauguration marked the beginning of a new era, signaling the commitment of the Nigerian government to democratic principles, human rights, and good governance. With the return to democratic rule, Nigeria embarked on a journey of political and socio-economic transformation. The newfound democratic space provided opportunities for citizens to engage in public discourse, express their opinions freely, and actively participate in the decision-making processes that would shape the nation's future. Democratic institutions were revitalized, with the legislature, judiciary, and executive branches functioning independently, serving as checks and balances to ensure the fair and equitable governance of the country (Saka, 2014).

After Nigeria's successful transition back to democratic rule in 1999, the country held a series of elections to sustain its democratic process. Elections were conducted in subsequent years, including 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and most recently, 2023. Each of these election cycles played a significant role in shaping Nigeria's democratic journey and determining the country's political landscape. Nigeria faced persistent issues such as electoral malpractice, violence, voter intimidation, and allegations of fraud in some

instances. These issues continue to be areas of concern for the country as it strives for more transparent and credible elections. However, the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria witnessed unfortunate incidents of electoral violence, with allegations pointing towards involvement from the ruling political class (Ibrahim, 2023; Vangurad, 2023).

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This study is based on the resource mobilization theory developed by John McCarthy and Mayer Zald in 1977. The theory examined how social movements and collective action are organized and sustained through the mobilization of resources (McCarthy et al., 1977). In the context of the 2023 presidential election and the future of democracy in Nigeria, applying this theory can help analyze the role of resources in electoral violence and its impact on democratic processes. One important resource that fuels electoral violence is money. These funds are used to support violent activities such as hiring thugs, purchasing weapons, or funding propaganda campaigns. Political actors may seek financial support from wealthy individuals, business groups, or illicit sources to finance their violent strategies. The availability of funds can influence the scale and intensity of violence during elections and the ability of perpetrators to sustain their actions over time. Human resources are instrumental in shaping the dynamics of electoral violence. Actively participating individuals, including political party loyalists, youth gangs, or hired thugs, form a network that engages in violent activities. Mobilizing these human resources involves recruiting, training, and coordinating individuals to act on behalf of specific political interests. Analyzing recruitment processes, social networks, and organizational structures can shed light on the formation and persistence of violent groups. Informational resources are crucial in shaping public opinion, spreading propaganda, and mobilizing support for violent actions. Those involved in electoral violence may manipulate information through social media, traditional media outlets, or direct communication channels to influence public sentiment, incite violence, or create fear. Understanding how informational resources are mobilized helps uncover the mechanisms through which violence is justified, legitimized, or delegitimized. Furthermore, political resources such as alliances, networks, or positions of power can be mobilized to either support or suppress electoral violence. Political actors may exploit their positions within the government, security forces, or influential institutions to facilitate or hinder violent activities.

### **Methodology**

The qualitative descriptive research approach adopted in this study allows for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of electoral violence in the 2023 presidential election. By examining reports from international, National observers, such as SMBintel, EU, the African Union, as well as scrutinizing accounts from reputable national newspapers, this study gains a comprehensive understanding of the scope and nature of electoral violence. Moreover, scholarly works pertaining to electoral violence and democracy in Nigeria offer valuable insights into the underlying causes and potential consequences of such incidents.

### **Nigeria's preparation for the February 25, 2023, presidential election**

During the party primaries held from April 4 to June 9, 2022, the candidates for the upcoming presidential election were officially nominated. This significant event marked the end of President Muhammadu Buhari's tenure, as he was term-limited and therefore ineligible to run for a third term under the All Progressives Congress (APC) party. Amidst the evolving political terrain, the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) made a momentous decision by selecting the highly regarded ex-Governor of Kano State, Rabiu Kwankwaso, to be their flagbearer in the upcoming presidential race. Following the primaries, the attention of the nation turned to the selection of vice presidential running mates. In a strategic move, Abubakar, the presidential candidate for the APC, carefully considered his options and ultimately chose Governor Ifeanyi Okowa as his running mate. Okowa's impressive track record and leadership qualities made him an ideal candidate to complement Abubakar's presidential bid. Meanwhile, Peter Obi, a prominent figure within the political sphere who represents the People's Democratic Party (PDP), took a different approach in his vice presidential selection. After careful deliberation, Obi decided to partner with former Senator Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed. With his extensive legislative experience and commitment to public service, Baba-Ahmed brought valuable expertise to Obi's campaign. In a similar vein, Bola Tinubu, a well-known political figure and candidate for the Action Democratic Party (ADP), announced Senator Kashim Shettima as his vice presidential running mate. Shettima's notable achievements as a senator and former governor of Borno State made him a credible and trusted choice, aligning well with Tinubu's vision for the country. Lastly, Kwankwaso, representing the NNPP, decided to partner with Pastor Isaac Idahosa as his running mate. Idahosa's background in religious leadership and his dedication to serving the community resonated with Kwankwaso's campaign message, allowing for a harmonious collaboration between the two. As the election season progressed, these carefully selected vice presidential candidates, along with their presidential counterparts, embarked on a journey to articulate their visions, engage with the electorate, and present their plans to steer Nigeria towards a prosperous future. The nation eagerly awaited election day, ready to make their voices heard and shape the destiny of their beloved country.

To ensure a smooth and successful electoral process, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) took proactive measures to prevent a recurrence of the challenges faced during the 2019 general elections (This Day Live, 2023). Recognizing the significance of collaboration and coordination, INEC proactively reached out to various government agencies and stakeholders involved in the electoral process. INEC, as the electoral umpire, understood the importance of engaging relevant government agencies to foster a seamless and efficient electoral exercise. It sought to build strong partnerships with entities such as the security

agencies, judiciary, and law enforcement agencies, recognizing their vital roles in maintaining peace, security, and justice throughout the electoral period. Moreover, INEC recognized the importance of involving stakeholders from various sectors to enhance transparency, credibility, and inclusivity. The commission reached out to civil society organizations, political parties, media houses, and community leaders, among others, to create a broad platform for dialogue, feedback, and collaboration. By actively engaging these government agencies and stakeholders, INEC aimed to address any potential challenges and ensure that the electoral process was conducted with the utmost integrity, fairness, and efficiency. This approach promoted a sense of shared responsibility and collective ownership of the electoral process, thereby fostering trust and confidence among all parties involved. In addition to outreach efforts, INEC also prioritized capacity-building programs and training initiatives to equip its staff and relevant stakeholders with the necessary skills and knowledge. This proactive approach aimed to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the electoral process, reducing the likelihood of challenges arising due to inadequate preparations or a lack of awareness. Through this comprehensive and inclusive approach, INEC sought to create an enabling environment where all stakeholders could contribute their expertise, knowledge, and resources to ensure a successful electoral exercise. By harnessing the collective efforts of government agencies and stakeholders, INEC aimed to avert the challenges experienced during the 2019 general elections, ultimately strengthening democratic governance and fostering public trust in the electoral system.

According to This Day Live's (2023) insightful analysis, the diligent efforts and meticulous preparations leading up to the forthcoming event are undeniably evident. A myriad of strategic planning activities and active involvement have been undertaken, underscoring the depth of commitment invested. Notably, the commission has successfully formulated and finalized a comprehensive four-year strategic plan and strategic Programme of action (SP and SPA), in addition to the meticulous development of the 2023 Election Project Plan (EPP), a remarkable 18 months in advance of the scheduled election date. This astute, forward-thinking approach adopted by the commission demonstrates their unwavering dedication to ensuring a smooth and efficient electoral process. By formulating a long-term vision and action plan through the SP and SPA, they have exemplified their commitment to strategic thinking and proactive measures. This strategic roadmap outlines the overarching goals, objectives, and targeted outcomes, providing a solid foundation for the commission's endeavors. Moreover, the commission's proactive approach extends to the granular level, as exemplified by the meticulous crafting of the 2023 Election Project Plan (EPP). By meticulously developing this plan well in advance, the commission showcases their attention to detail and their readiness to address any potential challenges or obstacles that may arise during the election period. This comprehensive project plan encompasses a diverse range of critical areas, including logistics, voter education, candidate nominations, security arrangements, and result collation, among others.

In addition to various aspects, the plan embodies an exciting array of cutting-edge technological advancements that will revolutionize the electoral landscape in 2023. Embracing the fast-paced march of progress, the Commission is poised to deploy state-of-the-art innovations aimed at enhancing the voting experience and ensuring a smooth electoral process. Anticipating a remarkable surge in political participation, the number of registered voters is projected to soar from a staggering 84,004,084 to an even more impressive 93,469,008. This significant increase in the electorate signifies a growing awareness and engagement of citizens in the democratic process as they recognize the power of their collective voices. Furthermore, the Commission's commitment to inclusivity and accessibility is exemplified by its proactive measures to expand the number of polling units. With an ambitious leap forward, the polling units will expand from 119,974 to an expansive 176,846. This strategic expansion enables more individuals to exercise their fundamental right to vote by providing convenient and easily accessible locations for casting their ballots (This Day Live, 2023). The electoral law in Nigeria provided a unique approach to voter registration, mandating the Commission to conduct the process on a "continuous" basis. However, the law also recognized the need for periodic suspension of the registration process to allow for adequate preparations for general elections. In line with this framework, continuous voter registration (CVR) was initially halted to facilitate the smooth running of the 2019 general election. Following its temporary suspension, the CVR resumed on June 21, 2021, signifying a renewed commitment to maintaining an updated and accurate voter registry (Ibrahim, 2023). This resumption marked the beginning of a comprehensive effort to register eligible voters and ensure their active participation in the democratic process. The CVR continued its operations for a span of one year, concluding on July 31, 2022, when it was once again suspended, this time in preparation for the highly anticipated 2023 general election. During the active period of the CVR, an impressive number of 12,298,944 new voters successfully registered, signifying the enthusiasm and engagement of the Nigerian populace. However, recognizing the importance of maintaining data integrity, a meticulous data clean-up process was carried out. As a result, 9,518,188 voter registrations were validated, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the electoral roll.

Also, Ogunbamowo (2021) explained that the Commission took proactive measures to address the common challenges associated with the implementation of new election technologies. Recognizing the importance of thorough testing and the timely introduction of innovations, the Commission meticulously designed and evaluated three crucial components well in advance of the election. Firstly, the INEC Voter Enrollment Device (IVED) was developed to enhance the voter registration process. This advanced device facilitated a more streamlined and accurate voter registration process, ensuring that the electoral roll was comprehensive and up-to-date. By leveraging state-of-the-art technology, the IVED eliminated the inconsistencies and inefficiencies often associated with manual registration methods. This innovation not only improved the integrity of the electoral process but also enhanced the overall efficiency of voter enrollment. In addition to the IVED, the Commission introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System

(BVAS) as another vital component. The BVAS served a dual purpose by enabling both voter accreditation and the electronic transmission of results for collation. This innovative system not only expedited the voter verification process but also ensured the secure and swift transmission of results, reducing the time required for result compilation. By embracing electronic transmission, the Commission fostered transparency and minimized the potential for human error or tampering, thereby bolstering public confidence in the electoral outcome. Furthermore, the Commission implemented the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal, which provided the general public with easy access to view polling unit results.

### **Election Day (February 28, 2023)**

On the much-anticipated election day, a wave of disconcerting news flooded the nation, revealing a concerning trend of delayed voting commencement across numerous polling units. The gravity of the situation became evident as YIAGA Africa (2023), a reputable organization dedicated to promoting democratic values, estimated that a mere 41% of the designated polling units had managed to initiate the voting process by 9:30 a.m. This distressing revelation occurred a whole hour after the scheduled start time, exacerbating the already palpable tension in the air. The resounding echoes of delayed starts reverberated throughout the country, casting a shadow of doubt on the efficiency and preparedness of the electoral system. Voters, eager to exercise their democratic rights, found themselves confronted with unforeseen obstacles, hindering their ability to cast their ballots promptly. The discrepancy between the planned and actual start times became a tangible symbol of frustration and disillusionment, leaving many to question the reliability of the electoral process. The estimation provided by YIAGA Africa, a trusted source renowned for its impartiality and commitment to electoral transparency, only added fuel to the already raging fire of public discontent. The realization that less than half of the polling units had managed to commence voting by the delayed hour of 9:30 a.m. sparked outrage and intensified calls for immediate action to rectify the situation. The reliability of the electoral process was called into question, with concerns raised about the potential implications for the overall integrity of the election.

Moreover, an insightful report by SBM (2023) Intelligence sheds light on the alarming statistics regarding the punctuality of polling units during elections. Startlingly, their findings revealed that a mere 41.3% of these units managed to open their doors promptly as scheduled. This unfortunate trend was further corroborated by data collected by the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, which went a step further, asserting that less than 30% of the units had commenced operations by 8:30 a.m. These figures serve as a stark reminder of the numerous challenges faced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in ensuring a smooth electoral process. One critical factor contributing to this disheartening situation was the currency crisis that plagued the country. This crisis had severe repercussions for INEC's logistical preparations as it hindered their ability to compensate transporters in cash prior to the election day. Consequently, this financial constraint had an unintended consequence: certain drivers refused to undertake the responsibility of transporting INEC materials or personnel. Such refusals added to the logistical complexity and further impeded the timely commencement of electoral activities.

### **Eruption of violence all over Nigeria**

The escalation of violence did not merely commence on the day of the election; rather, its ominous presence was already palpable prior to the much-anticipated electoral event. The seeds of hostility had been sown and nourished in the days leading up to the election, causing an atmosphere fraught with tension and volatility. Even before voters flocked to the polling stations, there were disturbing signs that the impending democratic exercise would be marred by acts of aggression and conflict. Rival political factions, driven by deep-seated animosities and competing ideologies, engaged in a series of heated confrontations. These clashes unfolded in various forms, ranging from verbal altercations and incendiary speeches to physical skirmishes and targeted acts of intimidation. Media platforms became battlegrounds for fierce rhetoric, amplifying the divisions and fanning the flames of hostility. The vitriolic discourse and smear campaigns spread like wildfire, exacerbating the already simmering tensions within the populace. Pervasive rumors and misinformation further fueled the growing animosity, with each side manipulating narratives to suit their agendas and stoking fear and anger among their respective supporters. As election day drew nearer, the atmosphere became increasingly charged. Political rallies, initially intended to energize and mobilize voters, devolved into chaotic spectacles marked by clashes between opposing factions. The streets, once symbols of unity and shared public spaces, transformed into zones of contention and potential danger. The incidents of pre-election violence, whether orchestrated or spontaneous, served as ominous harbingers of the turmoil to come. The sense of apprehension and foreboding hung heavy in the air as people braced themselves for the storm that was about to descend upon their communities. It is essential to recognize that the violence that plagued the election was not an isolated event confined to a single day; rather, it was a culmination of mounting tensions and grievances that had been festering for an extended period. The prelude to the election was characterized by a distressing climate of hostility, division, and polarization that ultimately set the stage for the tragic events that unfolded on the day of the election itself.

Precisely, SMB (2023) reported that on February 23, the Imo Commissioner for Trade and Investment and two APC leaders were ambushed by gunmen in Umawuchi village. On the same day, the Managing Director of Imo State Waste Management Agency and a representative from Okigwe South had a near-death encounter in a remote village near Okata Community. On February 25, ballot boxes and voting materials were snatched by political thugs at a polling unit in Oredo, Edo State. Disturbances were also recorded in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, due to a ballot paper shortage. The INEC office in Takai LGA, Kano State, was burned by

suspected thugs. Additionally, incidents of violence occurred in Idanre, Ondo State, where a person was shot dead, and in Etim Ekpo LGA, Akwa Ibom State, where two persons were shot dead. More violence was reported on February 25 as a female voter was stabbed by political thugs in Edo State. In Okene LGA, Kogi State, a PDP agent was killed by thugs suspected to be APC members. In Kano, at least two people were burned to death, and a campaign office was burned down. In Rivers State, a pregnant woman and a vigilante service member were killed, and houses were burned in Ubimini Community. Hoodlums also caused unrest in various polling units in Lagos State, including Awoyaya, Ibeju Lekki, and Oshodi. On February 27, the traditional ruler of Umuezeokaoha Community in Ebonyi State was shot and killed by political thugs. Thugs also disrupted the result collation process at the Plateau North Senatorial District's collation center. On February 28, there were reports of hoodlums attacking Igbo traders in Lagos, although the police denied the news. Additionally, a hoodlum shot a lady to death in Agege LGA while celebrating a political party's victory.

The impact of election violence on Nigeria's democracy is nothing short of catastrophic. When acts of violence and intimidation are used to suppress opposition voices and stifle free and fair debate, the very essence of the democratic process is undermined and weakened. This erosion of democratic principles has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the immediate aftermath of an election. One of the most significant consequences of election violence is the erosion of public trust in the electoral process. When citizens witness or experience violence during elections, they lose faith in the ability of the electoral system to accurately represent their voices and choices. This loss of trust can lead to disillusionment and apathy among the populace as they begin to question the legitimacy and integrity of the electoral process. When people no longer have confidence in the system, voter turnout declines, further weakening the democratic process. Furthermore, the legitimacy of elected officials and democratic institutions is severely compromised when election violence occurs. If individuals are elected through a process marred by violence, coercion, or fraud, their legitimacy to govern is called into question. When this foundation is torn down by election violence, elected officials and institutions lose their credibility and the ability to effectively govern. Moreover, election violence hampers the development of a vibrant and inclusive political environment. In a democracy, healthy and robust debates are essential for shaping public opinion, formulating policy, and holding elected officials accountable. When violence is employed to silence opposition voices, the space for open discourse and the exchange of ideas is stifled. This lack of diverse perspectives weakens the quality of decision-making, hindering progress and inhibiting the development of a truly representative democracy. The consequences of election violence are not limited to the immediate aftermath of an election but can have long-lasting effects on the political, social, and economic fabric of a nation. The damage caused by election violence seeps into the very core of society, sowing seeds of division.

### **Conclusion**

Electoral violence poses a significant threat to the future of democracy in Nigeria. By understanding its root causes and implementing the proposed solutions, Nigeria can forge a path towards a more inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous democratic system. It requires the concerted efforts of all stakeholders, from political leaders to civil society organizations and citizens, to safeguard the electoral process and foster a culture of non-violence, thereby ensuring a brighter future for Nigeria and its democratic aspirations.

### **Recommendations**

Drawing upon these compelling discoveries, the experts propose the following suggestions:

1. Given the prevalence of electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, it is crucial to prioritize the enhancement of electoral security measures. The government ought to establish strong partnerships with pertinent security agencies to formulate and execute all-encompassing approaches aimed at averting and tackling occurrences of violence. This may include increasing the presence of security personnel at polling units, conducting thorough risk assessments prior to the election, and ensuring swift and effective response mechanisms in case of any security incidents.
2. The delay in voting commencement at numerous polling units during the 2023 election highlights the need for improved electoral infrastructure and preparedness. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should invest in upgrading its systems and processes to ensure the efficient and timely conduct of elections. This may involve implementing robust technological solutions, such as advanced voter registration and result transmission systems, to streamline the electoral process.
3. To safeguard the future of democracy in Nigeria, there is a need to prioritize civic education and voter engagement initiatives. Efforts should be made to educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities as voters, the importance of peaceful participation in the electoral process, and the consequences of electoral violence.

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