

Electoral Conflict and Challenges of Insecurity in Nigeria: An Evaluation of the 2015 Gubernatorial Election in Imo State

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Abstract

This study focused on electoral conflict and challenges of insecurity in Nigeria. It evaluates the conflicts emanating from the 2015 governorship election in Imo state and its impact on the security of lives and property of the people. The methodology for the study was the qualitative method which dwells on historical and analytical techniques. It used secondary source of data collection like textbooks, journals etc. The study adopted the political economy approach as a framework for analysis. It is the contention of the study that electoral conflict constitutes a bane to the stability of the nations. It equally reveals that electoral conflict is a consequence of the primitive accumulation of resources by the political elite. The study showed that elections in Nigeria create more anxieties and fear in such area as security of life and property. It is on the basis of this startling revelation that the study recommended for value reorientation among political elite for the survival and sustenance of peace in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Election, Violence, Insecurity, Democracy, Elite.*

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Background to the Study

Elections in most African countries are characterized by uncertainties, due to the possibility of election related conflict. Election related conflict may take place at different stages of the electoral process; before, during and after election. Universally, election is regarded as the heart of representative democracy. Elections in Nigeria have witnessed abusive use of the incumbency factor by our political leaders and “party-in-power. This phenomenon had continued to threaten the electoral and democratization process leading to electoral conflicts (inter and intra). Elections in Nigeria have been generally described as a do or die affair, where every contestant tries at all cost to undo his perceived political rival. Consequently, cases of arson, high profile killings of opponents, maiming of unsuspecting electorates, snatching of electoral materials and general destruction of properties always becomes the order of the day.

Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which has witnessed five general elections (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015) is yet to show profound evidence of a growing democracy and stable polity. All these elections were marked with conflicts just as their processes and end products encountered credibility and legitimacy crisis. The electoral process offers the widest and best avenue to do this, given the premium it places on popular participation. It then follows that electoral process must be of high integrity, measured in terms of its degree of adherence to the electoral laws, openness, transparency, accountability, competition and participation. Any attempt to pervert the electoral process against these virtues may serve to engender security of the state. The import of this is that electoral conflict is multidimensional, having physical, psychological and structural dimensions. The physical elements include assassination of political opponents, arson, looting, shooting, kidnapping and hostage taking, forceful disruption of campaign , rallies, armed raids on voting and collating centres, including snatching of ballot papers and boxes at gun point. 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 or text messages. The structural dimension of electoral conflict 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 politicization of security and electoral officials (Nwolise, 2007).

Conflict ridden situations have historically featured in all elections conducted in Nigeria since the 1950s. Hence, issues surrounding the electioneering processes potentially relate to violence and violation of the rights of individuals (Abbass, 2008). Thus, rather than serve as a means and a process of exercising legitimate political rights, elections in Nigeria since independence, turned out to be serious political liability, causing serious political turmoil and threatening the survival of the nation. It is against this background that this study becomes germane to evaluate the implication of electoral conflict and its security challenges on the sustainability of current democratic experiment in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Statement of the Problem

One of the greatest threats to the fourth Republic in Nigeria is security challenge posed by electoral conflict. It is a major source of democratic instability with palpable threats of deconsolidation. This is complicated by the absence/paucity of democrats, with democratic mindset, to play the game of politics according to established rules. This has tended to aggravate the security issue facing the country. It has threatened the prospects of democratic stability and consolidation. Most recent examples includes disputed and violent elections across the country during the party primaries across the states (APC, PDP, APGA) etc where the attendant search for redress through official and unofficial responses has, altogether, been largely trapped in deepening contradictions. There were manifestations of electoral conflict that have assumed an unprecedented magnitude and changing form and character with negative implications on security issues of the nation. The elections of 1999, 2003 and 2007 have been accused of unprecedented widespread conflict. In the 2011 and 2015 elections, there were cases of electoral violence across the six geopolitical zones. The electoral conflict started with ruinous campaigns as violent clashes ensued among supporters of different political parties which led to the demise of several people while many sustained injuries of various degrees (Abah & Nwokwu, 2015).

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative technique; historical and analytical technique. It uses archival materials, periodic publications, journals, relevant books on the subject matter, newspapers, magazines, official documents, seminar papers, academic research papers, libraries and the internet.

Conceptual Clarification

Election

Election is seen as the process of choice agreed upon by a group of people which enables them to select one of a few people out of many to occupy authority positions. (Onah & Chukwu, 2017). Abah and Nwokwu, 2015) asserts that election is the process through which eligible electorates cast their votes in order to choose from among political contestants that vie for various elective positions for the purpose of sound leadership, quality representation and good governance. Election is the modern form of political recruitment by a larger number of people for the selection of a fewer number who assume legislative and executive powers of the state. It is indeed the life wire of modern democracy. Election into state power positions is usually performed under the umbrellas of political parties. Election is further defined as a process by which the electorates of a country vote directly to elect their leaders in either legislative or executive arm of government, or choice of selecting a leader by people's vote.

Electoral Conflict

In this study, electoral violence or conflict are used interchangeably. Basically it has to do with all forms of organized 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 (Albert, 2007). Also, Lehouncq (2003) opines that electoral violence or conflict is a form, perhaps the most deadly form of electoral fraud, which has been defined as “clandestine efforts to shape election results. This can be perpetrated both by the incumbent power holder to avoid defeat and by opposition elements seeking to wrest political power from the governing party. In most cases, electorate conflict is targeted at electoral stakeholders such as voters, candidates, party agents, election workers, media and monitors, electoral information such as registration data, vote results, ballots, campaign materials, for example, vehicles and public address systems, electoral facilities such as polling and counting stations, and electoral events, including campaign rallies (Hoglund, 2006).

Giving the fact that electoral conflict can be employed by both the ruling and opposition forces, coupled with the wide array of its likely targets as enunciated above, electoral conflict no doubt constitutes a major source of security challenges and instability in Nigeria.

Insecurity

The concept of insecurity connotes different meanings such as absence of safety; danger, hazard, uncertainty, lack of protection and lack of safety. Beland (2005), sees insecurity as a state of fear or anxiety due to absence or lack of protection. Insecurity denotes prevalence of physical or potential threat of fear, anxiety or danger detrimental to the safety and survival of individuals, groups and state at large. The foregoing definitions of insecurity underscore a major point that those affected by insecurity are not only uncertain or unaware of what would happen but they are also vulnerable to threats and dangers when they occur. Insecurity is defined as a breach of peace, and security, whether historical, religious, ethno-regional civil, social, economic and political that contributes to recurring conflicts, and leads to wanton destruction of lives and property.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Marxist political economy approach by Karl Marx in 1859 to explain the theoretical premise of this work. The approach assumes that there is an interface between the economic substructure and the political superstructure. In the views of Ryndina and Chernikov (1985) cited in Asogwa (2009), political economy is fundamentally concerned with the analysis of the economic roles of the state, its impact upon the economic system and its socio-economic consequences. Thus, the central role of the state, in the political economy of the post-independence Nigeria was what set the patterns of politics and the violence in various parts of the country. The central role of the state in the economy made it to be lucrative. The Nigerian state therefore became the centre of all economic activities. It controls enormous resources as a result of its role in the Nigerian society. The lucrative character of the Nigerian state emanated from the employment of the state as an instrument of wealth creation or means of production by the emerging bourgeoisie class in the immediate post-independent Nigeria (Asogwa, 2009).

The lucrative character of the state was to set the tone for the Nigerian politics and the pervasive culture of violence associated with it. The input of this theory lies in the fact that the fierce struggle to secure political power in Nigeria is hinged on the fact that such power is a sure means for the allocation of national wealth. Winning political struggle implies winning unlimited access to wealth and losing means unimaginable access to wealth. Against this backdrop, it is not surprising to witness enormous deployment of all available means to ensure victory in election. Therefore, electoral conflict such as thuggery, rigging, killing, assassination, maiming become fashionable in the bid to control the very lucrative state power in Nigeria.

Consequently, people whom they want to lead are killed in their numbers and properties worth billions of Naira are destroyed with impunity. Desperation for political power degenerates into electoral conflicts of various dimensions. This has been identified as the bane of sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

Electoral conflict/Violence in Nigeria: the case of 2015 Gubernatorial Election in Imo State

The case of 2015 governorship election, in Imo State. Nigeria marched into another political electoral transition in 2015. Nnonyelu (2015) stated that there were palpable fears and anxiety across the length and breadth of the country as to the possible scenario that the nation will find itself after the 2015 general elections. However, in the build up to the elections which were rescheduled to hold on March 28 and 11 April, 2015, all the candidates of political parties contesting the governorship election in Imo-state signed a peace pact committing themselves, their followers and parties to a code of conduct as contained in the Electoral Act of 2010 as amended. It was the expectation of every Imolites that they would remain peaceful in all their activities before, during and after the elections. Notwithstanding the above concerted effort to ensure peaceful elections in the period under review, the conduct was marred with cases of violent across the state. Daily Trust, (2017) reported that the state House of Assembly and Governorship election in Onuimo Local Government were marred with violence. Also in Ohaji/Egbema local government, Oru East and Oguta were characterized with violent. The report had it that suspected thugs three in number were shot and killed by soldiers while trying to escape with ballot boxes at Onuimo Local government area.

Another violence was recorded at Mbutu in Aboh-Mbaise Local Government. The Senior Special Assistant (SSA) media to Governor Rochas Okorocha of the All Progressive congress (APC) was battered by security agents and arrested on the orders and directives of the Peoples Democratic Party's candidate and former Deputy Speaker of the House of Representative RT Hon. Emeka Ihedioha. The election in the area was characterized with voters' intimidation and molestation on supporters of the two leading political parties to the election, the APC and the PDP (Horn, 2016).

Speaking to newsmen shortly after casting his vote at Ogboko, the Governor Rochas Okorocha condemned the violence and snatching of boxes in the area (Daily Trust, 2017). In a similar development, the election witness violence in various wards across Mbaitoli

Local Government Area. These unlawful conducts was caused by desperate politicians using the instrumentality of government to rig the election in favour of a particular candidate. The act was resisted and on the process violence erupted (Daily Trust, 2017). There were hate speech and the denigration of opponents which heighten tensions and increased the conflict situation at various polling unit across the state.

In a nutshell, the election dashed the hope and aspirations of the generality of the citizens. In fact, it seems to have created more anxieties in such areas as security of life and property, electoral violence, and the state democratic experiment is faltering. Above all, widespread irregularities and unprecedented electoral violence prompted the declaration of Imo gubernatorial election result inconclusive.

Evaluation of Electoral Conflict and its Security Challenges in Nigeria

Electoral violence in Nigeria's fourth republic experience has shown that there is high incidence of violence. Elections in Nigeria have not made a clear departure from the kind of elections we witnessed in the first republic which were characterized by rancor, acrimony, ethnocentrism, parochialism, violence and sundry irregularities (Abah & Nwokwu, 2015). The disturbing aspect of the 2015 general elections was the unbridled use of hate speeches against opponents during electioneering campaigns. Most of the speeches at campaign rallies were unarguably not issue based; rather they were more or less directed towards character assassination of the opponents.

Troublingly, not only is democracy threatened in the country, but Nigeria's corporate existence is also endangered by the activities of many influential public officials who seem to be above the law. The violence which often accompanies political activities is simply act meant to break through the power caste system, to obtain and utilize power not for the classical reasons for which powers are sought but for self. The attitude of "winner takes all" or zero-sum game makes the contest fierce because of what politics has turn out to be. It is now an access to primitive accumulation. This explicates why potential contestants prepares for election war. This paper looks at the crude nature of politics that Nigerian politicians and their parties play in the country is evolving democracy. The nature of political life among Nigerian parties is undoubtedly uncivilized. As unequivocally observed by Liebowitz and Ibrahim (2013), civility is one quality that is largely absent in political party life. The most important aspect of the internal functioning of political parties in Nigeria since 1978 is that they have a persistent tendency to factionalise and fractionalize. As people go into politics to seek power and money, the battle for access is very intense and destructive. Thugs, violence and betrayal are often the currency for political part engagement. Indeed, the period leading to each election is marked by the assassination of party leaders and contestants for various offices. The reality is that the political Godfathers use money and violence to control the electoral process. They decide on party nomination and campaign outcomes and when candidates try to steer an independent to course, violence or conflict becomes an instrument to deal with them. The result is that they raise the level of electoral violence and make free and fair elections difficult.

Conclusion

Electoral processes in the history of Nigeria's democratic governance have continued to be marred by extraordinary displays of rigging, dodgy, “do or die” affair, ballot snatching at gun points, violence and acrimony, thuggery, boycotts, threats and criminal manipulations of votes' list, brazen falsification of election results, the use of security agencies against political opponents and the intimidation (Bekoe, 2011). It has been revealed that electoral violence, irrespective of diverse motives, actors, targets and forms, has been counter – productive to the nation. Both in the short and the long run, electoral conflict threatens the democratic foundations of competition, participation and legitimacy. It also brings about the marginalization of the people in politics.

Suggestions

Arising from the study, the following are recommended:

- i. There should be a review of the issue of governance and accountability as an imperative to hold political leaders accountable while in office.
- ii. There should be a measure of re-orientating the ruling elites on the values of good governance.
- iii. There should be the political will to punish violators of electoral process.
- iv. There is need for value re-orientation for the survival and sustenance of peace and Nigerian democracy.

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