



## **Political Violence and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: A focus on the 2019 and 2023 General Elections**

<sup>1</sup>Lambe Emmanuel Oyewole, <sup>2</sup>Hassan Seyid Ishola, & <sup>3</sup>Alabi Abdullahi

<sup>1, 2 & 3</sup> Department of Politics and Governance, Kwara State University, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author's E-mail:* [Emmanuel.lambe60@gmail.com](mailto:Emmanuel.lambe60@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Overtime, election has been the most controversial aspect of Nigeria's democracy as it includes activities for choosing amongst individuals for the leadership and representative role in the country. Leadership seats have always been a contest and a battle that most individuals pursue. The political space of Nigeria therefore has always been characterized by violence which is usually being employed for political gains, ethno-religious vices and destabilization of the democratic processes. The research studies the various reasons for the continuous violence in Nigeria's electoral processes, its impacts on the electoral processes and largely on the democratic consolidation of the country. The paper employed the descriptive analysis method in analyzing the causes and impact level of political violence. The paper asserted that the ethnic and religious volatility plays a great role in the ensuing of violence in the last election, as the election was viewed as an election amongst individuals of ethnic groups. The researchers therefore, suggest that principle of federal character can reduce political violence and make for democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Election, Violence, Democracy, Ethnicity and Religions.

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## Introduction

Democracy is now a new aura of significance in contemporary world affairs. The Democratic peace movement was made for the nations of the world to embrace it, given that it is perceived to enhance development and gives way for stable and fair involvement of the people in the political space of the country. Though the idea of democracy is widespread, accepted and practiced, still among the various world continents its practice has faced some contradictions and critics. In spite of its widespread fundamentality and practices, there still exist difficulties in adopting and practicing its tenets in its pure form in some part of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe. This could be attributed to many factors, which include the reception of the people towards the tenets of Democracy, cultural hemming, poor development of democratic institutions, ideological confusion and misconceptions, as well as other factors. Lambe (2022) opined that Democracy is defined as a system of government that gives preference to and strengthens citizens' decision-making, and thereby, promotes equal participation of local citizens in securing and building their nation for the collective good of all, while upholding the principles of justice, peace and the rule of law

Democracy has many forms, and its practices and outcomes vary from nation to nation. Nigeria, like other countries of the world, is not left out of this sweeping wave of democratic awareness and enlargement. It is noteworthy that Nigeria is one of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa still struggling to develop democratically. After more than sixty years of independence from the British colony, the scenario in the country democratic practices remains pessimistic. Democracy and its practices are totally misinterpreted, and it is wrongly practiced in some parts of the world. A good number of explanations have been aroused to account for this adduced state of affairs. These include: Political conflict, loophole rule of laws, and mismanagement of public funds, poor macroeconomic policies, systemic corruption, ethno-religious fragility and cultural volatility, inadequate skilled manpower, as well as poor political will.

Electoral process is an institutionalized procedure for the choosing of political Office Holders by qualified adult's members of a society. Hence, electioneering process exists to provide the electorate the opportunity and right to choose their representative and maintain contact with



them. Therefore, for an electoral system to be democratic, it should allow the electorate the leverage to make real and meaningful choices devoid of coercion or intimidation (Eminue, 2005). Nigeria's political history has been challenged with the bad tales of electoral violence a feat that has negatively affected the nation's polity. Democracy ought to guarantee regular free and fair elections; freedom of expression and association; accountability of the State's administrative organs, universal suffrage; equal rights and participation of the local citizens in the formulation of and implementation of development plans, and as well, guarantee security to the entire populace. Most importantly, democracy should be able to enhance the provision and equal distribution of resources and basic human needs, and as well, enable a heterogeneous state to manage its divides peacefully.

Elections in Nigeria have consistently been characterized by issues from the pre electoral activities to the electoral activities and then the post electoral activities. On and on, we can catalogue the fraudulent manipulations and vices which have now become regular features of elections in Nigeria. Elections in Nigeria have historically been conflict ridden. The campaigns preceding elections are invariably marked by pettiness, intolerance, and violence. From intra party campaigns to the general voting there's always presence of violence. The 2023 election state, legislative and Presidential was not exempted from the recurring vices of violence by state actors, non-state actors, elite class, disgruntled groups, marginalized regions and religious actors. (Eminue 2017). According to Premium Times (2023), Nigeria recorded 109 deaths in three months linked to the 2023 election. The present fragility the country faces from ethnic and religious issues is a key bomb that can easily spark the country into violence. Femi Gbajabamila (2023) more so noted that the 2023 Presidential, Legislative and State election was characterized by ethnic and religious sentiments rather than competence and merits. Looking at the Presidential Election from the top three candidates, each party represented a region of the country. The election of the country is continually being characterized as being "not as it supposed to be". On a normal day, the citizens love and have nothing to do with each other on a daily basis, but at any given opportunity such as the election campaign season, politicians exploit these factors, whipping up sentiments and thereby creating disaffection and ill-feeling. Rather than issue based campaigns, ethno religious sentiments were rather used.



Elections in Nigeria have historically been conflict ridden. The campaigns preceding elections are invariably marked by pettiness, intolerance, and violence. In the 2019 and 2023 election there were several reported incidents of intra-party, as well as, inter-party violence, conflicts, including abductions and assassinations. And the elections and their outcomes have often been neither free nor fair, characterized by violations of the process (both inadvertent and willful), corrupt conduct by officials, rigging of results and so on. Again, reports indicate that incidences of these were pervasive during the party primaries, and that some candidates are busy scheming to ensure a favorable outcome for themselves, by hook or crook, in the oncoming elections

Political conflicts impact negatively in many forms of social cohesion such as the inability for people to interact with one another creates unhealthy histories in the minds of generation's. More so, during political conflicts a lot of people abandon their economic desires, urge for development and focus on ethnic, cultural values, religion or traditions to pledge allegiance to new, artificial and unproven sentiments.

### **Research objectives**

The main objective of the research is to assess the impact of political violence on Democratic consolidation and secondly, to assess the impact of Ethno-Religious vices on electoral processes.

### **Methodology**

The research made use of descriptive method to analyse the study of Electoral violence on democratic consolidation

### **Conceptual clarification**

#### **Concept of Democracy**

Democracy is a system of government that gives preference to and strengthens citizens' decision-making, and thereby, promotes equal participation of local citizens in securing and building their nation for the collective good of all, while upholding the principles of justice, peace and the rule of law. Here, citizens, who are also members of the civil society, are to be recognized as active participants in deliberating issues that affect their lives with government



officials, both at the community, state and federal levels, and not merely recognized as passive observers. (Lambe 2023)

Obviously, the term ‘democracy’ has a long standing history with opposing or contradictory connotations and denotations in its usage. In this section, I review some literature in the conceptual underpinnings of the subject of democracy. The term democracy was invented by the ancient Greeks, and developed earlier by the Athenians. Although it was understood earlier to mean the ‘self-government’ (autonomy of the community or polis), it faced a lot of criticism as a result of its restricted form of autonomy, which gave preference to male citizens at some era.

Developing a working definition of the term as “the expression of the universal human quest for autonomy,” Sanford argues that democracy signified “rule by the people” from the earliest period, which upholds the belief in autonomy or self-determination for individuals and group to which they belong. Hence, he pinpoints that “democracy offers the radically different promise that freedom need not be sacrificed for order because the constitution guaranteeing both is supported not by force alone, but also by the express and regular consent of the governed,” (Sanford 2000).

### **Concept of Political Violence**

According to Anifowose (1982) political violence is the use of or threat of physical act carried out by individual or individuals within a political system against another individual or groups and property, with the intent to cause injury or death to persons, damage or destruction to property, and whose objective, choice of targets or victims, surrounding circumstance, implementation, and effects have political significances, that tends to modify or change the behavior of others in the existing arrangement for the political system

Political violence could take two dimensions that are pre-electoral violence and post-electoral violence (Tamuno, 1991). Pre-Electoral violence may occur where electoral laws or provisions are seen to favor a particular candidate at the expense of the other. It could also occur when a particular candidate is over-ambitious and perhaps sees the signals that he may likely lose the election to the opponent. Post-electoral violence on the other hand, may be spontaneous. It may be engineered by individuals who feel cheated, alienated or deprived by the unfairness of the



electoral process. This deprivation may be real or perceived. In Nigeria, the purpose of such violence apart from seeking redress through illegal means is also to destroy it, if we cannot have it (Afolabi 2007).

### **Political Violence in Nigeria**

Generally, the term violence is characterized as any act, which causes any physical, psychological, emotional, verbal or economic harm, whether this occurs in private or public life, in peace time or in conflict situations. So, violence refers to the act of causing intentional fears in the minds of people for a particular gain. This violence can be in tangible threats or intangible threats, so far as it can be employed to achieve political gains. By extension, therefore electoral violence means any act of violence perpetrated in the course of political activities, including during and post-election periods, and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meeting or voting at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other stakeholders or to cause bodily harm, or injury to any person connected with the electoral process.

International Foundation for Election Systems (2011) defines electoral violence as “any violence (harm) or threat of violence (harm) that is aimed at any person or property involved in the election process, or at disrupting any part of the electoral or political process during the election period. According to Albert (2007), electoral violence involves all forms of organized acts of threats aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder or opponent before, during and after an election with an intention to determine, delay or influence a political process. Nigeria elections from the first republic to the present republic violence has been a characterizing event which has always beclouded the democratic space, moreover violence is seen as an integral instrument in the face of winning elections and also violence has become part of the political culture of Nigeria. Kukah (2011), argued that violence is part of the foundation of most states, and quite often rears its ugly head in states with weak democratic structures. The employment of violence varies as greed, sit tight syndrome, electoral abuse, and corruption of electoral process, rigging of elections, electoral fraud, thuggery and abuse of power. Other causes of electoral violence in Nigeria include problems with voter registration, god-fatherism, political violence,



intra-party violence, violent disruption of political meetings, parallel party congresses, delegate bribery, duplicate polls, refusal to send election materials to supposed rival constituencies, ethno-religious slurs, manifestoes devoid of concrete vision and ideologies, imposition of candidates, perversion of election procedures, kidnapping of opponents, assassination of would-be candidates and political chieftains, stealing of ballot boxes and outright rigging.

According to the NSA (2020) Nigeria recorded a total of 52 deaths during the 2019 general elections and a high amount of destruction of property ranging from individual properties to public property.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **State Fragility Theory**

The theory gained prominence from the 1990s onwards and gained further traction after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The theory was coined by various scholars in the International Development Association (IDA). A fragile state is a low income country characterized by a weak state capacity or weak state legitimacy leaving citizens vulnerable to a range of shocks. A fragile state is significantly susceptible to crisis in one or more of its sub systems. It is a state that is particularly vulnerable to internal and external shocks, and domestic and international conflicts. In a fragile state institutional arrangements embody and perhaps preserve the conditions of crisis: in economic terms, this could be institutions that reinforce stagnation or low growth rates or embody extreme inequality (in wealth, in access to land, in access to the means to make a living); in social terms institutions may embody extreme inequality or lack of access altogether to health or education; in political terms institution may entrench exclusionary coalitions in power (in ethnic religious, or perhaps regional terms) or extreme factionalism or significantly fragmented security organizations". (IDAJ vol 6; 2014).

### **Relationship between state fragility and political violence**

The fragile nature of Nigeria in its security architecture, political and social structure, gives room for ethnic tension and volatility which has constituted crisis during electoral processes. The lack



of trust between the various ethnic groups gave rise to the ethnic volatility in the 2023 election and beyond.

Most crises in Nigeria are poverty induced. This leads to depression and deprivation. As a result, the inability of the state to provide basic services for the people, generate new conflict or renew the old ones. Evidence abounds to suggest that oil has given rise to vertical and horizontal conflict between national, state, local and society or between dominant and subordinate geopolitical zones, classes and groups across Nigeria, given the pivotal role that oil plays in the restructuring power relationships in Nigeria. Crisis of resource control and revenue sharing regularly rent the air between proponents and opponents, these have estranged the relationship not only between the super-ordinate government and subordinate government, but between the electorates and the government. Therefore in the application of this theory, it is because of the fragility of the state that is why the Issue of ethnicity, Religion, Personal Beliefs, sentiments can easily upturn the country into turmoil.

### **Empirical review**

In the words of Alanamu (2005), the history of violence in Nigeria politics dates back to the colonial era. From the 1960s, elections in Nigeria approximated a war wage to determine “who gets what, when and how” (Oyediran 1997). All weapons were available for those combatants to use which include religion, ethnic sentiments, outright bribery, the power of incumbency, corruption, the abuse of electoral processes etc. Indeed, evidence before us proves that electoral behavior in Nigeria has never been guided by ideology, party programmes or the merit of those standing to be elected, but by a political calculus based on ethnic geopolitics, the means to assume power by all costs, either singly or by a small power bloc around a big power bloc for the purpose of fighting the war so as to win, rule and rule and then share the anticipated booty.

Nwobashi (2015) in a study “Electoral Violence in Nigeria” sees political violence as the use of illegitimate force of any kind prohibited by the state (law) to achieve political ends. Though this may be true, correct and acceptable if it has to do with an opposing or opposition party adopting that. But the reverse is usually the case if it is adopted by the ruling party (party in power) it then could be an acceptable phenomenon. For instance, the People’s Democratic Party (P.D.P) which





is the ruling party could adopt political violence as a strategy to winning elections, and it will be termed acceptable and normal, but when the opposition party for instance, All Progressive Party (APC) adopts that it will be termed illegal since they were not in control of government machinery, and as such all manner of security agents will be deployed to cow them down.

In a related study, Nkwede and Nwobashi (2011) defined political violence as all collective attacks within a political community against the political regimes, but the argument of the researcher is that political violence goes beyond the political community, since neighbouring communities and foreign investors feel the bite and pains of political violence in other communities.

Political violence has been part of human history, present in the history of all humanity for ages. It is an endemic feature of most of the developing world political systems. Particularly in developing countries, like Nigeria, where politics has become an essential feature of the people's means of achieving economic wealth (Tamuno, 1972). It was Nigeria's pride that she achieved her independence with minimum disturbances; but, it is rather unfortunate that after independence Nigeria has been gravitating in a spiral of political violence. This problem deteriorated in the elections conducted immediately after independence in the 1960s.

Akubo and Yakubu (2014) affirm that the roles played by political parties are vital in every nation's democratization. The cardinal and strategic roles of this essential and fundamental institution of democratization which is germane to its growth are central to the achievements and failures of democratic politics. "The study carefully looked at the relationship between political parties in the democratic consolidation of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, with heavy reliance on secondary data supported by the analytical approach. The culminations of the study are the problems that have threatened the consolidation of democracy since the beginning of the fourth republic, namely the lack of institutionalization and personalization of political parties; godfatherism; intra-party conflict within political parties and ongoing party/political abuse." Nigeria's party system is already fragile and unstable, with no clear signs of benefit to consolidating democracy. It was recommended that questions of organizational capability, efficient leadership, intra-party conflict, accountability, institutionalization and personalization,



political mobilization mechanisms, and linkages to the common people and civil society be discussed, and solutions proffered.

Kalu and Gberevbie, (2016) carried out a study titled “Election Violence and Democracy in Nigeria: A Study of the 2011 and 2015 General Elections in Lagos State”. The study examines election violence and democracy in Nigeria with focus on the 2011 and 2015 general elections in Lagos State. The study adopts a qualitative method basically from primary data (oral interview) and secondary data, using observations, journal articles, newspaper reports and reports of INEC obtained online. The study was anchored on the Frustration Aggression Theory in understanding the rationale for engaging in electoral violence. It reveals that election violence was caused by many factors including; lack of internal democracy within political parties, inefficiency of the electoral commissions, inadequate security personnel, inadequate voter education, voters’ bribery, rumour of rigging, among others. Therefore, the paper recommends among others that political leaders should play positive roles in building effective government through their constitutional duties and mandates. All political parties in Nigeria should endeavour to make internal democracy within the party a top priority.

Most crises in Nigeria are poverty induced. This leads to depression and deprivation. As a result, the inability of the state to provide basic services for the people, generate new conflict or renew the old ones. Evidence abounds to suggest that oil has given rise to vertical and horizontal conflict between national, state, local and society or between dominant and subordinate geopolitical zones, classes and groups across Nigeria, given the pivotal role that oil plays in the restructuring power relationships in Nigeria. Crisis of resource control and revenue sharing regularly rent the air between proponents and opponents, these have estranged the relationship not only between the super-ordinate government and subordinate government, but between the electorates and the government. This, then, hampers the possibilities of putting up institutions and structures to provide daily living for the jobless youths in the streets. In a bid to earn a living through no available opportunities, these youths take up arms to source their living, hence the spate of political kidnapping and assassination to ensure that political godfathers, and godson have their way in political positions, so that they themselves will in turn earn a living. During the



2019, 2023 election evidence of vote buying was recorded by EiE in polling units across the countries, evidence of vote buying is as a result of widespread of poverty and weaponization of poverty for political gains.

Any chaos is an opportunity to settle scores and exact revenge on personal foes. These adversely affect the human security and social development of the country (Vilela 2009). Political violence helps in propagating the ongoing cycle of violence in the country. The acts impact negatively on the children living in such societies as they grow up to take the same root. Bandura and Walters maintained that such children would likely end up being violent in nature. They further explain human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences.

Massive unemployment and poverty are prevalent in Nigeria which has experienced a depressed economy since the 1980s. This provides a fertile ground for the recruitment of the youths into an army of political thugs. As a result, these youths feed on the crumbs that fell from the tables of the politicians, who in-turn used them as thugs to perpetuate political and electoral violence.

### **Interconnection between Political Violence and Democratic consolidation**

Political violence in Nigerian democracy have become intractable because of ethnics, party and political interest which have become a modern day parlance in public governance and the Nigeria democracy, while godfather's which is a famous concept in the teachings and religion of the Roman Catholic Church may have found it's root in the political sphere of the Nigerian politics arising from the inability of most contestants in an election to stand on their own and contest elections (Nkwede, Ibeogu & Nwankwo, 2014).

Security ensures peace of mind and the possibility to sleep relaxed. Security implies stability and continuity of existence of the human life in the society. Since society is paramount in everyday life, insecurity and violence which has become a topical issue in today's Nigeria democratic exercise implies the inability to cope with shock or misfortune, therefore, increase in violence and insecurity results in pervasive anxiety and fear and so becomes detrimental to the survival of the nation's fledgling democracy



There are four important goals that a viable electoral system must be able to achieve. First is the achievement of political equality in the context of ensuring representativeness, inclusiveness, accessibility and competitiveness. Second, it must allow for deliberation; that is, it must give room for robust and quality debate that will translate to political knowledge and deliberative decision-making. Still in furtherance of deliberation, it must be capable of healing divisions and generating consensus within the community. Third, the electoral system must be capable of defining a political community by excluding non-citizen residents/taxpayers from voting. Finally, it must be able to engender stability.

Those who hold positions in the power struggle determine the location and distribution of scarce resources. Therefore, politics in Nigeria is the struggle for more money and this means that to get into politics, there is always a price to pay. Since politics entails spending huge sums of money, one will have to be involved in some competition which may precipitate political violence. Echoing in the same vein Adeyemo, (2000) maintained that political violence develops as a feature of struggle for power. He further opined that, the employment of violence in the struggle for power has some negative implications for the realization of the collective well-being of individuals and society as a whole. In Nigeria, political violence has become highly disruptive to social life, thereby causing divisions in families and communities as well as causing antagonisms among and within social groups. Nigerians have witnessed several cases of political violence in the form of assassinations, bomb-blasts, intimidations, murders, and destruction of properties in time past and now on the increase. The effect of this menace in Nigeria is tending in some respects towards social disaggregation into its constituent ethnic and sub ethnic groups divisions. Killing, harming and intimidating persons trying to vote during elections in order to destroy ballot boxes in areas where the perpetrators lack supporters or in order to snatch ballot boxes so as to stuff them with ballot papers illegally obtained and thumb-printed creates a social division in Nigeria.

### **Curbing Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

There exist various recommendations by scholars, think tanks, policy makers and writers. The volatility of the country's Ethno-religious space has shown that over time Nigeria has not healed



from the civil war and the amalgamation of the country by the Western Colonial western masters. Issues of religion superiority, tenets and beliefs lead to tussle for ethno-religious hegemony.

The Ethnic crisis was resolved by the introduction of the Principle of Federal character in the 1979 constitution, however the principles have not been effectively practiced thereby giving room for marginalization and ethnic segregation. This can be seen as an integral cause of the ethnic tension and volatility of the Ethnic spaces. As some ethnic groups see themselves as not benefiting from the union and at the receiving end. Therefore, the principle of federal character needs to be adhered to in other to reduce the inherent ethnic tensions and marginalization mentality facing some regions of the country.

The use and employment of state resources by incumbents remains a factor that affects Nigeria's democracy. Therefore, the elimination of the tendency of rulers to perpetuate themselves in office according to Chukkol (2006). Since any incumbent government is hell bent on using the incumbency factor to continue in office, will normally unleash coercive force on the opposition. This tended to breed tension before, during and after election, hence unconstitutional tenure elongation should not be contemplated at all. The elimination tendency of those outside the government to seek to come to the saddle at all cost. Also, the removal of the mentality of those outside who want to win elections and test the goodies of being in power and therefore willing to deploy all "missiles" in order to realize their ambition. Such behavioral change is desirable to curb violence in our elections. The political class should strive to put national interest above personal or party considerations by eschewing the culture of violence (political/electoral) lawlessness, intolerance of oppositions, and politics of material inducement (Landan, 2008).

The media, non-government organizations, community leaders and civil society should strive to educate politicians and the general public on the core values of democracy and the need to practice politics by the rules of the game. One way of removing violence in Nigeria is by riding it of election rigging, malpractices and the love of financial profits. The benefits attached to political offices will always attract greedy individuals rather than capable individuals.



## **Conclusion**

Conflict, violence caused by ethno-religious vices is an inherent issue that has clouded Nigeria Political space. Since the laying down of the foundation of federalism by the Bourdillon Government and the consequent Independence of the country to face the creation of the Colonial masters, various constitutional laws and policy actions such as the federal character principle etc. has been enacted to ensure peace, cordial living, and unity of the country. But however, ethnic and religious loyalty has been seen has a more uniting font in the minds of some people. Therefore the hegemony belief and superiority beliefs of some religion and ethnic group over others have continue to devoid the democratic space of the country thereby pushing the country into internal crisis, which only dents the image of the country in the international village, impairs relationship between and amongst ethnic groups, creates distrust and sentimental relations amongst the ethnic groups thereby fusing segregation and ethnic loyalty rather than National loyalty. The principles of democracy will however find it difficult to establish its tenet in its pure form in this type of environment thereby causing slow or no political development, equal economic development or social cohesion.

## **Recommendations**

Therefore, a re-orientation, re-negotiation of the ethnic issues will suffice in reducing the fragile nature and tension beclouding social political relations in the country. The federal government needs to re-sit with the Elite, stakeholders, aggrieved individuals and groups and create a way forward on national unity and inclusion. The Sovereign National Conference organized by the campaign of democracy needs to be revisited and all grey areas that has been earmarked and noted for actions should be adopted reduce ethic volatility.

More so, the principle of federal character has a lot of potential in solving the ethnic tensions, so, the federal government needs to ensure inclusiveness of all in the federal government. Therefore, a pragmatic application of the federal character in principle will solve issues of marginalization and ethnic volatility.





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