



Democratization and Electoral Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between democratization and electoral violence in Nigeria, paying particular attention to the nature of the organization of electoral violence and its impact on democratic development. It argues that the organization of electoral violence in Nigeria is primarily party-based and expresses a vertical relationship between party leaders/political elites and a diverse set of actors such as cult groups, state security personnel, university teachers and the grassroots that is grounded in the interactions of patronage and the commodification of violence. Accordingly, violent electoral politics raises questions of conflict bargaining by the different actors as they struggle to either capture power, the state or the 'dividends' of democracy by coercion. Overall, the article concludes that electoral violence has negative implications for the growth, development and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democratization, Political parties, Electoral violence, Bargaining, Elites & Cult groups

Introduction

The convergence of democratization and violence during the process of transition remains a critical issue in the literature on democratic transition. Zielinski (1999) argues that throughout history, the internal process of democratization has been more frequently characterized by conflict and violence than peace (see also Mansfield and Snyder 2012; Mansfield and Snyder (2009). One key observation is that the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule often opens bottled-up spaces, leading to agitations for more inclusive politics as well as resistance that tend to defend the status quo (Obi 2007). At the international level,

the export of liberal democracy abroad creates internal contradictions that often trigger political conflicts including civil wars. The American intervention in Iraq in 2003 and the Non-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invasion of Libya in 2011 to impose liberal democracy from above and the internal political upheavals they generated are some of the often cited examples in recent times (see Baron et al, 2019).

Interestingly, at the core of the democratic peace theory is that democracy promotes peace, an idea that is historically rooted in the Kantian peace, and has more recently

been reinforced by Francis Fukumaya's end of history of hypothesis. The basic argument is that the more societies become liberal and democratize, the less violence they are. Nevertheless, the path to democratization does not necessarily run smoothly (Cederman, Hug and Krebs, 2010, p. 377), raising the question: What explains the dynamics of democratization and violence in most countries undergoing democratic transitions?

The existing literature points to two influential theoretical perspectives. First, some analyses question the legacy of military rule and argue that strategic ambitions of the military to pursue and protect their core interests in post-military rule are key factors that trigger internal violence during democratic transitions. This body of literature speaks to the political agent thesis where actors are said to manipulate the transition process to gain strategic advantage in ways that inevitably result in violent conflicts (Christensen, Nguyen, and Sexton 2019, Obi, 2007; Crescenzi, 1999; Zielinski, 1999; Marks, 1992). Myanmar is an illustrative example, especially with reference to the military elites as agents of destabilization (Christensen, Nguyen, and Sexton 2019).

The second theoretical paradigm identifies structural conditions of economic development, socio-economic inequality and the nature of state institutions as important factors that may determine whether the process of democratic transition will be successful including being peaceful or violent (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi, 1996; Huntington, 1991; Lipset 1959). A closer look at both set of theoretical explanations shows a dynamic interaction of structures and actors in understanding the reality of democratization

conflicts and the possibility of violence during democratic transitions.

In Nigeria, the process of transiting to liberal democracy after British colonial rule in 1960 has been fraught with political violence that undermines political stability and the enjoyment of democratic peace. The regional elections crisis of 1964 in Western Nigeria, particularly the internal party crises within the Action Group were to spread to other parts of the country with significant impact on the conduct and outcome of the subsequent general elections of 1964/65. In fact, the fraudulent and violent nature of the 1965 general elections has been dialectically linked to the military coups of 1966, which eventually brought the first Republic to an abrupt end. Contradictorily, the problem of electoral violence has persisted and even intensified in spite of efforts at electoral reforms such as the Justice Uwais Report, which recommended amongst others the establishment of Special Electoral Offences Commission to prosecute electoral offenders. Recently, in 2021, the National Assembly amended the Electoral Act, making provisions for direct party primaries with a view to promoting inclusive participation of party members and addressing some of the challenges associated with Godfatherism, lack of internal party democracy and the increasing role of political parties in electoral malpractices.

However, President Muhammadu Buhari rejected the Bill, arguing that it denied political parties the right and autonomy to choose between direct and indirect primaries in the nomination or election of party flagbearers. While the constitutional right of the president to decline assent to the Bill was not in question, the predominant perception in Nigeria then was

that the Bill would have contributed significantly to strengthening the democratization process and reducing the incidence of violent electoral politics in which political parties, state and other non-state actors have been heavily involved in their organization and execution.

The objective of this article is to examine the nature of the organization of electoral violence in Nigeria and its implications for the development and consolidation of democracy in the country. It doing so, it seeks to extend the scholarly debate on electoral violence beyond actor-structure analysis, thereby contributing to the literature on democratization and political violence. The key questions addressed are: What are the motivating factors in electoral violence in Nigeria? How is electoral violence organized in Nigeria and how does it impact the process of democratic development and democratic consolidation?

To successfully respond to above questions and proffer effective solutions, the article is divided into five parts starting with the introduction. Section two interrogates the meaning of democratization and how it is linked to violence. Following this section is the presentation of the background to violent electoral politics in Nigeria. The section explores the historical dynamics the nature of actors and how they have evolved and shaped electoral violence in the country. The next section explains the nature of the organization of electoral violence and how it impacts democratic consolidation while the fifth section concludes and offers policy prescription.

Defining democratization

Democratization is the transition from authoritarian rule to a more inclusive politics that promotes broader political

participation of the people in governance processes. As experienced by a number of countries since the first, second and third waves of liberal democratization, the democratization process involves dismantling structures of dictatorship and autocracy with a view to institutionalizing democratic culture where the people emerge as the means to, and beneficiaries of democratic governance (Crescenzi, 1999).

When viewed from the transition from authoritarianism to liberal democratization, some have raised the question: Is Africa democratising (Ake, 1996). Some have also argued that liberal democratization represents a Western project aimed at the reproduction and consolidation of a liberal democratic world order in a capitalist dominated global system (Cheru 2012, p. 267). For these radical scholars, the experience of the developing societies with democratization is particularly problematic. It is noted that the tendency to associate multiparty politics and periodic conduct of elections with democratization does not adequately capture the very essence of democracy. In a detailed analysis, Ake (1992) highlights the conceptual distinction between procedural and substantive democracy in order to show that democratization goes beyond the formal establishment of liberal democratic institutions that have no real value to the people. Accordingly, the nature of the democratization process in the third world can be conceived more or less as the transition to civilian rule where emergent democratic institutions of government merely serve as labels of democracy. In this context, ordinary people rarely influence the decisions, actions and policies of the emergent ruling elites and democratic institutions to positively affect their daily life (Cranenburgh, 2011, p.445). Consequently,

it has been observed that the democratization process in Africa amounts to the democratization of disempowerment, which ends up devaluing democracy. This is because the nature of the practice of liberal democracy is conflated with democratization (Ake, 1992, p.33). In fact, some such as Obiagu (2021) has described the African process of democratization as creeping autocratisation that does not serve as a liberating project. Given this character of the democratic transitions, which compromise the rights and liberties of the people, the dialectical link between democratization and political violence in African social formations appears inevitable. But, what then is political violence and its subset of electoral violence?

The Concept and Nature of Political and Electoral Violence

The concept of political violence is very broad. It is not amenable to a single generally accepted definition, partly because of the contestations surrounding not only what is 'political', but also what is 'violence' (Della Porta 1995, p. 2). Some argue, for example, that political violence may include such "vast phenomena as riots, guerrilla warfare, insurgencies, terrorism, cyber warfare, rebellion, and civil wars" (see Claire Dowling and Vanessa Meier, 2018; Kalyvas, 2013). Beyond these macro expressions, other analyses argue that electoral violence constitutes a micro form of political violence (Igwe and Amadi, 2021). By distinction, electoral violence includes the assassination of political opponents and voters, attacks on electoral personnel, arson, looting, ballot-stealing, ballot box snatching and armed attacks on voting and collation centres (Nwolise, 2007; Omotola 2010). The nature and manifestations of electoral violence could also be physical and psychological in which case both force and

non-lethal means are inherently constituted. In this article, the focus is on electoral violence and the point to note is that electoral violence has been inseparably intertwined with the democratic transition process in Nigeria since the first republic of 1960-1967. What seems to have changed is the nature of actors involved in the organization and execution of electoral and political violence.

Democratization and Violent Electoral Politics in Nigerian Political History

Election violence has been an integral part of Nigeria's transition to democracy since political independence in the 1960s. Perhaps, the only exceptions are the 1959 and 1999 general elections, which were organized by the outgoing British colonial authorities and the Nigerian military government respectively, and to some extent, the June 12 1993 elections which had been generally adjudged free, fair and peaceful. Accordingly, the process of instituting liberal democracy in Nigeria, beginning with the first Republic in 1960 to-date, has been marked by violent political contestations, expressed in the competitive struggles by political parties to out rig one another by coercion. This was evident in the Western regional election crisis of 1964. In that election, citizens and voters were killed. As Hart (1993) has noted, "...the regional elections in Western Nigeria were blatantly rigged and provoked serious unrest" (p.397). The subsequent general elections of 1964/65 were also mired in violence, involving "wide scale murder, kidnapping and arson as well as gross irregularities" (Olakunle, et. al 2019, p. 41). Some have argued that intensity and impact of the violence associated with the 1964 elections contributed to the military takeover of government in 1966, which eventually led to

the collapse of the first democratic experiment in postcolonial Nigeria. Similarly, the 1979 and 1983 elections respectively were characterized by violence and massive rigging. As Hart (1993) argued in respect of the nature of rigging among the various political parties in the 1983 elections, the methods and degree of rigging merely varied according to the strengths of the parties measured in the balance between resource availability and thuggery and the ability to demonstrate violence and manipulate election results. Making a specific and comparative analysis of the role of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Unity Party of Nigeria in the rigging of the election, Hart (1993, p 404) has this to say: "Obviously both the NPN and the UPN were strong enough to rig more in some places than in others. But the NPN out rigged the UPN."

It should be noted rigging and violence are not mutually exclusive. Both are strongly correlated and they reinforce each other. Indeed, what have remained constant in the history of violent electoral politics in Nigeria is the changing nature of actors and the mode of orchestrating elections rigging and violence. Unlike in the 1980s where the major instruments for intimidating voters and rigging elections were primarily machetes (Hazen and Horner, 2007; Lubeck, Vines, 2005; Joab-Peterside, 2005), and the Southwest region of Nigeria was particularly prone to electoral violence, today, as in the 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 general election, sophisticated weapons, cult groups and military personnel have been mobilized to win elections by force rather than votes across different parts of the country. There is also the observation that Nigeria's democratic evolutionary process has been characterized by identity contestations and ethnically-inspired

electoral violence to the extent that liberal democracy is conceived as a threat to national stability and peace in the country (Ochonu, 2020). To some extent, the violent nature of Nigeria's democratization experience has questioned the democratic peace theory, while also implicating the need to understand how the organization of electoral violence affects the dynamics and gradual institutionalization of violent political culture in Nigeria.

Actors and Processes in the Organization of Electoral Violence

Daxecker (2019) acknowledges that the literature on electoral violence in Nigeria does not adequately capture how electoral violence is organized. Leveraging on Daxecker's (2019) observation, this article contends that the starting point for analysis is to note that the nature of the organization of electoral violence is constantly in a flux. Second, the organization of electoral violence takes on different and complex forms in which the actors can be described as being involved in a network of violence (Iwilade, 2014). This complexity and changing forms of actors have found expression, in recent times, in the interactions of political elites, lecturers, non-state armed cult groups and armed state security personnel in the rigging of election results that often lead to the outbreak of electoral violence. In the 2019 general elections, particularly during the National Assembly and Governorship Elections in Rivers State, one Dr. Ferry Gberegbe, a lecturer of the Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic, Bori who worked as a People's Democratic Party (PDP) agent was killed by the Special Anti-Armed Robbery Squad (SARS) team deployed to provide security for the election. It was alleged that the SARS, a specialized state police institution was working for political elites of the All

Peoples Congress (APC) in Rivers State to ensure that the party wins the election. It is interesting to note that Rivers State is one of the states in Nigeria that is endemically characterized by violent electoral politics in which different armed groups have been effectively mobilized and used to secure electoral victories for political parties (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

But, generally, the shift to the competitive deployment of both non-state actors and state security institutions such as the Army and Police personnel in the rigging of elections results reflect the complexity and growing intensity of violent electoral politics in Nigeria within the context of armed politics (Nyiayaana 2019). In fact, there is virtually no general elections in Nigeria, starting from 2015 that soldiers have not been used to commit electoral violence in ways that demonstrate both the privatization of state security institutions and the might of political elites. In Ekiti, Ondo and Rivers States in the 2015 general elections as well in Rivers State in the 2019 elections soldiers acted as agents masterminding electoral malpractices for the ruling political parties. The Abonnema case in the 2019 general elections in Rivers state effectively illustrates how both ruling and opposition parties depend on both state and non-state armed actors to influence the outcome of electoral competition with implications for violence. For example, in the February 2019 presidential election the battle appeared to have been well fought in Abonnema, where election turned out to be war. The Nigerian army, which were deployed by the APC-led federal government openly clashed with cultists in a gun battle, leading to death of a soldier and 37 people in the Abonnema community. In May 2020, Governor Nyesom Wike compensated the families of those who lost

their lives during the violent elections with N450m (National Network, 2020, p.5).

Furthermore, throughout Nigeria, the arming and sponsoring of youth as political thugs by politicians to achieve their political and electoral ambitions is central to the organization of electoral violence in the country. As Dr. Murtala Rufai recently revealed in a lecture titled, "I am a Bandit", contemporary armed bandits who terrorize Zamfara state today can be traced to the 2011 general elections. According to Rufai, youth who were armed and used by politicians in the state as political thugs to achieve their ambitions in the 2011 general elections and were abandoned thereafter, later transformed into bandits in the state (Olugbemi, 2021).

Another of form of linkages inherent in the organization of electoral violence in Nigeria is the influencing of the appointment of Vice-Chancellors (VCs) of publicly-owned Nigerian Universities by political elites of the ruling political party. Traditionally or conventionally, VCs are appointed to provide academic leadership and administration of the University systems. In Nigeria, however, VCs also play a role in elections management such that ruling political elites that appoint them have exploited their position for targeted rigging of elections results. Both governing and opposition parties in Nigeria exploit this strategy to advantage. At the state level, ruling political elites such as state governors appoint loyal party faithful as VCs in anticipation of their emerging new roles in electoral malpractices.

It is important to stress that as part of the ad-hoc staff who manages elections in Nigeria; VCs are appointed by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as returning Officers.

These returning officers are saddled with the responsibility of collating and declaring the results of candidates. VCs are mostly the returning officers who declare the results of presidential elections in each of the 36 states of the federation as well governorship elections results. Generally, VCs and academics are preferred by the INEC as Returning Officers in National Assembly elections. Accordingly, given the central role of the VCs as Returning Officers, it is difficult to emerge as a VC in public Universities in Nigeria without a strong affiliation and demonstrable partisanship commitments to a political party. This recent trend has not only led to the penetration of party politics and the politicization of local governance in the ivory tower, but also the institutionalization of corruption and violence associated with conducting and rigging elections in the country. Apart from the VCs, University teachers are generally involved in the conduct of elections in Nigeria as Presiding Officers, Collation officers, Party Agents and their involvement in electoral malpractices constitutes a threat to the consolidation of democracy (The Guardian, 2019, p.1). These academics are used by politicians to commit electoral fraud against the people. In 2021, a Professor from Akwa-Ibom state University, Prof. Peter Ogban was convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for 10 years in 2021 for involving in electoral malpractices. Prof. Peter Ogban served as Chief Returning officer in the Akwa Ibom North Senatorial District election.

One key feature of Nigeria's democratic politics is that election cycles go beyond the conventional understanding of a period set aside for citizens to decide the winners and losers in electoral competitions. Instead, elections present an important opportunity

for rent seeking by a diversity of actors whose negative roles affect the nature of violence and influence who wins at the poll. These actors, as already noted, include both state and non-state actors who engage in the organization of electoral violence for private gains, which may include capturing political power or the dividends of democracy by force. Indeed, a basic feature of the organization of electoral violence in Nigeria is that it is primarily party-based and expresses a vertical relationship between party leaders/elites and a diverse set of actors such as cult groups, state security personnel, university teachers and the grassroots in such a way that patronage and the commodification of violence interact and are sustained. And at the grassroots level, the nature of the organization of electoral violence, which centres on the ordinary people including cult groups increasingly draw attention to the evolving nature, complexities and dynamics of political violence in Nigeria.

The Grassroots and the Nature of the Organization of Electoral Violence

The involvement of the ordinary people in the organization of electoral violence at the grassroots level takes different forms and is not new as well. These include but are limited to the exchange of voting cards by prospective voters for cash or food stuffs such as garri, rice, salts or clothes either the night preceding election or on Election Day. This form of exchanges has been defined as stomach infrastructure, a concept that was introduced by a former Ekiti State governor. The concept of stomach infrastructure makes more sense, especially its relationship to the logic of electoral violence. For example, following Galtung's (1969) conceptual framework of structural violence, which differentiates between direct and indirect violence, vote buying (political

corruption), can be defined as a form of indirect violence that also reproduces physical violence in the sense that it undermines the will of the people to freely choose their leaders. Vote buying or exchange of votes for food stuffs whittles down the democratic value of elections by substituting free choice with coercion in which money or food stuffs act as the coercive agent. The logic and contradictions of vote buying, therefore, entrench indirect violence that kills more than physical violence. This is because once the political elites assume power, they no longer care about the voters whether in terms of policies, development infrastructures or projects that will transform their social and economic conditions, a situation that ultimately result in political disempowerment and gradual death of citizens. This point is well highlighted in the section dealing with the implications of electoral violence for citizens, democratic development and democratic sustainability.

But, beyond the active involvement of the ordinary people in stomach infrastructure, there is an evolving new form of electoral violence that is executed by grassroots-based youths within the context of armed cult groups, especially in the South-South region of the country. It takes the form organized criminality and rent-seeking where cult groups dominant in a particular community demand money from party leaders and political elites on Election Day or the day before election. Such money is paid to the cultists by the political parties from a variety of sources including what has been conceptually defined as “security money” (Onapajo, Francis and Okeke-Uzodike 2015, p. 1).

It is worthy to note that in Nigeria, local politicians and party leaders have access to what is called security money, which is

provided by political parties. This money is structured into party expenses as a response to the competitive struggles by political parties to secure victory at the polls on elections day at all cost. Security money is often distributed and shared to INEC ad-hoc staff and cult groups on Election Day. In most cases, unless the cult boys are given money or ‘settled’, the election will not be conducted in the local wards even in spite of the presence of heavily armed state security personnel due to their violent dispositions. The nature of the organization and expression of this form of violence include the hijacking of electoral materials and forceful detention of ad-hoc INEC staff, and sometimes local party leaders of the ward by the cult groups.

So, apart from being armed and used by as thugs as already noted, cult groups are also transforming into independent actors in such a way that they do not necessarily constitute thugs of local political elites. This is not to argue that the instrumentalisation and mobilization of armed cult groups by politicians to execute violence to win election no longer takes place in rural communities. No, instead, the argument is that armed-cult groups also constitute themselves into an independent structure for mobilizing themselves horizontally for their own share of the national cake on election days.

Consequently, the construction of an image of victimhood based on an analysis of patron-client relationship in which grassroots-based youth cult groups are portrayed as hapless in their use for political violence is inadequate to capture and understand the nature, complex organization and changing dynamics of electoral violence in rural Nigeria. For example, until Don Wani, a notorious cultist was killed in Rivers state, he acted as

independent actor with several networks that negotiate with the highest political bidders (party leaders and political elites) and was crucial in determining the outcome of electoral competitions in the state (Joab-Peterside, Niyiayana and Jackson, 2021).

Implications of Violent Electoral Politics for Citizens and Democratic Consolidation

Election violence affects citizens differently and context matters in terms of the devaluation of democracy. These variations may be expressed by citizens in their level of political participation, attitudes to party politics, voting turn-out, distrust in state institution, interethnic hatred and ethnic polarizations, and declining political knowledge. These consequences have implications for the process of democratic consolidation. Yet, the nature of partisanship commitment to political parties by citizens whether as members or supporters affect variations in political participation. In Nigeria, despite the growing intensity of violence that characterizes each election cycle in the country, members of different political parties continue to be involved in party politics. The nature of partisanship to political parties is, therefore, central to understanding the divergence in political attitudes of citizens and the dynamics of democratic institutionalization. However, in order to have a better understanding of the impact of electoral violence on citizens' participation and democratic consolidation, there is need to highlight both physical and structural dimensions of electoral violence.

As noted earlier, by the inherent logic of vote buying, it is difficult for voters to engage in the process of electoral punishment of political elites who seek re-election after misbehaving in the first tenure. Not the least because once in power, ruling political elites use their position to

accumulate wealth and acquire more violent resources such as armed cult groups and state security personnel as private armies and instrument for securing votes by force in the next election. This results in the logic of the militarization of elections in the country.

On the other hand, physical violence arising from killings during, before and after elections or the destruction of property deter people from exercising their franchise including contesting for political offices. In the 2019 general elections, cross-national empirical accounts of both the international and local observer groups, which monitored the elections concluded that deaths caused by election-induced violence in that year were no fewer than 1065, a fatality figure that exceeded 1000 battlefield deaths correlated with the definition of war (Small and Singer, 2001). In fact, elections in Nigeria are synonymous with war or can aptly be described as a do or die affair such that the violent take it by force. At the same time, when this violence is sectional in nature and directed at certain ethnic or religious groups as it was the case of the 2011 post-election in the North, the tendency for ethnic disharmony and polarizations is greater, posing a serious threat to national stability and peace. Electoral violence, therefore, threatens true sense of citizenship in Nigeria, especially, given the multicultural nature and ethnic composition of the country.

Consequently, the combined effects of both physical and structural violence have created widespread political cynicism in the Nigerian populace, making it increasingly difficult to promote and preserve a sense of real national involvement in politics, which is central to the institutionalization and consolidation of democracy. Indeed, there is a widespread perception in Nigeria that

whether the people vote or not, the candidates who have been anointed by their political godfathers must win. To this end, voting is considered a waste of time and resources, and the argument that in a democracy the people determine the fate of candidates during elections is more theoretical than practical in Nigeria. This is because in Nigeria, as in much of Africa, "...incumbents do not fear electoral punishment because they control the levers of power that are critical to determining electoral outcomes, so the theoretical incentive to do right by voters is nullified in reality." (Achunu 2020, p. 7).

Conclusion

Violent electoral politics has defined the history of democratization in Nigeria ever since the first Republic and the actors involved have been shaped by a variety of incentive structures. These incentives rest on capturing the dividends of democracy by

force, dividends defined in terms of getting access to, acquisition or retention of political power, economic survival and stomach infrastructure. The organization of electoral violence is primarily party-based, yet involves both state and non-state actors including university lecturers. At the grassroots level, armed cult groups are a force to reckon with in the organization of electoral violence such as snatching and stuffing ballot boxes to rig election for political parties or their political patrons. In this way, patronage and the commodification of violence interact to sustain electoral violence in Nigeria. Consequently, the presence of the dynamics of commodification of violence in the democratization process in Nigeria compels electronic voting as a key policy solution to electoral violence, which should also be complemented by socio-economic improvements in the life of the people.

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