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Electoral Violence, Politicians and Lumpens in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Findings from Abeokuta, Nigeria

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Abstract

Since 1999 when Nigeria's fourth-republic started, elections have become antithetical to the consolidation of democracy because of the spate of horrendous violence that occurs before, during and after elections amongst other ills that have defined the democratisation process. Conspicuous in the series of violence; are youth lumpens whose activities torpedo consolidation of democracy and political security. However, the fact that they do not operate on their own for themselves implies that they have sponsors. Therefore, this article presents the organisation, mobilisation and source of sponsorship for lumpens involved in electoral violence in Abeokuta North Local Government in Ogun State. Based on data qualitatively generated from purposively selected respondents germane to the objectives of the study and analysed using the economy of affection theory, this article identifies a demand-supply chain for the agency (lumpens) of violence sustained by an affective relationship between lumpens and politicians in the locale of the study. Succinctly put, this affective relationship illustrates an alliance struck against democratisation by the agents and sponsors of electoral violence and political insecurity in the locale of study which is largely representative of Nigeria's political environment.

Introduction

Elections in Nigeria have become a source of perennial tension leading to loss of valuable lives and wanton destruction of properties around the country. Consequently, rather than consolidating democracy in Nigeria, elections have become equated with terror. This is because of many incidences of violence that occur before, during and after elections. It is also worrisome that despite the hype around the notion of democratic peace¹ as the hope of

a peaceful world, periodic elections have configured the peace not only in Nigeria, but also in many democratising African countries as a fragile one.² As a result of this, elections have emerged as threats to the lives of and security of many Africans. In addition, elections because of its violent characteristics on the continent have disconnected citizens from democracy and the state. A major deficit arising from this is the lack of social contract between the electorate and the government

which underscores the illegitimate status of the many states on the continent.³

The need to prevent democratic reversals especially in post-conflict countries many of which are in the continent has not been lost on the international community going by the degree of assistance to post-conflict countries since the end of the Cold-War. This is because of the realisation that democracy founded on flawless electoral processes offers hope of stability for post-conflict countries most of which were conflict ridden owing to contestations for power amongst other issues. For this purpose, democratising postconflict countries such as El Salvador, Afghanistan, Guatemala Cambodia Uganda, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Rwanda and Sierra Leone have received substantial support towards democratisation as part of contributions to peace and stability.⁴ Nigeria also benefitted from such assistance in the build-up to the fourth republic.⁵

Measuring the impact of support received for peaceful elections and the stability of democracy by Nigeria and many other African countries gives a disappointing verdict. For example, each election from 1999 to 2007 was corrupt and worse than the other.⁶ This has led to disappointment of the electorate who hitherto nursed a romantic view that the enthronement of democracy will create a haven of peace and development in the country. The extent of different contexts of violence that has characterised elections since the inception of the fourth republic has informed descriptions of Nigeria as a bloody democracy⁷ and rigged democracy⁸ which is an indication that after decades of the democratisation in Africa, democracy has not reduced electoral violence.

However, electoral violence is not an

entirely new problem in Nigeria's political processes.⁹ This is because it has led to defining moments in Nigeria's political history producing actors and victims in the process. From 1952 to 2002, a content analysis of statements and the behaviour of leading politicians across the country reveals that democracy remains endangered because politicians continue to seek power for the sake of primitive accumulation of wealth and not primarily to serve.¹⁰ This is telling of the split-nature of the character of members of the political class because while they publicly abjure electoral violence, they remain the beneficiaries and victims of this scourge. Since 2003, electoral violence has taken different dimensions in the country in its seeming emergence as the norm in seeking political power.¹¹ This has informed high level of voter-apathy and the complicity of security agencies which pave the way for rigging and violence which are perpetuated by lumpens working for most of the political parties.¹² This has presented the security agencies as instruments of oppression and suppression against members and supporters of the opposition acting on the instructions of the incumbent and dominant political party in most places¹³ and sometimes resulting in political assassination.¹⁴ This phenomenon has encouraged the flowering of lumpen groups operating like political militias who are readily deployed to protect the interest of the party as narrowly defined by leaders of the party whenever the need arises. This is comparable to the establishment of militia groups by ethnic nationalities in the country which has also become rampant since the inception of the fourth republic.¹⁵

As a result, several lumpen groups now

work as mercenaries or militias for many political parties and politicians.¹⁶ The relationship between lumpens and politicians have been sustained by *Big Men* – those who disregard inconvenient laws and subvert chains of authority and bureaucracy¹⁷ within peculiar systems of affective relations. The fact that sponsors (*big men*) on their own cannot execute these unpatriotic acts makes lumpens indispensable for the perpetration of electoral violence. As widespread as the phenomenon is, a generalised approach to the problem could be misleading because each political community possesses its own peculiar characteristics which must be understood in its own context.

Conceptual Discourse: Electoral Violence, Lumpens and Political (In)Security

Violence is multi-dimensional.¹⁸ It could also be qualified as a coin with two faces. This is because when used legitimately it is permissible but when used illegitimately, it becomes criminal. It is also a genre of electoral violence¹⁹. This has been a constant feature in Nigeria's fourth republic. Electoral violence involves: "all forms of organised acts or threats – physical, psychological and structural – aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view to determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process".²⁰ It can also include "clandestine efforts to shape election results"²¹. This is done not only by the incumbent, but also by the opposition elements in the unbridled struggle for power.²²

In the physical context of electoral violence, lumpens are very central because it

is typified by arson, looting, shooting, kidnapping, forceful disruption of campaign rallies, armed raids on voting and collating centres, including snatching of ballot boxes at gun point. The psychological dimension of electoral violence is manifested in the official and unofficial actions that instill fear in the people and potentially strong opponents. This serves two main purposes of discouraging voters who are likely to vote against a particular political party and denying popular candidates the chance to be voted for. The use of state agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission to selectively witch-hunt opponents of failed the third-term bid of former President Obasanjo also fits into the context of psychological forms of electoral violence.²³ The open declaration of the 2007 elections by former president Olusegun Obasanjo as a: "do or die affair" smacks of terror tactics in a political contest which produced results that can be described as mere allocation of figure without considering the turnout of voters as observed that:

. . . massive: international and domestic observers estimated total turnout at no more than 14 million, and some observers argue that, in fact, it was as low as 5 million. Yet, INEC announced that Yar'Adua won 24 million votes, Buhari 6.6 million votes and Atiku 2.5 million votes – a total of more than 33 million votes.²⁴

Also, psychological dimension of electoral violence characterised Nigeria's transition process preceding the extant fourth republic. This got to its peak during the reign of Nigeria's late military Head of State General Sanni Abacha described by Collin Powell, the one-time American secretary as having the worst psychological bio-history he ever read.²⁵ The

Abacha regime wantonly assassinated of dissent voices,²⁶ threatened some by security agencies and the preemptively disqualified of all viable presidential opponents during his transition programme (Albert, 2005b and Adeniyi, 2005). Denzer (2004) narrates and analyses the death of three prominent Yoruba women as having occurred in the context of intensifying political violence believed to have been sponsored by the state during this period.

Structurally electoral violence is perpetuated by creating unlevel playing grounds for participants in the electoral process and making different rules to apply to different participants in the electoral process.

Conceptually, this article locates electoral violence in the context of the definition of violence as; . . . *the illegal employment of methods of physical coercion for personal or group ends.*²⁷ This definition encapsulates the rationale behind the use of electoral violence which is primarily for the candidate of political party and secondarily for the political party. The crude manifestation of electoral violence in Nigeria is a combination of pre-theoretical violence characterised by the use of knives, arrows and use of physical torture and modern arms and ammunitions; which are fast replacing manifestoes in the quest for political offices in contemporary Nigeria.

Lumpens

The activities of paid anti-social elements (usually unemployed), to oppress, intimidate or kill political opponents and loot or vandalise their property on the instructions of political opponents been a source of concern to well-meaning stakeholders in Nigeria's democratic process. However, since 2003, there has

emerged a new pattern of electoral violence in the country with patterns and actors differing from one state to the other.²⁸ The prominent actors in electoral violence across the country are members of the transport union in different states of the country especially in the south-western part of the country²⁹ are fingered in many cases of urban and electoral violence. Nevertheless, there exists lumpens involved in electoral skirmishes who are not members of the union.

The members of such groups qualify to be addressed as lumpens because they represent a pool of people whose labour or skills have become obsolete largely because of capitalist transformation, restructuring or retrenchment.³⁰ This category includes the unemployed and the unemployable, mostly male, prone to criminal behaviour, petty theft, drugs peddling, drunkenness and other anti-social tendencies.³¹

A combination of men drawn mainly from the two categories above, constitute lumpens in the context of this article. As will be seen later in this article lumpens mostly youths have now emerged as the militant wing of political parties. Unlike thugs that were mainly used for election purposes, lumpen youths in the fourth republic have become active participants in the political process with open relationships with political parties and politicians despite the attendant implications of their unwholesome activities for political security.

Political (In)Security

Political security is the freedom from any form of arbitrary government, dictatorship or political intimidation.³² A corollary of this is security and freedom to participate safely without fear of being harassed or attacked in

the political process, especially during elections. In this context, it includes the freedom from real or imagined threats of harassment, intimidation or assassination for exercising one's electoral discretion. Political security also implies the security of personnel involved in the conduct of elections. The reverse of the situation leads to political insecurity.

Electoral Violence in Pre and Post-Independence Nigeria

The 1959 elections qualify as a very decisive one in the analysis of political parties because of its intrinsic link to the control of government after independence and there were early warning signals that the elections might be violent across the country.³³ Indications pointing to the possibility of violence were obvious in the several inter and intra-party clashes prior to the elections. From pre-independence till the extant fourth republic, the Police and the judiciary especially in Nigeria have been instruments of electoral violence.³⁴ The case of one Ibrahim Dimis, prominent member of Northern People's Congress (NPC) illustrates the dominant culture of political intolerance during the period. After a quarrel with NPC, he formed his own Party and became leader of the Habe-Fulani People's Party-Action Group Alliance.³⁵ This alliance with the Action Group led to political insecurity for him based on trumped-up charges leveled against him.³⁶ The display of political intolerance and abuse of the judiciary became brazen when:

He was arrested by the Native Authority police at the end of January 1959, and charged with having offered a bribe to electors at a

by-election to the House of Assembly in September 1958, and with 'parading himself' in Bauchi dressed like a chief... late in February, he was again arrested, following riots in Tafawa Balewa . . . and charged with incitement to riot, taking part in a riot, and holding a political meeting outside the house of the District Head of Tafawa Balewa.

In March 1959, Chief Obafemi Awolowo had his convoy of cars stoned by a mob in Abuja while on a tour of Northern Nigeria. He was also reported to have complained of a similar attack in Bida both of which he claimed the Police ignored.³⁷ In the Western region, the most destructive clash broke out in Efon Alaye in present day Ekiti State where a fierce confrontation ensued between members of the NCNC and indigenous people performing a local festival on 18 May 1959. The NCNC claimed the festival was a sham one put together to instigate violence while the Western region in a statement issued on 31 May denied this arguing that the NCNC had been advised by the Nigeria Police not to interfere with the festival.³⁸ Also, in the then Western region, there were series of violent clashes involving prominent politicians like Alhaji Inuwa Wada the Federal Minister of Works and Survey of the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) and Action Group (AG) supporters near Ijebu Ode in present day Ogun State and clashes between NCNC and AG in villages near Iwo.³⁹ In another instance, Chief Joseph Odutola Osuntokun, Western Minister of Lands was involved in a fracas in his hometown in Ekiti Division, and the West African Pilot, a leading Newspaper published pictures of him wielding a shotgun.⁴⁰ Politicians in the Eastern region did not behave differently as there were reported cases of arson and assassination

attempts during this period.

The bestial violence that characterised elections in 1951, 1956, 1959, 1960 and 1964 culminated in the collapse of the first republic⁴¹ and this was alluded to in the maiden speech delivered on 16 January 1966 by Major-General Aguiyi-Ironsi. Electoral Violence in the Second Republic.

Staggered elections were conducted and supervised by the leadership of military regime headed by Major-General Olusegun Obasanjo between 7 July and 11 August⁴² in the following order; Senate, House of Representatives and State Houses of Assemblies, gubernatorial elections and the presidential elections came last.⁴³ The main cause of conflict at the national level was controversy over the interpretation of what constituted two-thirds majority of nineteen states which was one of the preconditions for victory in the presidential elections.

However, just like someone who has failed to learn from history and doomed to repeat it, the civilian-to-civilian transition of 1983 witnessed an unprecedented level of electoral violence before, during and after. Conspicuous in these acts of violence were youths who served as political thugs to politicians. This period exposed the knack of politicians to instigate and mobilise youths for violence and marked the genesis of the perversion of associational life with the involvement of members of transport unions and other unions of artisans in electoral violence.⁴⁴ The election management body was also complicit in the manipulation of voters' registers and the appointment of partisan individuals in many states.⁴⁵ These culminated in the eruption of violence in many states of the country with the worst-hit states being Ondo and Oyo with lesser

degree of violence in Ogun and Lagos.⁴⁶

Prior to the elections and reminiscent of a prophecy of doom, Dr Omololu Olunloyo who was later declared winner of the 1983 gubernatorial election in Oyo State was reported to have warned of the imminent return of the military if the various political parties failed to strike a peaceful compromise at the end of the year's election, as reported in the *New Nigeria Newspaper* of March 14 1983 on page 93.⁴⁷ Again, owing to widespread violence arising from the mismanagement of the 1983 elections conducted by civilians, the military once more took up the challenge of restoring sanity and stability to the polity. In the maiden broadcast of Major-General Muhammadu Buhari, he underscored the need to save the country from total collapse consequent upon the mismanagement of the 1983 elections.

Electoral Violence in The Third Republic: From Structural to Physical Violence

Although, truncated at the presidential level, gubernatorial and national assembly elections were held across the country with little or no incidences of violence. However, the annulment of the June 12 Presidential election by military president, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida led to widespread violent reactions that claimed many lives and wanton destruction of properties which remain unprecedented in the history of electoral violence in the country.⁴⁸ The annulment of the June 12 presidential election represents a classic case of structural violence defined by repression and exploitation.⁴⁹ Therefore, the annulment of the June 12 presidential election typifies a form of structural

violence that instigated widespread and protracted physical violence across the country.

Electoral Violence in the Fourth Republic

After a tortuous and windy transition programme, the fourth republic was formally inaugurated on 29 May 1999. Since then, elections have been held in 2003, 2007 and 2011 successively. The problem of electoral violence has been worsened by an unprecedented upsurge in political killings which has become a sad commentary on the extant democratic process. Although, it occurred at a negligible rate in 1999, election days since then have become days of tension and nightmares for virtually all Nigerians. Also, the problem has re-emerged with its variables in a mutating fashion. Chief amongst these variables is the use of lumpens as agencies of violence which result in perennial political insecurity. Unlike in the past republics when members of the public angered by the mismanagement of the electoral process participated in mass social actions to protest such manipulations, there seems to have emerged a professional class of lumpens who now constitute the military wing for politicians and political parties. In Ogun state where Abeokuta North is situated, there was an unprecedented rise in the use of rituals, violence and lumpens by the administration that ruled the state for eight years from 2003 in restricting the political space.⁵⁰ However, despite being widespread, the style of organisation, mobilisation and source of sponsorship for lumpens vary from one political space to another.

The Study Area

The present day Abeokuta city (under the rocks) and capital of Ogun state was initially peopled by people who were forced to migrate from Ibadan.⁵¹

In a public meeting held at the Isale Ijebu quarter of the town, Lamodi an Egba Chief shot Ege an influential Ife Chief dead with a pistol, and in the commotion which ensued Lamodi himself was slain. For fear of the Ifes avenging the death of Ege the Egbas withdrew in a body from Ibadan and encamped on the other side of Ona river ... Here also they were ill at ease and after divination they sent for one Sodeke. Sodeke was at the head of this new colony until his death . . . At Abeokuta the refugees kept together according to their family distinctions.

In 1893, the Egba United Government based in Abeokuta was recognised by the United Kingdom and became part of the colony of Nigeria under British rule in 1914. Since Nigeria's independence, Abeokuta has been known as an integral part of the Awolowo brand of progressive politics.⁵² However, this changed in 2003 when the People's Democratic Party (PDP) a largely conservative party became the ruling party in the State. Presently, the ancient city Abeokuta is divided into two Local Government Areas for the purpose of political administration. These are Abeokuta North and South. Abeokuta North has its administrative headquarters at Akomoje. The notable indigenous inhabitants are the Oke-Ona, Gbagura, Owu and Oke-Ogun. It stands on space of 57,360 hectares.

Scope of the Study

The study is limited to Abeokuta North Local

Government Area of Ogun State in the metropolis of Ogun State capital. The respondents were limited to purposively selected individuals who led lumpen groups in the study area as the time of this study. They were selected based on their activities as lumpens in elections at both the intra-party and inter-party levels since the fourth-republic commenced. Out of the ten earlier contacted; only four eventually participated in the interview.

Research Methodology

The research methodology was mainly qualitative. This was informed by the fact that studies done on the involvement of lumpens in electoral violence in the study area are scanty and the need to know the current manifestation of the problem. The four interviewees were drawn from the two lumpen groups in the Local Government based on their affinities with the leading political parties in the community and activities since 1999.

Theoretical Framework: Economy of Affection

Reciprocity has been a major cause of political alignment and disagreement. This underscores exchange as a strong basis of political relationships. This is conceptualised as the economy of affection.⁵³ Besides reasons such as the failure or the incapacity of many states to meet the basic needs of individuals, people usually engage in affective relationship if they desire all or one of the following:⁵⁴

- (a) To gain status,
- (b) Seek favour,
- (c) Share a benefit,
- (d) Provide a common good.

A look at the above list indicates that affective behavior will be a denominator in political relationships. Therefore, this theory is relevant as it will be useful in understanding the motive of the lumpen youths for engaging in electoral violence in the political community under study.

Organisation, Mobilisation and Sponsorship in 2003 Organisation

According to one of the respondents, his group was formed while they were still members of the Dr Fredrick Fasehun faction of Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) and subsequently joined the defunct Alliance for Democracy (AD). However, they became organised as lumpens and known as *tough boys* in 2002 preparatory to the party primaries of the AD in sympathy with one of the leading candidates who left the party after he did not win the party's gubernatorial ticket. At this juncture, they became organised in order to react to unwarranted attacks from some of their colleagues who stayed back in the AD who were coming to destabilise the rallies and programmes of their new party and candidate. According to him:

Their threats and subsequent disruption of empowerment programmes of Otunba Gbenga Daniel (OGD) as the flag bearer of the PDP became the main reason of our organisation to offer security and protection for our candidate and party activities.

Mobilisation and Sponsorship for 2003 Elections

The respondent gave account of two forms of mobilisation and sponsorship. The first one was when they were in the fold of defunct AD.

According to him, some of them were employed into the civil service of the state as drivers and artisans but given the laxity to come to work when it was convenient for them. This is statutorily contrary to the rules guiding the conduct of the civil servants. Some were also given buses to use for transport business ostensibly as part of poverty alleviation schemes by the government. All these provided mobilisation and sponsorship for them which made it easy for them to be mobilised for political activities.

After joining the PDP, their activities were noticed by some supporters of OGD who now identified with them by promising them a better life if they teamed up with him. In particular, he mentioned one serving member of the Federal House of Representatives who became their coordinator. He went further to recount many encounters of clashes around the city between the two groups. From his account, it is clear that they emerged to participate in pre-election violence and later inter-party violence. However, they started clashing with their counterparts when they became annexed by the PDP preparatory to the 2003 election.

Mobilisation and Sponsorship for 2007 Elections

According to the fourth respondent who hails from the area and in his late thirties, the emergence of a native of the Local Government in person of Senator Ibikunle Amosun who decamped from the PDP in the contest caused a split within their fold because they considered those who did not support him as bastards. This reveals the extent of primordial sentiments in their decisions and choice of candidates.

The mobilisation and sponsorship of

lumpens for the 2007 elections can be described as following the pattern of a demand induced inflation which led to conflagration before, during and after elections. The weight of what was exchanged between lumpens and politicians after the 2003 elections and the style of sustaining lumpens by politicians made mobilisation and sponsorship more financially demanding because of the need to entice lumpens from rival groups and the need to take care of those retained.

These identified fall within the concept of the economy of affection⁵⁵ that people take to affective behaviour when seeking benefits. So, for both parties affective behaviour was inevitable for different reasons. While politicians lacked confidence in the ability of the state to provide security and win elections based on their manifestoes, lumpens served the politicians in order to meet existential needs. This relationship had a severe effect on political security and economic empowerment in Abeokuta. This is because more vehicles and soft loans were distributed in the guise of empowerment programmes by the two leading contenders in the election to lumpens as a means of mobility for them. This contradicted the ostensibly stated objectives of the empowerment programmes; which politicians claimed were meant for all.

Contradictions and Implications for Peaceful Elections and Political Security

The alliance between lumpens and politicians since the beginning of the fourth republic in Abeokuta North similar to what obtains in many political settings across the country has had severe implications for peaceful elections,

political and national security. This indeed represents a contradiction of what is normatively expected of political parties; which is to provide stability to democracy. To the contrary, but in the presented which is representative of many states in the country, political parties based on their alliance with lumpens now promote anomic, extractive and violent politics⁵⁶ (Smith, 2003). Dissimilar to the argument of Huntington (1968: 408) quoted in Smith (2003:138), political parties in Nigeria are strong not basically because of institutionalising mass support but largely because of their relationships with lumpens which continues to scare a substantial number of the electorate from participating especially in elections.

Evidently, the stark reality that has become glaring in the light of this research is that many citizens between in the fourth-republic developed a phobia for election periods across the country; an attitude that has been reinforced with the post-election violence of 2011. This means that politics in Nigeria since the beginning of the fourth-republic has not been practiced within a framework of legitimate rules and norms. Rather, the conduct of politics has been dictated by unapproved use of force, coercion and violence. This makes lumpens indispensable for many desperate politicians because of their pliability for electoral violence.

Conclusion

The sustained unholy relationship between lumpens and politicians as found out in the locale under focus which is reflective of many others in the country have dire implications political security and peaceful elections. Unfortunately, this seems to be the continuation

of a trend that continues to mar elections in Nigeria since the first republic. In addition to its inimical effect on participatory democracy, the alliance between lumpens and politicians sustained by the transactive character of the political class, erodes the legitimacy of the so-called elected representatives of the people. It also corrodes the confidence of the electorate in the capacity and neutrality of election management bodies and the security agents who are expected to prevent or curtail electoral violence. This denies citizens most of whom are afraid of becoming victims of electoral violence at both the intra and inter-party level; their rights of free participation. Consequently, democracy and participation in elections become skewed against a large section of the public while political insecurity rages on.

Sadly, the organisation, mobilisation and sponsorship of lumpens by politicians in the fourth republic reiterates the need to query the motive of most seekers of elective offices who rely on the instrumentalisation of lumpens to win elections. This is because the relationship between lumpens and politicians practically takes away the suffrage of a substantial number of the electorate making the state illegitimate due to the absence of a valid social contract occasioned by electoral violence and political insecurity put in place by lumpens and their politicians.

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