



## Electoral Violence and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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**Abstract.** This paper examines electoral violence and its implications for the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Having returned to democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria's elections have been marred by violence, thereby underscoring the tenets of free and fair elections and democratic consolidation. This paper identifies the causes, dynamic manifestations, and implications of electoral violence adopting the political economy as its theoretical framework for analysis. The paper concludes that, electoral violence constitutes a serious threat to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria; as it undermines the electoral process, weakens public confidence in democratic institutions, and perpetuates a cycle of instability and mistrust. It also concludes that; the consolidation of democracy requires a multi-faceted approach in order to strengthen the autonomy and capacity of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) to ensure free and fair elections. Ultimately, the process to achieve democratic consolidation in Nigeria is a collective responsibility; where the political leaders, civil society, security agencies, and the entire populace must come together to reject violence and embrace the principles of democracy. It is only by ensuring that elections are deemed free, fair and peaceful that Nigeria can fully achieve the much-needed potential of democratic consolidation for its socio-economic development and national integration.

**Keywords:** Election, Democracy, Electoral Violence, Democratic Consolidation, Political Economy

### 1. Introduction

The use of violence to get access to political power has been a persistent prognosis in Nigerian politics since the first republic (1960-1966) and is trend-malady has not changed. Perpetual incidents of electoral violence in Nigerian political processes have forced many cynics to refer to electoral violence as part of the

country's political structure. Some common traits of electoral violence that manifested in Nigeria include the use of security agents and thugs to intimidate, disrupt and disperse voters, hijacking of elections materials and officials, political assassinations, clashes between rival political supporter groups, stuffing of ballot boxes, sporadic shooting of voters, destruction of elections materials, and many more audacious violent actions.

Elections in Nigeria since the advent of the fourth republic in 1999; and particularly the general elections of 2011, 2015 and that of 2019 have been marred by the spite of electoral violence. Elections are seen as the major ingredient of representative democracy. That is why Lindberg (2003) as cited in Adesote and Abimbola (2014) averred that:

Every modern version of representative democracy entails the notion of elections as the primary means of selection of political decision makers. Thus, it is incomprehensible in contemporary times to think of democracy without linking it to the idea and practice of elections.

Elections are an integral part of liberal democracy without which the notion of democracy will be an unrealistic hope or wish that cannot be achieved. Elections is a process in which candidates get elected into public offices. Elections are supposed to be free, fair and credible, and managed by an unbiased umpire so that the will of the majority will be upheld.

Elections constitute the central element of liberal democracy. This is because, elections confer legitimacy on political leadership. Thus, it is important to the consolidation of democracy. Elections confer citizens with the rights to choose their political leaders to make choices for them. Goodwin-Gill (2006), posits that, in any state, the authority of the government can only be derived from the will of the people through a

genuine, free and fair elections held at regular time frames based on the principle of universal, equal and secret suffrage.

Democratic elections are becoming an international norm. Governments gain legitimacy from such elections as they are receiving their power directly from the people. However, not all elections are democratic, nor are all elections that claim to be democratic are actually democratic. In many countries, election unfairness is the rule, violence on elections day is frequent, and claims of fraud are rampant (Goodwin-Gill, 2006). Election in post-colonial Nigeria became a fundamental game to win political power. Ironically, while there can be election without democracy, it is not possible to have democracy without election. This affirms the importance of election in the consolidation of democracy.

Interestingly, an estimated 20% of elections held globally experience some form of electoral violence of which the most frequent occurrences are found in South Asia and Africa (Burchard, 2015). Nigeria is one of the highly politically divided countries in Africa. The political class in Nigeria have since the advent of the fourth republic portrayed authoritarian tendency. Arguing on the above, Human Rights Watch noted:

Many of Nigeria's ostensibly elected leaders obtained their positions by demonstrating an ability to use corruption and political violence to prevail in sham elections. Using violent and brazenly rigged polls, government officials have denied millions of Nigerians any real voice in selecting their political leaders. In place of democratic competition, struggles for political office have often been waged violently in the streets by gangs of thugs-youths—recruited by politicians to help them seize control of power (2007:21).

Democracy has become mankind's most viable form of government, especially, after the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) survey of 1951 which indicated the popularity of democracy in Europe as "there were no replies adverse to democracy" (UNESCO, 1951:527). Free and fair and credible election is the conveyor of democratic consolidation as the will of the electorates is sacred and inviolable. The question here is, how has elections that is supposed to engender democratically elected political office holders to bring about development and prosperity to Nigeria, instead breeds violence, insecurity and backwardness to the people of Nigeria? We shall attempt to answer this question using the political economy theoretical frame as the basis for analysis.

## 2. Conceptual Clarifications

### 2.1 Election

Election is the legal process of selecting our political leaders for a specified term of office. From a functionalist perspective, election is seen as a formal and organised process by which individuals or groups in a state select their representatives, or leaders. It usually involves voting, where citizens cast their votes to choose from candidates or options presented. Anifowose (2003) portrays election as a process of elitist selection by the masses in any given political system. Elections are fundamental aspects of democratic systems, giving room to the citizens to influence how they are governed. Highlighting the place of elections in representative democracy Animashun (2010) argued that, Elections represents the lifeblood of modern democracy and the frequency, fairness and openness of such elections are crucial to the political stability of the polity. In this instance, Roberts and Edwards cited in Omotola (2007:21) defined elections as "a method for the selections of persons to fill certain offices through choices made by an electorate; those (citizens) who are qualified to vote under the rules and procedures of the electoral system". Elections have meaning for the functionalists only in democratic basis as it led to making a choice for decision makers by the majority of the citizens as we noted above. Elections is supposed to make the government responsible and responsive.

In the same instance, Dye (2001) refers to election as the process through which qualified adult citizens participate in the selection of candidates that will govern the state on their behalf. These definitions suggest various features such as fair participation of the electorates and candidates for elections to be accepted by the people. This participation makes the election a unique character of democratic practice and consolidation. Election enables citizens to elect their leaders ensuring the consolidation of democracy.

### 2.2 Electoral Violence

Electoral violence as a term has no universally accepted generalization. This can be attributed to the slogan of "violence begets violence" as espoused by Franz Fanon in the period of opposition to colonial rule. The argument here is that, defensive violence represents resisting their opponent's aggression. They portray their violence as an act of self-defence. However, International Foundation for Election Systems (2011) defines electoral violence as "any violence or (harm) or threat of violence (harm) that is aimed at any person or property involved in the

election process, or at disrupting any part of the electoral or political process during the election period”. Electoral violence presents one of the main challenges to democratic consolidation. To Fischer (2002), electoral violence is any random or organised act that seeks to determine, delay. Or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, disinformation, physical assault, forced “protection”, blackmail, destruction of property, or assassination. Electoral violence can be seen as a type of political violence. But it can be differentiated from political violence by its major objective. Electoral violence is committed by politicians and their supporters in order to acquire power by all means. The major patterns of electoral violence in Nigeria often consists of looting, shooting, violent interruption of campaign rallies, armed

attacks on polling and collation centers, which includes seizure of electoral materials, usually with weapons, destruction of properties owned by political opponents, hostage taking, kidnappings, abuse of power of incumbency, falsification of election results, bias involvement of security agents and electoral personnel and most especially assassination of opponents.

Nearly all of the country’s general elections have been tainted with an element of violence. This can be seen during the post-elections violence that followed the general elections of 2011 which led to the death of at least 800 people in over three days of rioting in 12 states across northern Nigeria (the worst case) in the political history of Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

**Table 2** Number of People killed and injured in the 2011 Post-Elections Violence in Northern Nigeria State

	Killed	Injured
Katsina	7	59
Kaduna	827	21
Bauchi	36	200
Adamawa	26	158
Gombe	20	147
Niger	9	27
Kano	8	22
Borno	3	10
Jigawa	1	38
Yobe	1	3

*Source: Lemu Panel Report (2011)*

Ironically, an estimated 20% of elections held globally experience some form of violence of which the most frequent episodes are found in South Asia and Africa (Burchard: 2015). He also indicated that, countries such as Chad, Cote d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zimbabwe; have all experienced a long history of elections characterised by violent protests. Extant studies have indicated that about 40% of elections or 20% of all elections conducted across Africa witnessed serious issues of electoral violence, while protracted civil clash was visible in a few other African countries such as Burundi 2015, Angola, 1992, Congo Brazzaville 1993, Zimbabwe 2008, Cote Ivoire 2010 and Nigeria 2011, and 2015 (Burchard: 2015) In the same instance George (2010) posits that, the 2019 general elections in Nigeria caused massive deaths in different parts of the country. In Rivers and Bayelsa states, 57 innocent citizens were killed due to elections violence. This is a true representation of what obtained in other parts of the country too. Høglund (2009) argued that electoral violence is the highest form of electoral fraud. To him, electoral violence is therefore a mechanism of coercive action employed by actors to advance their interest or to realise specific political objectives (2009).

**Table 2:** Causes of Electoral Violence

	Conditions enabling the Use of Electoral Violence	Factors Triggering Electoral Violence
Nature of Politics	Patrimonial Politics Violence as a Political Tool Culture of Impunity Access to Arms	Violent Actors Participating in Election Biased Police
Nature of Election	Competitiveness Political Mobilization Exposure to Attacks	Misuse of Political Rights Militant Mobilization “Close Races”
Electoral Institutions	System Creating Clear Winner and Losers Few Regulations about Electoral Conduct Administration with Few Checks and Little Power	Political Usage of Electoral Administration Electoral Fraud Unwanted or Unexpected Outcome of the Election

*Source: Høglund, K. (2009)*

### 2.3 Democracy

Democracy as a concept has attracted the attention of political theorists for many centuries. Suffice to argue here that, the liberal conception of democracy as opined by Scmitter and Terry is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives (1988:76). Using the same persuasion as above, Dahl (2015), who is credited with propounding the theory of the pluralist theory of democracy explains why we should support democracy and argued that “democracy has at least ten advantages” in comparison to non-democracies:

1. Avoiding tyranny
2. Essential rights
3. General freedom
4. Self-determination
5. Moral autonomy
6. Human development
7. Protecting essential interests
8. Political equality
9. Peace-seeking
10. Prosperity.

In fact, democracy does not have to be liberal. Most countries in Africa have liberal democracies where periodic elections take place, but liberal features such as independent electoral body, judiciary and freedom of expression, are compromised thereby impacting the consolidation of democracy in those countries.

### 2.4 Democratic Consolidation

The term democratic consolidation refers to a political process in a country by which democracy is so variously and soundly entrenched within its institutions that it is very difficult to be compromised. To Linz and Stepan (1996), democratic consolidation connotes widespread adherence to democratic norms, robust institutions, free and fair elections, and the rule of law, which together ensure resilience against authoritarian regression and foster long-term stability. In this analysis Gorokhovskaia (2017) averred that, in simplistic terms, a country can only be said to be democratic when democracy becomes routinized, institutionalized and normalized to the extent that acting outside its tenets and practices or desecration of democratic norms is both unappealing and disadvantages for every politician and other political actor in the polity. Against generally held believe that, durability of democracies does not appear to exclude them from a degradation in the quality of their democracy. It follows therefore that democratic consolidation is not necessarily about the perseverance

of the democratic system, but rather how deep rooted are the principles, practices and processes of democracy or how well do politicians and political actors appreciate the democratic practices to allow for the consolidation of democracy in the country.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Political Economy Theory provides an excellent vista for understanding the nexus between electoral violence and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. This theory explains how economy, power dynamics, and resource competition shape political behaviour and outcomes, including the use of violence during elections. Political Economy Theory has been advanced by several scholars such as Karl Marx (1818-1883), he laid the foundation for political economy theory. He was followed by other scholars such as Max Weber (1864-1920) who focused on how political systems, especially bureaucracies, are often influenced by economic interests and patronage. Nigerian politics is heavily influenced by patron-client systems, where resources are used to maintain political loyalty (Weber,1997). While John S. Mills (1806-1873) emphasized on how the distribution of economic resources shapes governance and social stability. His work underscores the notion that economic inequality can affect democratic processes (Mills, 1884). In his work Bates (1981) Markets and States in Tropical Africa, Bates argued correctly that elites often prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term democratic consolidation. When linked to the Nigerian environment, one can see how political elites normally use state resources for personal gain, fueling competition for political power and violence during elections

### 4. Dialectics on Electoral Violence and Consolidation of Democracy in Nigeria

Ironically, electoral violence in Nigeria has been a persistent feature of its political history, which is driven by a complex interplay of historical, socio-political, and economic factors. A good dialectical analysis of electoral violence in the Nigerian state requires an understanding of the inherent contradictions and issues within the country’s political processes, institutions, and of course the socio-economic structures.

Historically, the colonial state’s imposition of indirect rule over the country exacerbated ethnic and regional divisions. These divisions were further institutionalized during independence, creating a competitive and often adversarial political culture. Moreover, the years of military incursion into politics

entrenched authoritarian tendencies, engendering a winner takes-all mentality in politics. This heightened the stakes of electoral contests, making the use of violence as a tool to gain political power and to hold to it at any cost appealing to the political elites in Nigeria. Electoral violence affects the credibility of periodic elections by instilling fear and suspicion among voters, reducing voter turnout, and allowing room for manipulative practices such as ballot box snatching, vote buying, and stuffing. This has serious consequences in the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

While politically, the contradictions in the political realm where elite competition and patronage held sway allows the politicians to adopt the use of violence as a tool to maintain access to state resources, which are the primary means of wealth accumulation. This creates a dialectical tension between democratic norms and the survivalist strategies of the ruling elites (Human Rights Watch, 2007). The notion of winner takes all syndrome in Nigeria, allows for making elections as a “do-or-die” affair. This breeds a cycle of impunity and authoritarian tendencies, affecting the development of issue-based politics thereby undermining the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Also, weak institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and the judiciary, are seriously undermined by corruption and political elite manipulations. INEC and the judiciary for instance have faced serious accusations of bias, inefficiency, and inability to ensure compliance to the rules, thereby underscoring public trust. This contradiction between formal institutions and informal practices naturally exposes the inability of these institutions to hold perpetrators to order. Weak institutions undermine democratic consolidation by exacerbating impunity and political elite manipulation by engaging in electoral violence which further undermine democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Socio-economic drivers such as youth unemployment and poverty create a ready-made population of frustrated youths who are easily recruited as political thugs by the political class to disrupts the electoral process. This is a dialectical factor of the state’s failure to address socio-economic inequalities. Ethnic and religious identities are usually mobilized to incite violence, exacerbated by deeper socio-economic inequalities that were left unaddressed by the state. This invariably disenfranchised and excluded the marginalized groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, discouraging their participation in the

political process. This exclusion weakens consolidation of democracy by limiting representation and diversity in governance.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper concludes that, electoral violence constitutes a serious threat to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria; as it undermines the electoral process, weakens public confidence in democratic institutions, and perpetuates a cycle of instability and mistrust. The paper also concludes that; as a result of electoral violence, lives are lost properties are destroyed, and local economies disrupted. That, the perpetuation of electoral violence in Nigeria is a cycle where structural weakness (poverty, weak institutions) interacts with political agency (manipulation by political elites). Dialectical tensions exit between forces of change (civil society, youth movements, reforms) and forces of continuity (vested interests, systematic corruption).

## 6. Ways Forward

The consolidation of democracy requires a multi-faceted approach in the following sectors:

**Institutional Reforms:** Strengthening the autonomy and capacity of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), judicial independence, and law enforcement to ensure free and fair elections.

**Economic Empowerment:** Ultimately, the process to achieve democratic consolidation in Nigeria by addressing poverty, unemployment and inequality to reduce the pool of ready-made youths usually mobilized to engage in electoral violence.

**Civic Education:** Raising awareness about the dangers of electoral violence and promoting peaceful participation in the electoral process. This can be achieved when seen as a collective responsibility; where the political leaders, civil society, security agencies, and the entire populace come together to reject violence and embrace the principles of democracy.

**Accountability Mechanisms:** By prosecuting sponsors and perpetrators of electoral violence in Nigeria to deter future occurrences will our elections be deemed free, fair and peaceful and that Nigeria can fully achieve the much-needed potential of democratic consolidation for its socio-economic development and national integration.

**Technological Advancement:** Introducing fully electronic voting and transmission of elections results will lead to a reduction of human interference, while fostering a political culture of inclusivity,

accountability, and respect for democratic norms and values will we enjoy democratic consolidation.

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