



## **Youth Participation in the Electoral Process and Electoral Violence in Nigeria: The Role of NGOs in Mitigation Process**

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### **Abstract**

Electoral violence is an abysmal but constant feature of the political configuration in Nigeria. Sadly, the youths play a prominent role in the circle of electoral violence. This study adopts qualitative method and utilized primary data to examine the roles of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in election violence mitigation in Nigeria. Data were gathered from the NGOs that participated in the study. The NGOs are; Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND), Community Initiative for Enhanced Peace and Development (CIEPD), West Africa Network for Peace building (WANEP), Action Aid Nigeria (AAN), and CLEEN Foundation (CLEEN). Findings reveal that NGOs have made significant efforts towards mitigating electoral violence, however there exists a yearning gap between their efforts and the achievements recorded over the years. Using critical theory as its theoretical framework, this study emphasizes that the election violence mitigation strategies NGOs adopt are incomprehensive and lack the depth required to fundamentally addressing the complex and interrelated root causes of electoral violence in the Nigerian context. Significantly, it is imperative for NGOs to adopt a holistic approach that will comprehensively address the interrelated factors that promote youth participation in electoral violence.

**Keywords:** Election, Violence, Youth, Non-Governmental Organizations, Mitigation

**Citation of article:** Oluwaseun O., (2022). Youth Participation in the Electoral Process and Electoral Violence in Nigeria: The Role of NGOs in Mitigation Process. *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies (AJPAS)*, 15(2):91-133.

**Date Submitted:** 31/08/2022 **Date Accepted:** 25/09/2022 **Date Published:** December, 2022



## Introduction

Elections are the bedrock on which a democratic system of government is established. Given this, elections are integral to democratic governance and serve as a platform from which governments derive their legitimacy. Hence, elections should be conducted in a free and fair manner that reflects the choices of the populace. Regardless, violence during elections has over the years become a common phenomenon in Nigeria; a multi-ethnic, diverse and plural society (Ashindorbe, 2018). Anifowose (1982) describes electoral violence as the use of threat or act of violence, displayed by an individual or individuals against individuals, group of people or property, capable of causing injury or death to persons and damage to property. According to Anifowose (1982), electoral violence negatively affects the political behaviour of the citizens as well as the political development of a nation. Similarly, Ikezue and Ololo (2015), describe electoral violence as the illegitimate use of force or threat, which could be physical, psychological and structural to harass, harm or even blackmail a political stakeholder; before, during or after an election, in order to influence the electoral process. Electoral violence can influence election results and at the same time encourage voter apathy, as voters are dissuaded from participating in elections due to the likely outbreak of violence and its impacts on lives and property. The overriding purpose of electoral violence by its sponsors and perpetrators is to either retain political power at all cost or wrestle political power from the incumbent (Inokoba and Maliki, 2011). Although, Onapajo (2014) argues that incumbent politicians and their supporters sponsor electoral violence and rig elections compared to opposition political parties aiming to take over power. In this context, electoral violence represents the struggle for political power between competing candidates contesting for elections. Elections in Nigeria have been synonymous with widespread



violence, pervasive intimidation as well as bribery and corruption since 1960, when the country attained independence (Badejo and Stephens, 2012).

The Federal Election Crisis of 1964/65 was characterized by unprecedented assassination, murder, destruction, arson and assault (Diamond, 1988). The violence was fuelled by the drive of the major political parties that were ethnically based, to maintain the political dominance and relevance enjoyed in their respective regions (Olowojolu *et al*, 2019). Nigeria returned to democratic governance in 1999 after many years of military rule. However, elections in Nigeria when compared to other countries in Africa are usually more violent (Burchard and Simati, 2019). The mass violence that broke out in Northern Nigeria following the 2011 general elections is prominent among post-1999 electoral violence (Onimisi, 2015). The violence was ignited based on ethnic and religious sentiments despite the fact that it was clear from the announcement of election results that Goodluck Jonathan from Southern Nigeria would defeat Muhammad Buhari, a Northerner and the presidential candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC)(Okonta, 2012). According to Ikyase and Egberi (2015); Burchard and Simati (2019); and Anyika and Ani (2021), electoral violence in Nigeria has attained an unprecedented height in different forms and magnitudes. Electoral violence takes diverse forms and these include; intimidation of voters and candidates, confrontations with security operatives, kidnapping, assassinations, assault on journalists, and attacks on INEC offices. In some cases, within days or weeks, the number of victims of electoral violence equates the aggregate number of victims in a civil war, thereby subverting peace and development achieved over the years (Birch *et al*, 2020). Electoral violence hampers the political process, destroys lives and property, compromises the integrity of elections, suppresses political institutions, undermines democratic maturity and affects the



development of the nation. Punch Newspapers (2022) reported that there have been series of attacks on the offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). In the process, over 9,836 smart card readers were lost, while ballot papers and cubicles were also destroyed. Furthermore, according to Punch Newspapers (2022), during the 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections, over 1,149 people lost their lives, including security officers and INEC officials.

Young people have played crucial roles in shaping the political discourse in Nigeria, both negatively and positively. However, this study focuses on the negative, and thus reviews scholarly literature on the active participation of youths in electoral violence (Inokoba and Maliki, 2011; Ogbeide, 2013; Egobueze and Ojirika, 2017; Eneji and Ikeorji, 2018; Edor, 2020; Anyika and Ani, 2021). While Egobueze and Ojirika (2017) emphasize that youths are at the heart of most violent conflicts in Nigeria, Edor (2020) observed that not only do youths perpetrate electoral violence; they very often do not get punished for their acts of violence. Often times, politicians capitalize on the security challenges in Nigeria to recruit youths as bodyguards and arm them with guns and rifles. Anyika and Ani (2021) describe this as the ‘securitization of youths’, but explained that the ulterior motive of engaging the youths is to employ them as political thugs to perpetrate electoral violence. Eneji and Ikeorji (2018) opined that it is pertinent to understand the structural dynamics that promote youth participation in electoral violence. According to Eneji and Ikeorji (2018), Nigerian youths are entangled in a socio-political and economic setting which presents them with enormous challenges. Hence, in order to have a broad and detailed discussion on youth and electoral violence, the socio-economic conditions shaping youth experience and pushing them into electoral violence must of huge necessity be considered. It is observed that the majority of



youths that participate in electoral violence are illiterates and unemployed, thus they serve as ready tools for desperate politicians (Ogbeide, 2013). Youth participation in electoral violence is an ugly phenomenon, having dire implications for democracy in Nigeria. Indeed, there is a symbiotic connection between youth participation in electoral violence and challenges of democratic growth in Nigeria. Inokoba and Maliki(2011) conclude that democratic growth will continue to elude Nigeria unless the political elites imbibe in the youths' appropriate democratic values. Youth participation in electoral violence evokes a deep sense of concern from academics, development experts, government agencies as well as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).The chief focus of this study is to appraise the impacts of election violence mitigation strategies by selected NGOs in Nigeria. It engages in a detailed analysis of the pre-election as well as post-election strategies these NGOs adopt to curb electoral violence. In addition, the study evaluates the factors that impede the activities of NGOs in their quest to mitigate electoral violence. The introduction in section one provides a background of study. Section two scrutinizes the existing literature on the subject matter. Section three examines the theoretical framework and research methodology adopted. Section four analyzes the research findings. Section five is the conclusion and offers some recommendations. Section six exposes the limitations of study and presents the issues for further investigation.

### **Literature Review**

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as agents of social transformation are inherently positioned to spearhead the mitigation of electoral violence (Onwudiwe and Berwind-Dart, 2010). The Election Violence Education and Resolution (EVER) Project, an initiative of The International Foundation for Electoral Systems(IFES)is one of such approaches adopted byCSOs to tackle the menace of electoral violence. EVER is a collaborative project that



involves CSOs, government institutions, security agencies and electoral bodies. The project seeks to monitor, curb and prevent incidences of electoral violence through the use of data. It therefore utilizes research to identify the factors and conditions that ignite electoral violence in order to adopt appropriate and effective strategies to curb the menace. In Nigeria, EVER was adopted during the 2007 elections. IFES collaborated with Nigeria Alliance for Peaceful Elections (NAPE), which is a coalition of six NGOs, one from each of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria working to curb electoral violence and improve democratic governance (Aniekwe and Agbiboa, 2015). Given the endemic challenge of electoral violence in Nigeria, NGOs as part of the larger Civil Society have through their advocacy and interventions played crucial roles in ensuring the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. NGOs engage in voters' and civic education across the country and advocate against electoral violence before, during and after elections. In addition, NGOs monitor elections across various polling units and mediate in community dispute resolution after elections (Mottiar, 2010; Obasanjo and Fayey, 2012; Amali and Msughter, 2016; Bado, 2021).

An NGO, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), United Kingdom Agency for International Development (UKAID), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) trained journalists in Borno State on conflict transformation and election violence prevention during the 2019 elections. The training was aimed at developing the capacity of media practitioners on news reportage relating to electoral violence (Premium Times, 2019). Prior to the 2015 elections, The Southern Kaduna People's Union (SOKAPU) convened a meeting that involved community leaders, CSOs, Chairmen of political parties, election candidates and advised political actors to accept the election result, informing them that communities would ostracize



those involved in electoral violence (Afolabi and Avasiloae, 2015). Similarly, The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) launched a radio program tagged Harmonization Election Day Broadcast (HEDB) to review the post-election violence that erupted after the 2011 general elections in order to forestall a similar experience during the 2015 general elections (Alli, 2015). During the 2015 general elections, The Interfaith Mediation Centre trained community peace observers (CPOs) to monitor conflict indicators and prevent disputes from becoming violent. The Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) emphasized that the best approach to prevent electoral violence is to hold credible elections. It thus engaged in civic education campaign and mass media peace messaging through the radio, television and internet (Afolabi and Avasiloae, 2015). In March 2015, The Institute of Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) in partnership with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) organized a Strategic Stakeholders Dialogue towards ending electoral violence in Nigeria (IPCR, 2015). IPCR adopted diverse approaches such as town hall meetings, drama presentation, jingles and road show to advocate and campaign against electoral violence (Mohammed, 2007). Over the years, the participation of women in politics and the electoral process has been negatively affected by electoral violence against women, in the form of hate speech, threat, harassment, blackmail, and assault. The Stop Violence Against Women in Politics (Stop-VAWIP) initiative aims to curb electoral violence targeted at politically active women. During the 2021 governorship election in Anambra State, an NGO, Gender Perspective and Social Development Centre (GPSDC) in partnership with the USAID and the NDI organized The Stop-VAWIP campaign to mitigate violence against women in politics. The Nation Newspapers (2021) reported that GPSDC recorded 52 cases of violence against women, during and before the governorship election in Anambra state on 6 November 2021. The Executive Director of Socio-Economic Research and Development



Centre (SERDEC), Tijani Abdulkareem, stated that the risk of violence is inherent in every election and that violence is mostly perpetrated by youths. Thus, it is important for the organization to sensitize and train youths, as well as other organizations on the effects and implications of electoral violence (Guardian Newspapers, 2019). There exists a plethora of literature on the roles of NGOs in mitigating electoral violence in Nigeria. However, most literature engage in the subject matter without specific focus on the impacts of election violence mitigation strategies on the youths. This study seeks to address the lacuna and builds on existing literature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Although, critical theory existed prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, in the 1930s, it became closely associated with the Frankfurt school. The Frankfurt school of Critical Theory emerged in response to the horrors of class oppression in the society. Its leading proponents were Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. Critical theory recognizes the fact that theories are mostly embedded in social and political life, specifically, this activates an examination of the purposes and functions it serves as a theory in explaining social issues. In distinguishing between two theories: traditional and critical theory, Horkheimer (1972) stated that the purpose underlining critical as opposed to traditional conceptions of theory is to improve human existence by abolishing all forms of injustice. Critical theory provides descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at increasing freedom in all forms. The practicality of critical theory has led to the emergence of a dynamic civil society, to which NGOs belong. Therefore, the appropriateness of analyzing the roles of NGOs in election violence mitigation from the context of critical theory becomes justified. Realistically, critical theory intends to remind us of unreconciled sufferings, it wants to denounce prevailing injustice, strengthen





resistance to it and ultimately contribute to its abolition (Tarr, 2011). NGOs involved in election violence mitigation, lend a huge voice to suffering. Adorno (1973), stressed that the concrete reality of human suffering must not only be made known but should unequivocally be given a voice. The objective of critical theory is to analyze the underlying social structures which result in abuses. By rejecting the existing bad society and calling for a more humane society, critical theory seeks to transform the society.

However, despite these potent features, critical theory is criticised for its inability to create a link between theory and praxis (Arden, 1958; Heather and Stolz, 1979). Critics argue that critical theory's failure as a political theory evolves from its entanglement with metatheoretical debate instead of providing practical solutions to fundamental and existing political problems. Again, those opposed to the concept of critical theory contend that it is limited in theoretical approach and in this regard, lacks methodological reflection of systemic analysis and enlightenment values (Aradau and Huysmans 2014; Wight 2018). A broader interpretation of this criticism would emphasize that critical theory is pedestrian, vague and imprecise to serve the social and political purposes for which it is intended (Wolin, 1987). Regardless, the relevance of critical theory as a social and political theory cannot be disregarded. According to Jahn (2021), empirical research reveals that critical theory as a political theory is relevant and extremely successful. While the emancipatory idea that critical theory represents appears utopian, critical theory invokes systematic processes that provokes societies towards rational institutions that promote socio-political transformation.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed the use of primary research method. Six NGOs actively involved in election violence mitigation were selected through voluntary response sample to participate



in the study. The NGOs are; Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND), Community Initiative for Enhanced Peace and Development (CIEPD), West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), Action Aid Nigeria (AAN), CLEEN Foundation (CLEEN), as well as YIAGA Africa (YIAGA). However, YIAGA did not respond to the questionnaire. Consequently, five NGOs; PIND, CIEPD, WANEP, AAN, and CLEEN participated in the study. The study utilized open ended questionnaire to gather data. Questionnaires were sent to the NGOs via their official e-mail addresses after discussing with members of staff. The questions asked revolve around NGOs perceptions of electoral violence, factors that motivate youth participation in electoral violence, the strategies adopted to mitigate youth participation in electoral violence, as well as the challenges NGOs encounter in their quest to mitigate youth participation in electoral violence. Data gathered were analyzed through qualitative method. The researcher read and interpreted the responses from the respondents. Furthermore, coding was utilized to categorize and organize data in order to identify the themes. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed and analyzed. Data analysis gave deeper insights into the activities of NGOs with respect to election violence mitigation.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The NGOs were asked what their perceptions of electoral violence are. WANEP states that electoral violence destroys lives and creates the avenue for the emergence of incompetent leaders. Furthermore, WANEP emphasizes that the rate at which youths avail themselves for electoral violence is alarming. This study supports the work of Egobueze and Ojirika (2017), that youths are at the heart of most violent conflicts in Nigeria. CLEEN explains that electoral violence adversely affects peace and development in any society. According to CLEEN, the immediate consequences are loss of lives and property, as well as heightened insecurity. More complex, is that electoral violence affects the credibility of the electoral and democratic



process and puts young people in conflict with the law as they are often seen as the problem. PIND and CIEPD share similar sentiments with CLEEN and WANEP asserting that electoral violence leads to insecurity, incompetent leaders as well as underdevelopment. CIEPD stressed that electoral violence if not curbed; spirals into a cycle of violence that supersedes the electoral cycle. AAN responded that electoral violence leads to negative citizenship. In this sense, electoral violence puts the nation in bad perception within the international community and for this reason, undermines economic development, most especially in the area of foreign direct investment. These findings corroborate the works of Awofeso and Odeyemi (2016), Akinyetun (2016) and Ogboji et al (2022), that electoral violence promotes insecurity and underdevelopment.

Without exception, the NGOs answered that unemployment, poverty, profitability of violence, illiteracy and ignorance, poor orientation on the consequences of violence, godfatherism, and cultism, are factors that promote youth participation in electoral violence. The NGOs emphasized that the high level of youth unemployment has provided youths the opportunity to indulge in negative ventures, including electoral violence. Youths that engage in electoral violence finds it profitable as a means of survival, because in most cases they receive financial rewards for their acts of violence. In this context, participating in electoral violence as WANEP stated serves as an opportunity for youths to extort money from political leaders, because once the politicians are elected into office, they abandon the youths. Eneji and Ikeorji (2018) stated that Nigerian youths are entangled in socio-economic conundrum, such as poverty and unemployment, which presents them with enormous challenges. Apparently, the failure of government to perform its obligations under the social contract triggers poverty and unemployment (Jiboku and Jiboku, 2019). As PIND describes, youths



that participate in electoral violence are violent entrepreneurs, who participate in electoral violence to meet their basic needs.

Furthermore, the NGOs identify illiteracy and ignorance as factors that influence youth participation in electoral violence. WANEP states that the youths that participate in electoral violence are easily convinced by political leaders to engage in electoral violence because they lack education on their civic rights and democracy. CIEPD describes illiteracy and ignorance as engines of electoral violence and emphasized that violent youths have poor knowledge of the consequences of electoral violence. Similarly, PIND mentioned that youths are prone to participate in electoral violence because they lack knowledge on what constitutes electoral violence, as well as its consequences on them and the society. Ogbeide (2013) acknowledges that youths that participate in electoral violence do so, not only because of idleness but also due to illiteracy and ignorance. In addition, CLEEN observed that loyalty to politicians in the form of godfatherism and cultism provides the platform for youths to participate in electoral violence. According to Wenibowei (2011), political godfatherism in Nigeria leads to aggressive struggle for political power, which usually descends into electoral violence before, during and after elections. Godfatherism is a cankerworm in the political arrangement of Nigeria and serves as an albatross that impedes democratic growth.

A careful critique of the activities of NGOs in relation to electoral violence mitigation should acknowledge the constellation of election mitigation strategies adopted by NGOs. It was therefore necessary to ask the participating NGOs the strategies they adopt to curb electoral violence before, during and after elections. PIND uses numerous methodologies that are community and youth range specific in carrying out holistic advocacy and sensitization. The strategies of the organization are informed and guided by their core objectives in relation to



the existing peculiarities of the communities where they carry out their operations. Some of these strategies include; distributing Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials to youths, consultation with youth leaders, and signing of peace accords. The IEC materials contain vital information on the impacts of electoral violence on the participating youths, the victims; the communities where these acts are perpetrated, as well as Nigeria. In addition, PIND consults with youth leaders that could instigate violence during elections. This strategy is particularly important to ensure that youth leaders are orientated on the need to caution their followers to maintain peace and order during the election period, regardless of any form of provocation. Youth leaders are also encouraged to sign peace accords. PIND stated that in most cases, getting these ruthless and vengeful leaders to sign the peace accord is not easily achieved because they often consider same as making a huge sacrifice, in the event the political situation does not favour their candidates.

As a result of these strategic interventions, violent youths, especially in the Niger Delta region where PIND focuses most of its activities now have the understanding of electoral violence and its associated consequences. CIEPD adopts the use of efficient and credible complaints process that provides a platform for community members to update the organization on any foreseeable incident of electoral violence. Upon receiving complaints, CIEPD alerts the police force to take necessary security steps in order to forestall the possibility of any impending electoral violence. In situations where police officers enforce arrest of suspects, they engage CIEPD to educate them on the benefits of shunning electoral violence. CIEPD acknowledges that many youths have re-channelled their energies into positive activities, such as campaigning on violent free elections. WANEP organizes training programs for youths on peaceful election. These trainings usually involve dialogues on the



role of youths in violent free elections as well as training of election observers who are youths. Remarkably, WANEP creates an election situation room to monitor violence during elections, in addition to creating awareness on peaceful election through campaigns. The interventions of WANEP have led to changes in behaviour among violent youths as well as active participation of youths in the electoral process. AAN organizes numerous programs to educate youths on the electoral process and electoral violence. One of such programs is; Strengthening Citizens' Engagement in Electoral Process (SCEEP) initiated to educate youths on engaging stakeholders in the electoral process. Through such programs, AAN strengthens the capacity of young people to promote good governance, and seeks to ensure that youths are positively engaged during elections towards impacting the electoral process.

According to AAN, these programs and projects focused on the youths and electoral violence have influenced the governance process positively. CLEEN has had a couple of engagement sessions with young people across Nigeria, in order to have an idea of their perceptions of electoral violence. Besides organizing sensitization programs, workshops, as well as dialogue sessions to educate the youths on the hazards of electoral violence, CLEEN conducts studies on the effects of electoral violence on Nigeria and what needs to be done to tackle the menace. CLEEN emphasizes that these strategies have positively shaped the perceptions of youths on electoral violence and as a result reduced the level of electoral violence in the Nigeria.

The pre-election stage of intervention is usually critical for NGOs as their activities are geared towards preventing electoral violence before the elections. According to Ikyase and Egberi (2015), pre-electoral violence may occur where electoral laws or provisions appear to favour a particular candidate to the detriment of the opposing candidate or candidates; it



could also occur due to the overriding ambition of political candidates that desire to attain power at all cost. Given the above, the contest for the attention of the youths between politicians and NGOs, practically affects the level of impacts these NGOs make at the pre-election stage.

Post-election violence occurs in the aftermath of an election and is the consequence of election outcomes. It is usually spontaneous and sparked by politically active individuals that think the electoral process was unfair, and to the detriment of their political party or parties (Ikyase and Egberi, 2015). PIND sensitizes youths on the consequences of political discourse which could further heat-up the polity. By adopting this strategy, PIND has been able to reconcile and reunite different conflicting youth groups from different political parties as a way of preventing post-election violence. On its part, CIEPD establishes post-election conflict prevention platforms through effective channels of communication with election stakeholders (INEC officials, security agencies, politicians and their supporters). These platforms enable all the stakeholders to analyze the outcome of elections with a view to addressing critical issues of post-election violence. This post-election strategy is efficacious as it enables election stakeholders to understand and manage their differences without the grudge to instigate violence. WANEP, through dialogue engages stakeholders in the electoral process on collaborative peace building for Youth Associations. The approach aims to educate and dissuade youths from being incited to violence by angry politicians' post-election. Many violent youths have been enlightened on the hazards of electoral violence through this strategy and as a result, post-election violence has been averted on numerous occasions. CLEEN focuses on the theme of security in tackling youth involvement in post-election violence. The organization works with government, CSOs, and the private sector to



promote public safety and security towards mitigating electoral violence. Through public sensitization on the need to promote security and peace, some violent youths have been restrained from participating in electoral violence. In addition, this approach has influenced officers of the police force to be proactive and more responsive in curbing youth participation in electoral violence. AAN engages in post-election audit to assess the participation of youths in electoral violence. This approach enables AAN to have a clear understanding of the impacts of its interventions and enables it to re-strategize towards adopting a more effective approach. In order to be more impactful, the organization explores the use of sensitization campaigns to advocate against post-election violence. Significantly, some violent youths have become desensitized to electoral violence as a result of AAN's sensitization campaigns. Obakhedo (2011), acknowledged the significance of political education and sensitization in curbing electoral violence.

According to Obakhedo, political education as a form of political socialization serves as a medium through which the citizens develop positive political values that shape their political behaviours. The question on the challenges militating against the efforts of NGOs elicited diverse responses. CIEPD stated that the difficulty in dealing with the entitlement mind set of youths, that violence is lucrative poses as a challenge. In addition, the violent youths lack the understanding of the implications of electoral violence. As a result, mobilising the youths to attend programs on peace education becomes a difficult task. CLEEN, PIND and WANEP explained that convincing young people to shun electoral violence, when there are no viable alternatives that will keep them gainfully engaged and provide them with income is a challenge. WANEP explicated that the situation becomes complicated for NGOs when they realise that they lack the ability to provide other sources of revenue for youths who earn





money from their involvement in electoral violence. PIND identifies the lack of commitment by the political class to curb electoral violence as an impediment to election violence mitigation strategies by NGOs in Nigeria. In particular, the absence of efficient institutional and legal frameworks that if formulated and implemented, would harmonize election violence mitigation strategies and deter the involvement of youths in electoral violence. AAN stated that politicians adopt a counter-narrative approach based on ethnic and religious divides in order to incite electoral violence, thereby rendering the election mitigation strategies by NGOs less effective.

Regardless of these challenges, NGOs have recorded significant achievements in their pursuit to mitigate electoral violence. PIND acknowledges that violent youths now have an understanding of electoral violence and its associated consequences as a result of its interventions. CIEPD submits that more youths have re-channelled their energies into positive activities, such as campaigning on violent free elections. WANEP identifies that its interventions have led to changes in behaviour among violent youths and promoted the active participation of youths in the electoral process. AAN asserts that programs and projects focused on youth and electoral violence have progressively influenced the governance process, while CLEEN emphasizes that its activities have positively reshaped the perceptions of youths on electoral violence.

Despite the achievements recorded by NGOs, electoral violence remains a strong feature of the electoral process in Nigeria. Consequently, this calls for a critical theory approach in order to pragmatically address the menace of electoral violence. Critical theory urges the development of new forms of thinking that creates the space for theory to be tested against reality. While critical theorists recognize the unavoidability of taking their orientations from



the social context in which they are situated, their guiding interest is one of emancipation from, rather than legitimating and consolidation of existing social forms (Burchill et al, 1996). Critical theory sees the world as a social totality, the resultant effect of this is that the social world has an effect on human beings. Therefore, critical theory as an emancipatory theory encourages people not only to critique their circumstances, but to become actively engaged in bringing about change. It thus, provides a theoretical framework that instigates NGOs to seek for social and political transformation. Logically, the above analysis creates the basis for the interventions of NGOs in electoral violence. And to this end, NGOs as agents of social change are reified and personified as if they were humans. In presenting NGOs as change agents, one must admit that they should have a historical background of societal ills they are confronting.

Horkheimer (1972), explained that critical theory does not simply present an expression of concrete historical situation, it also acts as a force within that situation to stimulate a change. By placing emphasis on history; critical theory seeks to understand the origin and essence of a social process. It also examines the process to see if there is any possibility for change that might be implicit in it (Renegger and Nicholas, 2007). As such, it goes beyond the historical narrative of a particular social process to instigate positive change and transformation. For this reason, critical theory seeks to analyze the state of affairs that confront human beings by understanding and addressing the root causes. The NGOs that participated in the study identified profitability of violence, illiteracy and ignorance, poor orientation on the consequences of violence, godfatherism, cultism, unemployment, and poverty as factors that promote youth participation in electoral violence. To be specific, some of the NGOs emphasized that convincing young people to desist from electoral violence without been able



to provide them any employment to keep them engaged and financially independent is a challenge. While NGOs adopt strategies such as campaigns, signing of peace accords, consultations with leaders in communities and establishing complaints process towards mitigating electoral violence, there are no significant strategies to address challenges such as; unemployment, poverty and the absence of effective legislation to punish sponsors, as well as perpetrators of electoral violence. It is critical for NGOs to understand that while the factors that promote youth participation in electoral violence appear independent, in the context of curbing electoral violence, these factors are interrelated because they serve as challenges that limit the impacts of NGOs activities with regards to election violence mitigation. A comprehensive approach towards mitigating electoral violence is required to subdue all the challenges that instigate and promote electoral violence. Importantly, in order for NGOs to maximize their potentials to mitigate electoral violence, they must as it is, holistically address the interrelated factors that promote youth participation in electoral violence.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It is pertinent to note that NGOs have recorded achievements in their quest to mitigate electoral violence. However, the achievements recorded thus far are modest and limited. The study utilized critical theory to buttress that NGOs must maximize their potentials by holistically addressing the factors that promote electoral violence. Aside from sensitizing the youths on the consequences of electoral violence, NGOs involved in election violence mitigation must partner with NGOs involved in poverty alleviation and youth empowerment. Significantly, the partnership will strengthen the effectiveness of NGOs involved in election violence mitigation, particularly in the context of alleviating poverty among violent youths. Secondly, in order to deter youths from participating in electoral violence, there is need for NGOs to advocate for legislation on election violence mitigation that will stringently punish



the sponsors, as well as perpetrators of electoral violence. Thirdly, NGOs must sensitize the youths on the essence of ethno-religious tolerance in order to subvert the influence of politicians that incite them to violence based on ethnic and religious divides.

### **Limitations of Study and Issues for Further Investigation**

This study like every other research work is not perfect. Firstly, the numbers of NGOs that participated in the study is a limitation. For example, the participation of YIAGA would have broadened the findings of the study. Secondly, the study ought to have engaged the youths as respondents in order to understand their perceptions of electoral violence. Going forward, future research on the topic should involve the youths in order to understand their perceptions of electoral violence and their lived experiences in this regard. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to have more NGOs participate in future research to broaden the scope of findings.

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