

# Electoral Violence and the Crisis of Democratic Experiment in Post-Colonial Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

*This study discusses the peculiar nature of political participation as well as the attendant violence that characterize it in post independent Nigeria. Central to discussion is identification of the various factors which influence electoral violence and the extent to which it has inhibited national cohesion and democratic values. The study concludes that, Nigeria should produce selfless and visionary leaders, educated masses as well as operating within the frame work of true federalism so as to make appreciable improvement on her development strides. The study therefore recommends discouragement of use of money and material gift during elections, reduction of remuneration of political office seekers, commensurate punishment for culprits' as well as independence of the independent Electoral Commission should be truly granted.*

## Introduction

In view of all discussions on democracy, one fact stands out; that democracy provides the citizens the power of choice to politically decide who governs them and also influence governmental policies.<sup>1</sup> It is also correct to posit that a democratic system gives sovereignty to the citizens to take total control of forces that will determine their welfare.<sup>2</sup> There are various schools of thought on the positive and negative impact of democracy,<sup>3</sup> but what is incontrovertible in the character of post-cold war politics is that poor nations that are not "democracy compliant" may lose relevance in the competitive nature of international aids-politics and diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> However, the beauty of democracy is observable when its principles are respected. The respect can lead to developmental expansion in political, social and economic activities. This takes us to the question whether there is a direct or indirect structural link between democracy and development. Shola Omotola's title, *No Democracy, No Development or Vice Versa?*<sup>5</sup> presupposes that there is a connection between the two concepts. In the Nigerian situation, it is a paradox. There seems not to be any remarkable landmark of development to justify the positive impact of democracy on the country's developmental calendar in the past fifty years of its attainment of political independence (1960-2010).

Books and articles in academic journal and newspapers have been published on all aspects of the Nigerian affairs, reflecting on the deplorable nature of her post colonial socio-political and economic realities. The common conclusion is that, Nigeria is a failing, if not a failed state, the second most corrupt nation in the world, a disservice to the black race and an embarrassment to Africa.<sup>6</sup> This position, either exaggerative or precise, it is obvious from existing facts of history that Nigeria's greatest bane of development is that of mal-governance coupled with an apathetic, disoriented and malleable masses.<sup>7</sup>

A careful view of Nigerian post colonial history shows that the palpable political, social and economic crises manifest themselves in various forms such as, the collapse of physical and social infrastructure, the high incidence of vandalization of public property, the sporadic bout of ethnoreligious blood-letting, pandemic fatal and menacing combats over resource control, the suffocating reality of corruption in public offices, high level of armed robbery, political assassinations, ritual murder, kidnapping, youth restiveness, collapse of formal and informal education at all levels, high rate of unemployment, desecration of value system, intensified religiosity without marked improvement in the spiritual and social quality of individuals and the society, mad thirst for foreign commodities and culture, civil war and undue military intervention in politics, the colonial heritage and its bequest of neo-colonialism, the lopsided nature of the federation coupled with unbalanced regional

development, debasement of the judiciary, the glorification of fraud such as election rigging, manipulation of electoral process and the rabid quest for power and values and the accompanying venality have added in concert though in different circumstances to diminish the nations corporate existence.<sup>8</sup> Of all the myriad features of post-colonial Nigerian state, electoral violence and its associated components forms the thrust of this discussion as it affects the stability of democratic values.

The study is therefore, an historical exploration into the nature and causes of electoral crises and the impact on Nigeria's efforts at democratization. The study equally examines the concept of, and factors which precipitate electoral violence and how this circle of violence has crippled the practice of democracy. Some recommendations were also suggested on how best to minimize electoral violence in the post-colonial Nigerian state. To achieve our goals, the study adopted the analytical methodological approach to examine the causes and impact of electoral violence in relation to the principles of democracy. For the sake of minimizing ambiguity in the classification of principles of democracy, the study limited its scope to the clarification of the American State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs.<sup>9</sup>

### **Concept of Electoral Violence and Democratic Experiment**

In pre-colonial Nigeria, there we been pervasive and recurring phenomena of violence arising from conflicting claims to natural resources, unhealthy competition among groups for greater share of available resources, identify supremacy, power possession as well as ethnic and sub-ethnic conflict over ownership of and access to values.<sup>10</sup> Violence in the context of this study is not limited to an action which intends directly to hurt persons. It is conceptualized as tactical, psychological and confrontational devices adopted by political actors to win elections. All activities associated with election are presumed to be part of democratic practices. In that wise, democratic experiment as applied in this discussion means the various attempts by the Nigerian state to entrench democratic governance since political independence in 1960. The first attempt lasted for six years (1960-1966), the second survived for just four years (1979-1983), the third was the botched infamous June 12 1993 election, while the fourth attempt is still gradually taking roots since 1999. However, the paper demonstrates that one of the major factors that have militated against Nigeria's efforts at democratization is electoral violence. Electoral violence in Nigeria manifests itself in various ways through historical institutions such as colonial heritage, ethnicity, poverty and unemployment, corruption, election rigging and provocative campaign practices. The continued perpetuation of electoral violence over the years has bridged the principles of democracy in the aspects of decentralization of power, presence of multi-partism, universal participation, free and fair election, respect for the rule of law, dialogue and negotiation. Some of the causes of electoral violence in Nigeria are discussed below.

### **Causes of Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

The colonial heritage and its bequest of neo-colonialism to a large extent have left much to be desired in apportioning causal factors to the upsurge of electoral violence in post colonial Nigeria.<sup>11</sup> The formation of the Nigerian nation as a colonial package with an ambiguous foundation is like a wound that refuses to heal. The colonial state laid the foundation of the present Nigerian state from an amalgam of several nationalities. In this political configuration, the politics and governance of the colonial masters was characterized by "arbitrariness" and "absolutism" which defined their relationship with their subjects.<sup>12</sup> This autocratic affair made the colonial state become so powerful that it was regarded as the sole centre of power. The colonial politics was so buried in intense power monopoly and pride that it could best be described as existing for itself and its mother country.<sup>13</sup> The same mentality was inherited and extended to the post-independent Nigerian state by the indigenous leaders who took over from the colonial rulers.<sup>14</sup> There is little surprise therefore, that post-independent Nigeria produces political leaders that are uncontrollably immersed in 'do or die' rush for power at all levels. The post-independent Nigerian state reflects the already divided polity with divide and rule tactics of the colonialists, ethnic rivalry, loose amalgamation and unhealthy competition for economic and political gains.

Due to over concentration of power at the centre, there is therefore the mad rush to acquire power because it provides the holder the authority to distribute the allocation of natural and material resources. That is why electoral violence has become a defining factor in post-colonial Nigerian politics. It should in addition be stated

that concentration of power negates the principles of democracy. It is dangerous when power is concentrated in an institution or individual, because such power could be abused and the holder becomes a dictator. Democracy supports decentralization of power because it promotes development as well as prevents tyranny. A central power from its seat of office may not be directly familiar with development in other parts of its communities. To promote even development, most democratic states have decentralized powers into three tiers of government; the central, state and local government. This is done in order to make the people enjoy what is commonly regarded in Nigeria as the dividend of democracy.

Ethnicity poses serious challenges to democratic rule in post-independent Nigeria. Ethnicity is conceptualized as manipulation of ethnic identity and loyalty in the context of competition for power and other valuable resources in a given socio-political milieu to discriminate against non-ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup> Ethnicity is not a political feature peculiar to Nigeria, it has taken a global dimension.<sup>16</sup> The seed of ethnicity was sown during British colonial rule and it got fully nurtured and promoted from 1960 in the era of conflicting ideologies of early Nigerian politicians with ethnically motivated intentions both at the central and regional levels, especially between 1960 and 1965.<sup>17</sup> Cases of ethnic loyalty in Nigeria during elections have generated recruitment of wrong leaders who have enjoyed the support of their kinsmen. In most cases Nigerian leadership recruitment is not based on credibility but ethnic influence and loyalty hence the problem of adequate tapping and harnessing the human and natural resources. This development has generated ethnic conflicts of various sorts as well as electoral violence, capable of crippling democratic culture.

However, the ethnicity factor in Nigerian electoral and political process seems incurable as it is a natural and intrinsic issue. Nigerian politicians deliberately promote ethnicity to score political points and create relevance. In the present composition of the Nigerian state, it is difficult to sincerely talk about the presence of patriotic multi-partism. Since democracy as a political concept provides one with choices, it becomes necessary and logical that you can only make a choice where there are more than one options. It is this reality that has manifested in bloc vote casting along ethnic line since 1960.

Poverty and unemployment have been intractable obstacles to free and fair election and democratic governance in Nigeria since independence. Unemployment as a common bane of Nigerian development engenders poverty both of knowledge and material in turn engenders ignorance, gullibility, thuggery, hooliganism and election rigging in the bid of economic survival.<sup>18</sup> This explains why violence, militarization, thuggery and the use of money to influence voters usually characterize elections in Nigeria. By using thugs and money for election rigging through snatching of ballot boxes, multiple voting, assassination, maiming of life and manipulation of election results in favour of candidates who have the money to buy their ways through democratic principles and fundamental human rights are grossly trampled upon. Invariably, most people are always disenfranchised, thus negating the democratic principle of universal participation which is the involvement of men and women in the process of electioneering and actual vote cast on election days.

Election rigging in Nigerian politics is worrisome and has a negative impact on the quality of leaders produced. This development often produces leaders who cannot harness and manage the resources of the nation as well as build up a solid democratic foundation and virile governance. For instance, in 2011 elections, about 117 cases of ballot box snatching were reported in Delta State.<sup>19</sup> The result of these ugly trends is the myriad post-election protests in all the states of the federation in recent times. In a democracy, political public leaders must be products of a free and fair election. That is, any political contest that fails to produce electoral victory at the end of the contest cannot be said to be democratic. In other words, a democracy must produce duly elected political public office holders.

The agencies charged with the responsibility of conducting elections in Nigeria for about fifty years are not credited with reliability, integrity and trust. In the first instance, these agencies were set up by wrong institutions such as the military and ex-military god-fathers who would still want to be part of the ruling government at all cost.<sup>20</sup> For example, FEDECO was inaugurated by the Olusegun Obasanjo military regime to conduct the 1979 state and federal elections in the country was characterized by massive election irregularities and as such accused by other political parties of manipulating election results in favour of National Party of Nigeria (NPN).<sup>21</sup> During Babangida regime, there was the transformation of FEDECO to National Electoral Commission (NEC) and this was equally accused of election malpractices in 1993. The change from NEC to independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) which conducted the 1999, 2003 and 2007 state and Federal elections did not change the

culture of election violence and irregularities as there were still a barrage of accusations from various quarters on it of supporting the people's Democratic Party (PDP) to rig elections in its favour.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the institutionalization of electoral corruption, there also have been cases of bribery among the election actors such as the polling agents and the returning officers during elections.<sup>23</sup> All these unethical election activities engender violence and constitute bane to democratic governance in Nigeria. In addition, there are reported cases of election officers exploiting the poor rural and difficult riverside regions to cause delay in the distribution of election materials to such areas most especially where their favoured supporters resides. As a matter of fact, most cases of election rigging in Nigeria are reported from the remote and rural areas of the country.<sup>24</sup> When the electoral body assigned with the responsibility of managing elections are corrupt, the end product of the elections always end in shambles. Election must be free and fair. All political parties should be given equal opportunity to participate in all stages of election activities. In essence, all parties involved in an election should be given the opportunity to express and organize themselves. In that process, the electoral body would have been seen to be fair in its duties to all parties involved which indicate respect for the rule of Law. The law should have no favourite. That is, everybody is equally protected by the law and also can equally be punished by the law. In other words, there is no person that is above the law. As long as the society is democratic, everybody is equal. But in the Nigerian situation, it seems those who aid election fraud are never punished, and as such they are above the law.

Most Nigerian politicians adopt violent, insulting, damaging and confrontational style of campaign which is not healthy for democratic culture. The use of abusive, foul and threatening languages as well as the involvement of ritual activities and actions of vendetta are reported to have characterized election campaign in Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> Election campaign is also associated with thuggery, fake promises, deceit and intimidation which have been intensifying spate of violence and as a result compromise the principles of democracy in the country. In a democracy, issues or matters that can lead to national conflict and embarrassment are easily avoided in the course of campaign. In Nigeria, election periods are always trying moments for its citizens because of the use of language of war by politician during campaign. It is this method of provocative campaign that fuels pre-election and post-election violence in the country. Since 1960, there has been no election held in Nigeria without fatal casualties. This has become the political scenario in the country which only the bold, wicked and violent can freely participate in active party politics.

## **Conclusion**

The study examined the post-colonial Nigerian electoral Violence and how it has adversely affected the practice of democratic culture since independence. It equally maintained that democracy is germane to development but in the Nigerian context, it is paradoxical that what characterize democracy has been electoral violence, thuggery, ethnicity, foul play, rigging, abuse of human rights, disregard to democratic principles and executive lawlessness at various levels. The study discovered that, causes of electoral violence could be traced to colonial legacy of dictatorship and deceitful political configuration before and during handing over of power to Nigerians. Poverty and unemployment have also been viewed as factors inducing violence in the country since 1960. Another identified factor of violence here is corrupt nature of electoral officers who usually exploit the ignorance of the masses as well as geographical disadvantage of the rural areas to perpetrate electoral fraud.

The study suggests that in order to discourage electoral violence and promote democratic culture for socio-economic and political developments, there must be reduction of the remunerations of political office holders who are recruited through elective principles as candidates would no longer find political office lucrative. There should also be strong legislations of imprisonment for election rigging and thuggery during elections. Moreover, political education should be given to the electorate to enable the voters have the political awareness as well as moral education on electoral rules and the implications of the breach of such rules. It is also recommended that sharing of money and other materials as gifts during campaign and elections are discouraged by punishment on culprits. Reduction of charges for the collection of forms for those vying for elective posts would help to reduce violence as candidates can no longer claim to have invested much money which he or she would later recoup. In addition, the independent National Electoral commission (INEC) should be actually made independent as this would at least curb the culture of influencing and bribing electoral officers at INEC offices to manipulate figures, pictures and symbols.

As a matter of fact, various suggestions and unenforced legislations have been made on related issues but unfortunately, Nigerian political participants seem to have been addicted to electoral fraud. The Nigerian people desire enduring democracy but seem not to be aware of the possibility that the country lacks the capacity to manage the gains and pains of democracy because of underdevelopment. However, if these suggestions are accepted, problems of election crisis as well as those of democratic growth would be reduced drastically if not totally solved.

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