

Violence and the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria.
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1. Introduction

The General Election held in Nigeria of February 25, 2023 and March 18, 2023 makes it exactly a century since electoral democracy was introduced in Nigeria. The first election held in Nigeria was in 1923 after the British colonialist's adoption of Clifford Constitution of 1922 that introduced elective principle for the country for four members from Lagos and Calabar into the Legislative Council. Notwithstanding the long duration, Nigeria has had a checkered history of electoral democracy. One stark feature of elections in the country is the spate of violence that always characterized elections and electioneering campaigns in the country (Adebanjo, 2022). Military intervention in Nigerian politics in the past has been linked to violent elections.

How to minimize or eliminate violence in the country's electoral process have led to adoption of varying election security strategies including deployment of the military to provide security during elections. This became apparent following the violence that erupted after results of the 2011 presidential election was announced. The scale of deaths recorded compelled some eminent Nigerian leaders led by the former head of State General Abdulsalami Abubaker to form the National Peace Committee. This Committee influences major candidates and political parties in election to sign a peace accord and reign on their supporters to conduct themselves in peaceful ways during election. This initiative which started in the 2015 electoral cycle has continued till date. But notwithstanding the jamboree of gathering major candidates and parties to signing of this peace accord, shake hands and do photo ups, incidences of violence are yet to be curtailed from Nigerian electoral process (Adebanjo, 2022)

But why is violence and integral part of Nigerian electoral system and why is that the security operative is unable to stop it and how come in spite of the widespread of violence in the election, the electoral management body in Nigeria the Independent National Electoral Commission still goes ahead to declare winners and make returns in the elections?



Figure 1: Picture of Ballot papers scattered by political party thugs in 2023 General elections (Vanguardngr.com March 30, 2022; Femke van Zeijl, Al Jazeera)

2. Historical Overview of Violence in Nigerian elections

The history of elections in post-independent Nigeria has been replete with violence. The first election conducted after independence in 1964/5, was marred by violence. It is on record that 200 lives were lost, especially in the Southwest region of the country in what is termed in history books as ‘operation wetie’ (Omididan, 2018). That violence and massive manipulation of election results laid the foundation for military coup in 1966 that halted the democratic order. The next time the country experienced “massive post-election violence” was during the 1983 general election which was conducted by the civilian regime that inherited power from the military in 1979. The electoral campaign that heralded that election was characterized by clashes between supporters of the major contending political parties but the announcement of the results of the election by the election management body, Federal Election Commission (FEDECO) sparked off widespread violence across the country with several lives lost and properties destroyed (GBJ, 2023).

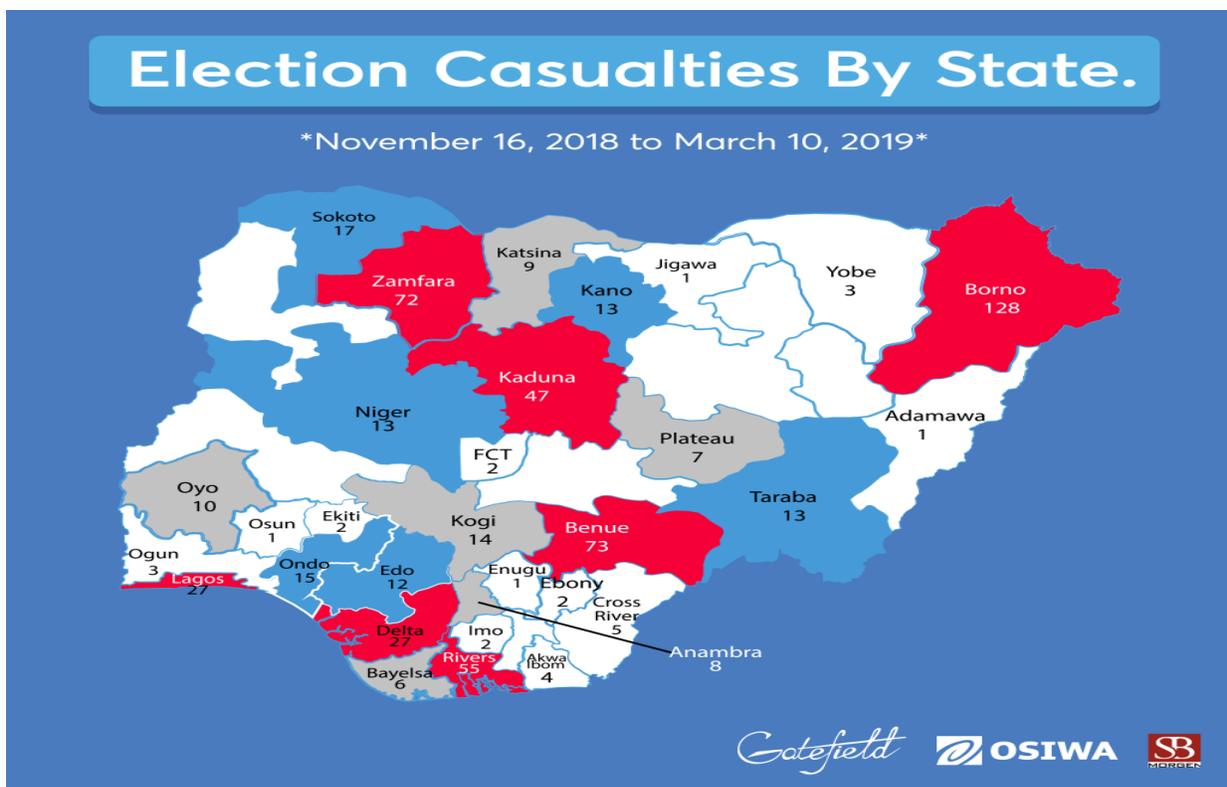


Figure 2: Election Violence by States in the 2019 General Elections (Osiwa,2019)

There was no serious episode of violence during the long transition to civil rule programme of the General Ibrahim Babangida Military administration but the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election triggered public outcry and waves of protests that led to killing of over 100 peaceful demonstrators and passers-by security agents, trying to contain the protests (Adebanjo, 2022).

Little has changed since Nigeria’s returned to democratic rule in 1999 too. There was widespread violence following allegations of fraud regarding the 1999 election that ushered in the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo. It is estimated that about 80 people died. Similarly, at least 100 people were killed during incidents of violence triggered by federal and state elections in 2003, and over

300 people lost their lives in connection to electoral violence four years later, with pre-election violence alone leading to death of over 70 lives (ICG, 2023).

The most devastating incident of electoral violence occurred in 2011, in which post-election violence led to the death of at least 800 people as a result of three days rioting in 12 states across northern Nigeria (HRW, 2011). According to International Crisis Group, more than 100 people lost their lives during and after the 2015 General Elections (ICG, 2023). The last general election conducted in 2019 before the 2023 episode also witnessed electoral violence that led to loss of lives. According to the European Union Election Observation Mission about 150 people were killed due to electoral violence (Sanni, 2019)

3. National Peace Committee and election Violence

The National Peace Committee (NPC) is a non-governmental initiative of prominent Nigerians to bring about violence free elections in Nigeria. The idea was conceived in response to emerging threats occasioned by the 2015 general elections. The fear of repeat of the violence of 2011 was palpable more so when the election is going to be a rematch of the 2011 contest. The task of NPC was to mediate an alternative dispute resolution mechanism aimed at achieving a smooth and peaceful conduct of the 2015 elections, devoid of any breakdown of law and order before, during and after the electioneering process. The NPC succeeded the major contestants President Goodluck Jonathan and General Mohamadu Buhari to sign a peace accord. The unexpected concession of defeat by the incumbent president even before the final result of that election was announced calmed tension that was building up due to dispute in results already released (ICG, 2023) . The NPC was hailed for contributing to the atmosphere and ever since, that initiative have become an integral part of Nigerian electoral process whether at the national or local levels.

But despite the efforts of the NPC in bringing top contenders and political parties to sign peace accord, violence is yet to be stemmed from Nigerian electoral process. The NPC efforts at mediating between major candidates and parties and expecting them to rein in on their supporters have yielded little fruit. Again, little effort is made at ensuring justice for victims of electoral violence. Though police have arrested some perpetrators of electoral crime, the issue of sincere prosecution has remained the challenge (Punch, 2023) The agitation to create an election crime commission as panacea to electoral infractions in Nigeria is yet to see the light of day as the bill passed by the Senate is stuck at the House of Representative (Punch, 2022)

4. 2023 General Elections

The spate of violence that characterized 2023 General elections was graphically captured Famke Van Zeiji of Aljazeera of how a group of 10 political thugs were moving around polling unit in Lagos shooting and disrupting the voting process from one Polling unit to another unchallenged by security operatives deployed to provide security for voters (Van Zeiji, 2023). Also, Stacy Abrams who monitored the elections in Lagos stated in a podcast hosted by Emmanuel Akinwotu and Alisa Chang that the degree of violence unleashed on election day and the fear it instilled on voters was very troubling (Akinwotu, Chang & Abrams, 2023). The violence on election day was not limited to Lagos, as Vanguard newspaper reported that the violence recorded during the polls virtually took place in all states of the federation (Vanguard, 2023). What is surprising to many is how security operative were unable to curtail the activities these political thugs in spite of the huge deployment of security personnel across the over 176,846 polling Units were voting are to take place (Suleman,2023). The conduct of security operatives in aiding political thugs does not

surprise observers that most of the perpetrators of violence operate unchecked (Ajayi, 2023; Operobi 2023). The impact of these violence is depicted in the number of cancelled votes and elections declared inconclusive by INEC. An election is declared inconclusive when the number of margins of difference between the leading candidate and the runners up is less than canceled votes. In the last elections, two gubernatorial elections in Kebbi and Adamawa states and 94 National Assembly and States Houses of Assembly elections were affected across 24 states and covering over 2000 Polling Units where supplementary elections were conducted on April 15, 2023 to determine winners of such elections (Suleiman, 2023).



Figure 3: Ward Collation Center in Lagos destroyed by Political thugs (Vanguardngr.com March 25,2023)

Seeds of violence in the 2023 election were sown by divisive campaign rhetoric's of the major parties slanted on Nigeria's ethnic and religious Faultline. In Lagos some members of the ruling party openly threatened the Igbo ethnic group not to come out to vote because of suspicion that they may vote the opposition parties. Police authorities took these threats that went viral on social media lackadaisically and the threat eventually carried out on election day as security agencies became helpless to contain the violence (TonyRazor, 2023). What is ironic is that prior to election day, official government tracking of violent physical attacks, recorded over 50 incidences across 22 out of the 36 states that made up Nigeria in just one month (Kwen, 2022). Some of these attacks led to deaths including candidates in the election and leaders of Political Parties in States such as Imo, Enugu and Kaduna (Ayodele, 2022; Sahara Reporters, 2023). Centre for Democracy and Development reports that over 109 deaths recorded in Nigeria covering about three months were linked to the elections (Olugbode , 2023). On election day alone about 39 were killed across the country (Opejobi, 2023). The irony about these incidences is that the culprits are not arrested nor prosecuted as it has always been the case with electoral violence in Nigeria. The Police claim that over 200 electoral offenders were arrested during the 2023 election and that 50 case files are to be handed over to INEC, the problem is that the election management body lacks capacity to prosecute electoral offenders. The agitation to unbundle the electoral commission and create a specialized agency through legislative process have not seen the light of day (Punch, 2022). The widespread violence and electoral malpractices have delegitimized the electoral process as most of the losers who are vehemently disputing the outcome have resorted to the courts. Currently,

over 400 cases have been filed by candidates and political parties including five different cases against the declaration of Mr. Bola Tinubu and the ruling All Progressive Congress as winners of the presidential election (Toromade, 2023) This is in addition to over 600 pre-election cases most of which are still running even after the process of election has been completed (Oyeyemi, 2022)

5.. Conclusion

Violence is a proven strategy in Nigeria – Africa’s largest democracy – to disrupt the voting process, especially in neighbourhoods that traditionally vote for the opposition. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria have not been different from previous elections in the country that were marred by violence and manipulation of results

The enthusiasm and increased engagement by Nigerians due to technological innovations introduced were dashed by the outcome of the elections The implication is frustration and voter apathy as indicated in elections conducted after the February 25 presidential election. Nigeria requires fundamental reforms in the electoral system to address the spate of violence and rigging that often characterize electoral process in the country.

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