YOUTHS AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: ISSUES AND WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian political landscape, since the return to democratic rule in May 29, 1999 has witnessed series of political violence. Of such violence is electoral violence. Although there are many scholarly writings and debates on the issue of electoral violence and particularly the role of the Nigerian youth in it, however, this paper aims at making further contribution to literature and the debate by examining issues surrounding electoral violence, particularly, factors predisposing the youth to electoral violence in Nigeria. The paper suggests the way forward to curbing electoral violence in the Nigerian polity. This paper relied heavily on secondary sources of information such as published works, journals, newspapers, and internet-based materials among others.

Keywords: Democracy, electoral violence, electoral process, Nigeria, youth.

Introduction

Elections in Nigeria and Africa have been characterised by widespread violence, with the youths constituting the largest prosecutors of such violence (Muhammed 2005; Omotola 2008; Badejo and Stephens 2012; Animasawun, 2013, Okafor, 2015; David and Manu, 2015). In fact, election time in Nigeria is almost like a war time. As Okafor (2015) noted, electoral violence is now becoming a national character of the Nigerian state in such a way that both the Nigerian state and her citizens are held hostage by this smashing political reality in which both are unfortunate willing conspirators. From independence to date, electoral violence in Nigeria has improved in sophistry just as the politicians and their cohorts have remained resolute in this destructive enterprise.

Osaghae (2002) noted that violence is not new in Nigerian politics and it was cited as one of the reasons by the military for seizing power in the second-republic (cited in Animasawun, 2013). The youths have always been used as the agency or vectors of violence by unscrupulous politicians owing to the amoral nature of Nigeria's politics (Rashid, 2004, cited in Animasawun, 2013).

Elections ought to be a mechanism for making it possible for persons to compete and win the right to hold certain public offices. Sadly, elections have become the greatest threat to the democratic ethos in Nigeria. Nigeria since its political independence and sovereignty has been characterized by series of politically motivated violence. These violence, no doubt have constituted setback to social, economic and political development (Kukah, 2010).

In the view of Rotberg (2007) as conveyed in Achebe (2012:245) the question of choice in selecting a leader in Nigeria is often an academic exercise, due to the election rigging, violence, and intimidation of the general public, particularly by those in power, but also by those with the means – the rich and influential.

Therefore, it is based on the above background that this work aims at examining the factors predisposing the youths to electoral violence; the implications of electoral violence in Nigeria; and making plausible recommendations towards discouraging youth involvement in electoral violence and prevention of electoral violence in Nigeria. The paper is divided into sections and subsections. It began with the introduction, conceptual clarifications, causes of electoral violence and grounds

for youth involvement in electoral violence in Nigeria, implications of electoral violence in Nigeria, the way forward towards prevention of electoral violence, and conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

For the purpose of this work, it is pertinent to clarify key concepts such as "youth" and "electoral violence".

a. Who is a Youth?

Youth is a relative concept, in that what constitutes the definition of a youth has been a subject of perceptions. Hence, the definition of youth varies from culture to culture, from organisation to organisation, and from society to society. However, certain criteria are used when defining youths. For instance, the youths are often perceived using age criterion, physical attributes (including mental health, energy, spontaneity, alertness among others), as well as the purpose or situation for which it is being used or defined. Thus, according to the 'Fact Sheet' prepared by the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 'the definition of youth perhaps changes with circumstances, especially with the changes in demographic, financial, economic and socio-cultural settings' (http://undesadspd.org/Youth.aspx).

The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines 'youth" as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years (http://undesadspd.org/Youth.aspx). Johnson (cited in Abhuere, 2000:85) argued, while leadership of youth programmes has no upper age limit, their membership has in practice covered people of over 35-45 years old (Muhammed, 2005). Berger (1972:42) submitted that youth cuts across age, pointing to culture as what really matters. According to Berger (1972), anyone who feels youthful, and exhibits such qualities as spontaneity, impulsiveness, energy, etc. is a youth (Muhammed 2005).

African Youth Charter (2006) posited that 'youth or young people shall refer to every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years'. In South Africa, for example, the country's National Youth Policy (NYP 2020) published in April 2015 defines young people as those falling within the age group of 14 to 35 years.

In Nigeria, the country's National Youth Policy documents (2001; 2009)

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define youth as comprising persons (males and females) aged 18 – 35 years, who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This category of people (young people or youth) has been described by both Policy documents as characterised by energy, enthusiasm, ambition, creativity, and promise; it represents the most active, the most volatile, and yet the most vulnerable segment of the population socio-economically, emotionally, and in other respects.

b. What is Electoral Violence?

Electoral violence has been defined in various ways. A Working Paper on 'Political and Electoral Violence in East Africa' noted that electoral violence is 'geared towards winning political competition or power through violence, subverting the ends of the electoral and democratic process'. The Working Paper quoted Mwagiru, who noted that; the "tool of trade" of electoral violence "is the intimidation and disempowerment of political opponents. Election violence takes place not just at election time, but in periods leading to elections, during the elections, and in the period immediately following elections such as during the counting of ballots" (Working Papers on Conflict Management, 2001).

Igbuzor (2010) also conceived electoral violence as 'any act of violence perpetrated in the course of political activities including pre, during and post election periods and may include any of the following acts: thuggery. use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral process.'

Albert (2007:133) defined it as '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'. Omotola (2008) referred to it as 'a form, perhaps the most deadly form, of electoral fraud'.

Electoral violence is multidimensional. It can be categorized into physical, psychological and structural dimensions (Nwolise, 2007; Omotola 2008, Okafor, 2015). Physical dimensions of electoral violence in Nigeria include political assassinations, riots, assaults, arson, looting, bombing and hijacking of electoral materials at gun point, torture, disruption of political meetings and campaign rallies

(Omotola 2008); shooting, kidnapping and hostage taking, armed raids on voting and collating centres, (Nwolise, 2007 as cited Omotola, 2008) and reckless driving and blocking of roads during electioneering period by electoral actors, among others.

The psychological dimension relates to official and unofficial actions that create fear in the people, which may be a product of physical violence. These include threats to opposition forces by security agents or through phone calls and text messages (Nwolise, 2007 as cited in Omotola, 2008). This also includes intimidating and inflammatory utterances. Example of such is the President Olusegun Obasanjo's declaration during the campaign build up to the 2007 general election that the election was going to be 'a do or die' affair (see Omotola 2007; 2008). Another instance of psychological dimension of electoral violence is what can be called inflammatory utterance of General Muhammadu Buhari, who as at then had failed for the third consecutive time as the presidential candidate. He was reported to have warned that 2015 would be bloody if the elections were not transparent. Buhari was quoted as saying "God willing, by 2015, something will happen. They either conduct a free and fair election or they go a very disgraceful way. If what happened in 2011 [alleged rigging of the presidential election] should again happen in 2015, by the grace of God, the dog and the baboon would all be soaked in blood" (see the online version of the Vanguard, May 15, 2012, http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/05/2015-ll-be-bloody-if-buhari/).

The structural dimension of electoral violence is that in which 'the structures of society and politics are organized in such a way as to generate conflicts, even though there may not be physical violence. But if the structural gaps are not addressed, there is likely to be actual physical violence. It is within this school of thought that the selective application of the law and the lack of an even electoral playing field fall' (Working Papers on Conflict Management No.2 (2001).

Structural dimension of electoral violence, as Omotola (2008) noted, 'is manifested in the form of systemic disequilibrium predicated upon double standards. In Nigeria, for example, all the parties were not given equal access to the state-owned media, particularly the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). Moreover, the anti-corruption

agencies of the state, particularly the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), were being used as a political weapon by the ruling party to harass, intimidate and frustrate the opposition out of politics' (Omotola, 2008).

The structural dimension of electoral violence seems more pronounced, being a product of structural imbalance, including coercion of citizens by government to register or vote, unequal opportunities for political parties and candidates, abuse of power of incumbency, falsification of election results, as well as the politicisation of security and electoral officials (Nwolise 2007).

Electoral violence can happen before, during and after the elections. Preelection violence may include acts or threats against electoral stakeholders during voters' registration or electioneering campaigns. Election Day violence includes the snatching of ballot papers or boxes, assaults on opposition agents or parties, and harassment or intimidation by security agents. In the aftermath of an election, electoral violence may take the form of violent protests against electoral rigging, whether real or imagined, and of the state's deploying its apparatus of force in response to the protest, thereby further fuelling the violence (Omotola 2008).

Causes of Electoral Violence and Grounds for Youth Involvement in Electoral Violence in Nigeria

On a general note, several factors have been adduced as causes of electoral violence as well as the instigating factors for youth involvement in electoral violence in Nigeria. Kukah (2010) attributes the cause of electoral violence to the essence of politics itself. He maintains that electoral violence persists because politics is the means for the allocation of resources for the improvement of the human condition. According to Kukah (2010), when citizens are dissatisfied with governance the temptation to resort to violence is often presented as a just recourse to seeking justice and fairness. Perpetrators of violence do not see themselves as threatening the system; rather they believe they are correcting it. According to Alemika (2011) those who are excluded from governance will resort to violence in their quest for office.

Furthermore, godfatherism is another notable factor instigating electoral violence in Nigeria. This is because godfatherism, as Animasawun (2013) noted, perceives winning elections as the ultimate end of democracy. According to Collier (2010) cited in Animasawun (2013), the activities of godfathers make politics

(2010) cited in Animasawun (2013), the activities of godfathers make politics attractive to criminals. In the opinion of Adebanwi (2010) cited in Animasawun (2013), godfatherism remains one of the ills in the political process since 1999 in Nigeria, because it has configured public office like an eatery which only the godfather alone gives the ticket to whoever he likes and once any beneficiary disobeys him, he gets him or her out of the eatery. Achebe (2012:245) sees godfatherism as 'an archaic, corrupt practice in which individuals with lots of money and time to spare (many of them half-baked, poorly educated thugs) sponsor their chosen candidates and push them right through to the desired political position, bribing, threatening, and, on occasion, murdering any opposition in the process'.

Alemika (2010) has also attributed the cause of electoral violence in Nigeria to actions and inactions of several actors who are determined to secure or retain political power without adhering to the rules of democratic competitive elections. Again, Kukah (2010) observed that the persistence of violence in almost every area of Nigeria national life is a symptom of the weakness of the apparatus of the state. Electoral violence is merely an extension of a series of expressions of violence arising from the widespread frustration of joblessness, lack of infrastructure, weakness and corruption of state institutions, poverty and so on. According to Kukah (2010) a state that is unable to meet its obligation to its citizens loses any right to make citizens comply with basic tenets of human conduct and decency.

Culture of impunity occasioned by lack of swift and appropriate punishment for law breakers and offenders remains another major motivating factor for youth involvement in electoral violence. Thus, as noted by Kukah (2010), the recurring menaces of electoral violence are occasioned by the inability of the government to mete out punishments to the perpetrators. According to him, the culture of impunity gives the perpetrator the freedom to trample upon the traps of the criminal law without being trapped or caught.

Abdullahi (1998) noted that youth unemployment is one of the major problems which has resulted in youths seeking means of livelihood through violent means such as hired assassins, armed robbery and car snatching in various forms. David and Manu (2015) reported that over 60 percent of youth lack access to employment and development opportunities.

Ugiagbe (2010) identified poverty, unemployment, ineffectiveness of security forces, culture of impunity, weak penalties, weak governance, corruption as well as small arms proliferations as some of the major causes of electoral violence in

small arms proliferations as some of the major causes of electoral violence in Nigeria. Furthermore, Badejo and Stephens (2012) found out in their study, "Predisposing Factors to Youth Involvement in Electoral Violence in Lagos Metropolis" that illiteracy, unemployment, influence of drugs, sharing of national cake, youths as tools in the hand of politicians, lack of information on politics, lack of transparency, lack of self worth, peer group influence, exposure to violence in the mass media, low quality of life, proliferation of arms, ethnic militia, religious affiliation and corruption in the body polity were predisposing factors of youths involvement in electoral violence.

Weapons availability and cheapness of small and light weapons also give the youth the courage to engage in violent political activities and intimidations while at the same time, instill fear in the people who should have challenged them. In some areas, automatic weapons are so cheap that they can be bought in exchange for a chicken or a few pounds of rice (Global Policy, 2015).

Generally, the cause of electoral violence in Nigeria can be situated within the overall concept of power struggle. Thus, Okafor (2015) opined that the struggle for power therefore, remains a battle for the strong and like in every war situation, nothing is spared. According to him, the wielders of political power are not only above the law, but loot state treasury with no conscience left in them.

In Nigeria, and indeed Africa, 'the high incidences of political and electoral violence can also be explained by cultural factors. Here, there is a political culture of thuggery that generally predisposes actors to engage in violence and intimidation during political contests. Within the context of the existing political system, the decay of political and social systems result in violence becoming the tool for settling political contests and managing political conflicts' (Working Papers on Conflict Management No.2 (2001).

Another major reason that can be advanced as a cause of electoral violence is poor civic education. The importance of civic education cannot be over emphasized. Citizens (electorate) ignorance of their duties and responsibilities regarding elections and electoral process is highly pronounced, hence the reason why they, especially the youths, become tools in the hands of the politicians for disruption of elections and electoral process. Premised on this, Adesanmi (2016) advocates the need to scrap the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme and to be replaced "immediately with one year compulsory civics for graduates of all tertiary institutions in Nigeria". Adesanmi notes that:

there is very little room for debate here in terms of the national emergency we have in civics. We are wasting valuable national time by producing functional civic illiterates and sending them to one year of national service before unleashing them on an atmosphere of corruption where the lack of opportunities compounds their situation. Nigeria would be far better served by investing in a year of civics for the younger generation than wasting her time and their time in NYSC. The only snag is the fact that the Nigerian political elite have spent five decades of national life and billions to prevent the emergence of precisely the sort of citizen that one year of post-graduation grounding in civics can produce. The Nigerian citizen without civics is the best gift of his political leaders. And this gift is the cliched gift that keeps on giving.

From the foregoing, however, these *causative* factors are by no means exhaustive and/or undisputable determinants of youth's involvement in electoral violence in Nigeria; nevertheless, they play critical role in our understanding of the contributory factors to electoral violence. Critically, youth unemployment and underemployment, poverty, and *acquisitive* political ideology can be identified as some of the major motivating factors for youth's involvement in electoral violence. More so, in Nigeria, the phenomenon of youth unemployment has assumed a serious dimension. It is a crisis well recognised. Premised on this, however, frustrated and poverty-stricken unemployed youths can easily be manipulated to perpetrate electoral violence, in as much as they stand to *gain* (monetarily) in such activity.

Implications of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Politically motivated violence has constituted a setback to the Nigerian social, economic and political development (Kukah, 2010). Electoral violence has a negative impact on the individual, family, the polity and the nation as a whole (Badejo and Stephens, 2012). It has negative consequences on human development, destroys social relationships, scares away investors, and retards all ramifications of development in the country (Muhammed (2005).

Omotola (2008) argued that electoral violence is a major source of democratic instability with palpable threats of deconsolidation. According to Rotberge (2007) cited in Achebe (2012:245) there is also the unpleasant factor of the violence associated with partisan politics that is often designed to keep balanced, well educated, fair-minded Nigerians away. So it can be said that the masses – the followership we are concerned about – don't really have a choice of leadership, because there's not true democratic process.

Similarly, Okafor (2015) also opined that violent electoral activities scare away a good number of the electorate from participating in the process. It gives the few evil politicians the opportunity to vote or declare their unpopular candidates winners where the opposite should have been the case. Violence is destructive to both men and women. The situation becomes more critical as a good number of the voters in Nigeria are women. Violence forces people to stay away from exercising their franchise as they prefer to stay indoors than falling into the deadly hands of the political devils

Ugiagbe (2010) also observed that electoral violence leads to political instability, insecurity and cycle of violence. Usman (2009) submitted that electoral violence affects the credibility of the democratic system, erodes the credibility of the rule of law and threatens the continued existence of Nigeria as a nation (Badejo and Stephens, 2012).

Again, Omotola (2008) concluded that electoral violence, irrespective of diverse motives, actors, targets and forms, has been counter-productive in Africa's new democracies (including Nigeria). Both in the short and the long run, violence threatens the democratic foundations of competition, participation and legitimacy. It also brings about the marginalisation of the people in politics.

From the foregoing, the negative effects of electoral violence cannot be overemphasized. They are multidimensional. Electoral violence negatively affects the social, economic, political, as well as security development of the nation. Socially, electoral violence weakens, destroys social relationships and interactions among people in community, especially when they have different political affiliations. Economically, electoral violence retards business and economic activities, and discourages foreign investors. This in turn affects the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Foreign Exchange reserves of the nation.

The political dimension of the effects of electoral violence can be seen in terms of discouraging popular participation in electoral processes. Electoral violence discourages many eligible citizens from participating actively in political activities. Also, electoral violence projects the image of the country in a bad manner to the outside world. This in turn affects the diplomatic relations of the country with other countries of the world. Finally, in terms of the security dimension of the negative effects of electoral violence, electoral violence constitutes threats to lives and property of not only the electoral actors, but the citizenry as a whole.

The Way Forward

Based on the aforementioned *causes* and implications of electoral violence, the following recommendations have been advanced as the way forward:

- Creating jobs opportunities for the teeming unemployed youths. Governments at all levels should promote small and medium scales enterprises through favourable business environments such as low interest loan schemes, availability of electricity, good transport system among others.

- Civil society organisations, religious bodies, relevant government agencies, etc, all have roles to play in organizing and facilitating educative and informative programmes for the youths and the electorate in general.

- Perpetrators of electoral violence should be prosecuted and punished accordingly. This will enhance deterrence.

- There is a need to intensify the anti-corruption war, because corruption is rife and constitutes a serious threat to social, economic and political development of the nation.

- Government should be transparent, accountable, trust worthy, while security agencies should be more proactive and more professional in handling election violence. In other words, security agencies should be impartial; they should not take sides with any political party.

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Conclusion

This paper is about youth and electoral violence in Nigeria. It examined the causes of electoral violence with respect to assessing the predisposing factors for youth involvement in it, as well as the implication of electoral violence. Electoral violence is any act, physically, psychologically and/ or structurally carried out by any individual, or group of individuals, which is aimed at subverting the electoral process. Several factors and implications of electoral violence have been identified. Some of the causative factors of electoral violence include but not limited to poverty, youth unemployment, corruption, uneven distribution of collective resources, ignorance, god fatherism, poor governance and lack of transparency, culture of impunity, small arms proliferation, among others. The implications of electoral violence are multidimensional. Electoral violence negatively affects the social, economic, political, as well as security development of the nation. Electoral violence scares away credible people from participating in the electoral process, destroys social relationships, retards business and economic activities; threatens the lives and properties of the citizenry, projects the image of the country in a bad manner, as well as jeopardising the country's diplomatic relations with the outside world.

Furthermore, there is a need for eradicating youth unemployment and poverty which are some of the major causes of youths' involvement in electoral violence. By creating more jobs for unemployed youths, it is expected that they will be fully engaged in legitimate works, and will also be able to cater for their basic needs. Consequently, a legitimately engaged youth will have less motivation to become 'a tool in the hands of politicians' to disrupt electoral process. This is premised on the common saying that 'idle hands are the devil's workshop'. Conclusively, the implementation of the recommendations given in this work is crucial in prevention of electoral violence. For instance, swift prosecution and punishment of the culprits of electoral violence will send signals to would-be perpetrators, either individual or political parties.

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