DEMOCRATIC ISSUES AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract
The unending controversies surrounding the issues of democratic governance and electoral processes in Nigeria has continued to receive increased attention of scholars of diverse backgrounds because of the crucial role it plays in any organized political system. The broad objective of this paper is to determine the effect of electoral violence on Nigeria's democracy, with particular reference to the 2023 general elections. The study was also guided by three specific goals and three research questions. Data for this study were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The study anchored on the theory of 'Social Contract' as a framework for analysis. Findings of the study revealed that the 2023 general elections in Nigeria were grossly characterized by unabated malpractices and deliberate attempts by the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) to further consolidate state power, against the wish of majority of the country's population. It also discovered that the verdict of the Presidential Electoral Petitions Tribunal further dampened the hope of citizens, thus, deepening the already existing attitude of political apathy which is detrimental to the growth of democracy in the country. The study concludes that the 2023 general elections have been adjudged by political and social affairs analysts as the worst election in Nigeria, since the return to the so-called democracy in 1999. It recommends, above all, that Nigerians should advocate for ideal democracy which guarantees a clear-cut separation of power among the various arms of government to ensure checks and balances, and that there is urgent need to embrace electronic voting and electronic transmission of results as a panacea to vote-buying in the country.
Keywords: *Democratic issues, electoral violence, critical analysis, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Nigeria returned to the current democratic system of government in 1999, after long years of military incursion in the political affairs of the state. Following this transition to democraticrule, Nigeria commenced the journey of political and socio-economic transformation. The renewed democratic rule availed the long anticipated opportunities for citizens to engage in public discourse, express their opinions freely, and actively participate in the decision-making processes that would shape the nation's future. Democratic institutions were revitalized, with the legislature, judiciary, and executivebranches functioning independently, serving as checks and balances to ensure the fair and equitable governance of the country (Saka,2014).

After Nigeria's successful transition back to democratic rule in 1999, the country faced persistent issues such as electoral malpractice, violence, voter intimidation, and allegations of fraud in some instances. These issues continue to be areas of concern for the country as it strives for more transparent and credible elections. However, the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria witnessed unfortunate incidents of electoral violence, with allegations pointing towards involvement from the ruling political class (Ibrahim, 2023; Vangurad, 2023).

All over the world, the conduct of periodic and regular elections have been identified as prerequisite for people-oriented governance. This is so because it avails citizens the needed opportunity to demand accountability from the political office holders, and by so doing, exercise some level of control over them. Ediagbonya et al (2023) maintained that:

'The quality of elections is part of the conditions for assessing the level of consolidation of new democracies. Despite the vital place that election holds in democratic government, the organization of free and fair elections remain a critical obstacle for new democracies in West Africa, particularly Nigeria'.

Electoral crisis has been identified as one of the major challenges facing most developing countries of the world, particularly in the Sub-Saharan African region. Its nature tends to vary slightly across climes with attendant consequences for the sustainable development of affected political systems. Over the years, a number of scholars have continually maintained that ours in Nigeria, is but, civil rule, as opposed to democracy. This view largely appears to be evidence-based as 'ideal democracy', by its very nature is rooted in the practice of freedom of speech and expression, the conduct free, fair and credible periodic elections, independence of the judiciary and the press, respect for public opinion and prevalence of the will of the masses.

In the past decades, the vast majority of Nigerian citizens of voting age have continued to embrace voter apathy, despite the persistent calls for greater participation in political activities within the country. The 2023 general elections stands out as one of the most controversial in the Nigerian political history, considering the age-long track record of maladministration – the outcome of which, was more or less not unexpected.

The promises of the President Muhammadu Buhari led administration to ensure free, fair and credible elections, as envisioned in the Nigerian Electoral Act (2022) and a number of other pre-election events which hitherto raised the hopes, expectations and the confidence level of Nigerian citizens, eventually turned-out to be stage-managed, as they were unable to correct the ills associated with the system.

Considering the recent turn of events, one can rightly assert that 'Nigeria is not a democracy', and 'it probably, has never been'.

Prior to the elections, the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Mahmood Yakubu promised Nigerians that the 2023 polls will be the country's "best ever". The Electoral Act of 2022, the polls were expected to feature positively transformational innovations. These include the Bi-modal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), which combines fingerprint and face biometrics to verify voters' identity, and the electronic transmission of results from polling units directly to the INEC Result Viewing. In principle, these tools should help prevent unregistered voters from casting ballots and stop anyone from altering figures being sent to state collation centres and INEC headquarters in Abuja, which accounted for much of the vote rigging in previous elections.

Participation in Nigerian elections had declined over the years, from 52.26 per cent and 69.08 per cent of registered voters in 1999 and 2003, respectively, to 43.65 per cent in 2015 and 34.75 per cent in 2019 – but several factors, as aforementioned, led more people to the polls in 2023. INEC's innovations, which curtailed rigging in recent gubernatorial elections in Anambra, Ekiti and Osun states, have boosted public confidence in the credibility of elections; many more voters now trust that their votes will count. The country's economic slump, seen in record unemployment, double-digit inflation and unprecedented emigration, were also issues to consider in this regard.

Statement of the Problem

The struggle for acquisition, consolidation and use of power in Nigeria, as it the case in many developing countries of the world, has caused more harm than good. A number of factors undermined the outcome of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. These include: the inability of many duly registered voters to access their voters card, malfunctioning of the Bi-modal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), inability of elections to take place in some polling units, on the election day, late arrival of electoral materials and officials, the non-adherence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials to the provisions of the New Electoral Act (2022) relating to electronic transmission of results, issues relating to cash crunch, network hitches, as well as widespread threats and violent attacks on electorates in various parts of the country, under the direct watch of some uniformed security operatives.

Similarly, a number of violent-related cases were recorded before and during the elections. For instance: The South West region was relatively quiet during the first half of February. Peaceful protests were held in Ekiti, Ogun, Ondo and Oyo states over the Central Bank's decision to change the design of Naira notes, price hikes, and fuel shortages. Demonstrations over currency shortages turned violent in

Abeokuta and Ibadan, the capital cities of Ogun, and Oyo states, respectively. In Lagos state, members of the Black Axe cult clashed with Eiye cult members on 1 February. Several people were reportedly wounded as the fighting spread from Etegbin to Ajangbadi in Ojo LGA.

The fragile condition of Nigeria democracy, according to Ediagbonya et al (2023), can be viewed from high profile assassination, clashes between and within a political party, violence in rallies and campaign grounds, thuggery and rigging elections.
In the opinion of Nwolise, (2007:153):

'It is not subject to debate or argument that that nation's democracy has been plagued by electoral violence since independence. It could be said that electoral violence comes in the form of assassination, kidnapping, arson, looting, ballot stealing and armed struggle. Multi-parties in Nigeria have seen politics as a matter of 'do or die affairs". That is why there have been several cases of electoral violence and crisis in Nigeria and it has affected Nigeria in various aspects especially in their socio-economic and political system'.

The resurgence and incursion of military into the politics of defunct French colonies in recent times, which are rooted in electoral malpractices, are not in any way unanticipated. These and more formed the basis for this study.

Literature Review
This section reviewed available literature under the following sub-thematic issues:

- Democracy and Democratic Issues in Nigeria
- Electoral Violence and Voter Apathy in Nigeria
- Power-Politics in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

Conceptual Review
Democracy: The term 'democracy' was derived from two Greek words – 'demos' meaning 'people' and 'kratos' meaning 'rule'. From the foregoing, it refers to a form of government based on the rule by the people with popular sovereignty as its most outstanding feature. According to the Cambridge Dictionary of current English, democracy refers to the belief in freedom and equality between people or a system of government based on the belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves. A functioning democracy requires participatory followership and morally sound leadership. Democracy denotes a form of government in which power and civic responsibilities are exercised by all adult citizens directly or indirectly through their elected representatives. It is established on the principle of majority rule and individual rights – a situation in which citizens are sovereign and central to the government.

Election: the concept of election has received varied interpretation from scholars of diverse backgrounds. According to Ojo (2007), election can be defined as the process or the act of choosing a person or persons for an office or for certain officers by the voters who are formally qualified to do so. In the opinion of Agu (2014), election is an official and legal organized, means by which citizens choose their leader to pilot their affairs. Election refers to a formal group decision making process by which a population chooses an individual or multiple individuals to hold public offices.

Electoral Violence: Violence could connote militancy, coercion, destruction or muscle flexing. Corsini (1976), defines violence as the expression of hostility and rage through physical force directed against persons or property. It is aggression in its most extreme and unacceptable form and most investigators conclude it has no therapeutic justification, since there are most constructive and human ways of expressing anger. Electoral violence, therefore, refers to all forms of violence associated with power struggles within the context of organized elections in the state.

Democracy and Democratic Issues in Nigeria

Unarguably, Nigeria is a country that is blessed with enormous human and material resources, but ironically, the same country has become the bastion of inequitable state policies, injustice and barefaced corruption, etc., where ethnicity has pervaded every facet of the Nigerian life, and more fundamentally determines who gets what, when and how (Lassswell,2008).

More than 90 million Nigerians, in a population estimated at over 210 million, were eligible to vote in 2023. That number is considerably larger than the 84 million who could cast ballots in 2019 and bigger than the electorates of West Africa's fourteen other countries combined. However, out of the 93.5 million registered voters, only 87.3 million had collected permanent voter cards on Election Day, and less than a third of them ultimately cast a ballot. Turnout overall was just 27 per cent, a record low (Hassan & Obe, 2023). Nevertheless, the 2023 presidential election encountered a lot of challenges. These include violence, intimidation, voter suppression, low voter turnout, and weaponization of ethnic sentiments. Violence and intimidation affected voter turnout, compounded by the fuel and cash shortages that hampered preparations (Hassan & Obe, 2023).To ward off fraud, and thus burnish the vote's legitimacy, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) rolled out new technological innovations.

According to Emoghene and Okolie (2017) the dominance of the factors of ethnicism, religions and politics these factors have affected the survival of democratic rule and national development in Nigeria. The nation's constitution does not reflect the wishes of the people; most government policies are anti-people and

do not engender national integration and cohesion (Ilesanmi, 2014). The Nigerian government remains distant fromserving the interest of its people.

Politics at the federal, state and local levels of the Nigerian federation are dominated by the powerful mandarin who built vast patronage networks during the military days and who now use political office to expand these networks and their personal fortunes. In the words of Ediagbonya et al (2023):

'The people, world over crave for free and fair election. It is their expectation that their votes would count. Free and fair election is a situation where persons are free to vote according to their wish without any coercion, inducement, harassment and intimidation'.

It is the position of Ojo that free and fair election connotes that the electorates are free to vote according to the dictates of their conscience. The rationale for adopting the democratic system of governance is to allow voters to make good choices among political parties, candidates and programs, provides mechanism for collective effort towards the development. All the highlighted items above are what make an election one of the basic features of democracy. Periodic free and fair elections constitute one of the most significant institutions of liberal and participatory democracy. It is very important that every Nigerian sets aside their differences, works together based on the positive values they hold dear for the attainment of sustainable democracy and political stability in Nigeria (Nwoziri, 2021).

Electoral Violence and Voter Apathy in Nigeria

Electoral violence represents one of the greatest challenges of many democratic societies. Electoral violence could be regarded as election-motivated crisis employed to alter, change or influence by forceor coercion, the electoral behavior of voters or voting patterns or possibly reverse electoral decisions in favor of a particular individual, group or political party. It could be seen as any violence (harm) or threat that is aimed at any person or property involved in the electoral process, or at disputing any part of the electoral or political process during the election period. Electoral violence could be before the election thus involving such activities that inflict any form of injury to the democratic system and its constituent, campaigns and actual voting. Such violence could also be a post-election phenomenon which comes consequent on the manipulation of election result, rejection of results and democratic transition i.e. from one leadership regime to another.

Nwokike, Ezeneme and Okafor (2023) posit that:

'The impact of electoral violence on Nigeria's democracy is nothing short of catastrophic. When acts of violence and intimidation areused to suppress opposition voices and stifle free and fair debate, the very essence of the democratic process is

undermined and weakened. This erosion of democratic principles has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the immediate aftermath of an election'.

They further added that:

'One of the most significant consequences of election violence is the erosion of public trust in the electoral process. When citizens witness or experience violence during elections, they lose faith in the ability of the electoral system to accurately represent their voices and choices'.

Several factors heighten the danger of violence. First are persistent security challenges across large swathes of the country. These include Islamist insurgents – Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province – in the North East, bandits as well as herders and farmers at loggerheads in the North West and North Central zones, Biafra separatists in the South East and criminal gangs in the Niger Delta. These challenges are affecting election preparations and could disrupt the vote in many places, thus raising the risk of post-election protests that could degenerate into street clashes or worse.

A second factor is the bitter quarrelling among the major parties. Unlike previous elections that were mostly two-horse races, the 2023 presidential contest features three front runners: Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress, Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party and Peter Obi of the Labour Party. The first two parties in particular are guilty of incitement and hate speech in their messaging, and partisans of all three candidates have spread the same on social media.

Prior to elections, as witnessed in Nigeria, violence among cult groups escalates as they battle for territorial control. Such control gives them the power to supply election-related services to politicians and parties – intimidating rivals, coercing voters or rigging ballots. The spread of these groups poses a significant threat to elections in the Niger Delta.

In the South West, though to a lesser degree, cults similarly imperil the polls. Armed groups, such as these cult groups – along with ex-militants – in the Niger Delta and Lagos, may intimidate voters or otherwise disrupt the proceedings. In Nigeria's former capital and most populous city, Lagos, violent cults are ready recruits for politicians seeking to orchestrate violence around the elections.

Election-related violence was reported in several states across the South South region. In Cross River state, the Commissioner for Women Affairs, Gertrude Njar, was abducted on 1 February in the capital, Calabar. No ransom demands were made public. On 5 February, gunmen ambushed the convoy of the People's Redemption Party (PRP) gubernatorial candidate in Cross River. Pastor Usani Uguru Usani – a former minister during President Buhari's first term and current PRP candidate for the governorship – survived the attack, but two people were reportedly killed. Another incident was reported in Port Harcourt, Rivers state, where gunmen in police uniforms shot at the car of Abiye

Sekibo, the director-general of the PDP presidential campaign in Rivers state. Sekibo claimed that a campaign venue he was inspecting was set ablaze, and that the assailants were policemen who arrived at thevenue with police vehicles linked to the state governor. State police maintained that the assailants were not police officers.

Separately, in Delta state, an unidentified armed group ambushed soldiers on patrol on 9 February, reportedly killing four in Ndokwa East. A traditional ruler in the community was also beheaded by the assailants.

The South East continued to experience several violent incidents during the first half of February. Anambra was home to the most violence, driven by reports of clashes between communal groups, violence against civilians, and attacks on police stations and electoral offices. On 1 February, an unidentified armed group attacked the office of Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission in Idemmili South LGA, destroying 729 ballot boxes, 243 voting cubicles, and 256 election bags. Gunmen ambushed Anambra vigilantes on patrol in Njikoka LGA, reportedly killing three of them and assaulting a police station with petrol bombs. In Ayamelum LGA, at least five people were reportedly killed on 6 February over a boundary dispute that involved members of the Anaku and Omor communities. Elsewhere across the region, suspected Ebubeagu operatives ambushed the convoy of the gubernatorial candidate for the All Progressives Grand Alliance, Bernard Odoh, reportedly killing the driver and a police officer. Thelocal Ebubeagu commander denied the attack. The Ebubeagu security out t has been accused of operating as a personal militia at the behest of the APC governor of Ebonyi state David Umahi. Moreover, on 14 February, a federal high court in Abakaliki decreed that the Ebubeagu should disband due to its involvement in widespread human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings.

Security issues escalated across the country. For instance:

- The commission could not register new voters in some local government areas in the North East, North West and North Central zones, and it was un- able to issue voter cards to many of the more than three million internally displaced people there.
- From 2019 to December 2022, criminals attacked INEC offices 50 times in fifteen of Nigeria's 36 states. Some of the early attacks, such as during the police abuse protests in October 2020, were apparently not election-related, but lately many have been.
- Attackers have torn down many offices housing materials for the vote.
- INEC officials admitted to being apprehensive about conducting the polls in many places.
- In Niger state, where fourteen of the 25 local government areas have suffered repeated attacks by armed groups, INEC has warned that it may be unable to hold elections in 270 polling units.

- In Katsina state, INEC said it could not administer the vote in 242 polling units home to 142,261 voters spread across ten of 34 local government areas.

According to Human Rights Watch:

'Political violence has become a central part of political competition across Nigeria and it takes many forms – from assassinations to armed clashes between gangs employed by rival politicians. This violence is most often carried out by gangs whose members are openly recruited and paid by politicians and party leaders to attack their sponsors' rivals, intimidate members of the public, rig elections and protect their patrons from similar attacks' (HRW, 2007:17).

According to Election Watch Report (2023), countless election officials and politicians have been violently targeted in the run-up to the elections. Party militias, criminal gangs and other armed groups have engaged in violence to suppress opponents, deter rival candidates from running and influence the electoral process.

The report further states that: the electoral campaigns have also further polarized the political and media allegations against partisan outlets and political candidates refusing to attend media engagements.

Power- Politics in Nigeria: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

The persistent struggle for the acquisition, consolidation and use of state power has continued to intensify among the various registered political parties, ethnic nationals and religious sects across the country. This situation has worsened with the emergence of arms-wielding thugs serving the interests of their political lords. Ediagbonya et al (2023), posits that:

'Politics is the cause of a much number of deaths in Nigeria through the acts of violence, thuggery, political assassination and crimes that are linked with the quest for power. In the course of all these, many criminal offences are committed. Security personnel are often mobilized to harass or intimidate political opponents or take sides in undermining free, fair and credible balloting'

Section 138 of the Nigerian Electoral Act prohibits undue influence. It provides as follows: A person who:

- Directly or indirectly, by himself or by another person on his behalf, makes use or threatens to make use of any force, violence or restrain.
- Inflicts or threatens to inflict by himself or by any other person, any temporal or spiritual injury, damage, harm or loss on or against a person in order to induce or compel that person to vote or refrain from voting, or on account of such person having voted or refrained from voting, or

- By abduction, duress or a fraudulent device or contrivance impedes or prevents the free use of the vote by the voter or thereby compels, induces or prevails on a voter to give or refrain from giving his vote.
- By preventing any political aspirant from free use of the media, designated vehicles, mobilization of political support and campaign at an election, commits an offence of undue influence and is liable on conviction to a fine of 100,000 or imprisonment for three years.

Article 13 (1) of the African Charter on Human and people's rights (Ratification and Enforcement Act Cap 10 laws of the Federation, 1990) provides that every citizen shall have the right to participate freely in the government of his country, either directly or through freely-chosen representatives in accordance with provisions of the law. Electoral violence is a negation of this right.

Social media platforms caused more harm than good. Influencers on these platforms, including some who work as journalists, and some who are on party payrolls, have traded in distorted narratives and inflammatory rhetoric. Unfair treatment of the opposition, especially by state governors, is also generating heat. A few governors are seeking to cripple opposition candidates by denying them.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the theory of 'Social Contract' as envisioned by ancient political philosophers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jack Rousseau. This perspective explained the condition of man in the 'state of nature', where life was short and brutal – a condition of 'absolute individualism', anarchy and lawlessness, to the point of cannibalism. The tenets of the Social Contract theory maintained that the people came together, appointed a supreme authority and relinquished part of their rights and liberty to the appointed authority (the government), to whom they shall willing pay taxes, abide by their laws and support their activities, and in return, expect that the security of their lives and properties be guaranteed, while ensuring their well-being. In other words, 'the sovereign (the state) embodies on herself, the will of the masses', - a welfare state, of sort.

Methodology

The qualitative descriptive research approach adopted in this study allows for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of electoral violence in the 2023 presidential election. By examining reports from international, National observers, as well as scrutinizing accounts from reputable national newspapers, this study gains a comprehensive understanding of the scope and nature of electoral violence. Moreover, scholarly works pertaining to electoral violence and democracy in Nigeria offer valuable insights into the underlying causes and potential consequences of such incidents.

Findings of the Study

Following a critical review of available literature, the findings from this study show that:

- The 2023 general elections in Nigeria were grossly characterized by unabated malpractices and deliberate attempts by the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) to further consolidate state power, against the wish of majority of the country's population.
- The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) compromised by not adequately releasing voters' cards to enable duly registered electorates to exercise their franchise.
- Security operatives allowed themselves to be bought over by candidates, as witnessed in Lagos state and other parts of the country where political elites and thugs threatened electorates with various forms of violence, yet, nothing was done to call the perpetrators to order.
- The verdict of the Presidential Electoral Petitions Tribunal further dampened the hope of citizens, thus, deepening the already existing attitude of political apathy which is detrimental to the growth of democracy in the country.

Conclusion

The 2023 general elections have been adjudged by political and social affairs analysts as the worst election in Nigeria, since the return to the so-called democracy in 1999. Nigeria has continually maintained an age-long history of electoral violence, electoral malpractices and superficial type of democracy characterized by the overbearing attitudes of Chief Executives, a rubber-stamp legislature and a bazaar-canteen judiciary which serves the interest of the highest bidder. The relegated position of the press is not an exception. Ours is a situation that interrogates the essence of investigative journalism as a prerequisite for effective political participation and good governance initiative. The perceived essence of the controversial currency swap policy which many Nigerians hitherto opposed, has turned out to be a mission dead on arrival, as it wasn't able to curb the menace of vote-buying. Nigerians are yet to understand the rationale behind the 2022 Electoral Act, if it cannot facilitate the conduct of credible elections across the country.

Recommendations

Consistent with the findings and conclusion, the study makes the following recommendations:

- Nigerians should advocate for ideal democracy which guarantees a clear-cut separation of power among the various arms of government to ensure checks and balances.

- ❖ There is urgent need to embrace electronic voting and electronic transmission of results as a panacea to vote-buying in the country.
- ❖ The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should respect the will of the citizens by the conducts of credible elections and the announcement of unadulterated results.
- ❖ There is need for value re-orientation on the part of Nigerian citizens to participate actively in the electoral process, as well as to secure their votes thereafter.

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