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THE PREVENTION OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: A PANACEA FOR ACHIEVING CREDIBLE ELECTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Electoral violence is a critical challenge to democratic processes in Nigeria, undermining the credibility and integrity of elections. This paper explores the underlying causes of electoral violence and proposes strategies for its prevention to achieve credible elections. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT), the study highlights how group dynamics and social identities shape behaviour and contribute to conflict during elections. Factors such as political exclusion, economic disparities, and historical grievances are identified as primary drivers of violence. The paper argues for a multifaceted approach to prevention, including fostering inclusive political representation, promoting intergroup dialogue, challenging harmful social norms, and supporting electoral education. Additionally, the role of responsible media, institutional legitimacy, and nonviolent conflict resolution are emphasized. By addressing the root causes and implementing these strategies, Nigeria can enhance the credibility of its elections and ensure a stable and democratic political environment. The study underscores the importance of understanding social dynamics and adopting comprehensive measures to mitigate electoral violence effectively.

Keywords: Electoral Violence, Prevention, Panacea, Credible Election, Strategies

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Introduction

Elections are fundamental to democratic governance, serving as the primary mechanism for the peaceful transfer of power and enabling citizens to voice their political preferences and select their leaders (Dahl, 1989; Diamond, 1999). A free, fair, and credible election is crucial for the legitimacy of any democratic government, fostering public trust and ensuring that the elected leaders truly represent the will of the people (Lindberg, 2006). However, the credibility and integrity of elections can be severely undermined when they are plagued by violence.

Electoral violence is characterized as any act that disrupts the established rules and regulations governing the electoral process through intimidation, coercion, or physical harm. This phenomenon poses significant threats to democratic governance and societal peace (Vellinga, 2011; Ogundiya, 2009). It encompasses a broad range of actions, including physical assaults, destruction of property, and psychological threats aimed at voters, candidates, electoral officials, and other stakeholders (Collier and Vicente, 2012). Such violence can occur at any stage of the electoral cycle—before, during, or after the voting process (Bekoe, 2011).

The impact of electoral violence extends beyond the immediate disruption of the electoral process. It affects voter turnout by creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, discouraging citizens from participating in the electoral process (Bratton, 2008). Additionally, electoral violence undermines public trust in democratic institutions, leading to a crisis of legitimacy for the elected government and eroding confidence in the electoral system as a whole (Hoglund, 2009). This erosion of trust can have long-term consequences for political stability, as citizens become increasingly disillusioned with democratic processes and may resort to alternative, and often violent, means of expressing their political grievances (Hoffman and Melly, 2015).

Moreover, electoral violence often involves a range of perpetrators, including political party supporters, militia groups, and even state security forces, each with their own motives and methods (Onapajo, Uzodike, and Whetho, 2011). The motives behind electoral violence can vary widely, from attempts to influence the election outcome by reducing opposition votes to efforts to delegitimize the electoral process altogether (Laakso, 2007). This multifaceted nature of electoral violence makes it a complex issue that requires comprehensive and multifaceted approaches to prevent and mitigate its occurrence.

In Nigeria, electoral violence has been a persistent challenge, with significant incidents recorded in various election cycles. The 2011 elections, for instance, were marked by widespread violence, resulting in numerous deaths and displacement of people (Lewis, 2011). Similarly, the 2015 and 2019 elections witnessed acts of violence that disrupted the electoral process and raised serious concerns about the country's ability to conduct credible elections (Adigun, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2003).

Given the profound impact of electoral violence on democratic governance and societal peace, it is imperative to explore effective strategies for its prevention. Strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, enhancing the capacity and independence of electoral bodies, and promoting civic education and voter awareness are critical steps toward achieving credible elections. Additionally, fostering political will and commitment to peaceful electoral practices among political leaders is essential for creating a conducive environment for free and fair elections (Omotola, 2010).

An Overview of the Conceptual Framework

According to Bekoe (2012), electoral violence encompasses a broad range of actions intended to influence the outcome of an election through force or intimidation. This includes physical assaults, destruction of property, and psychological threats aimed at voters, candidates, electoral officials, and other stakeholders. Such acts are not in tandem with the established norms of the society. Ahamefula and Nnajieto (2005) attested to this thus; crime entails activities that involve breaking the law. It is an illegal act or activity that can be punished by law. There is a difference between deviant behaviour and crime, while deviance is behaviour that is at variance with the norms and values of the society, crime is the violation of the criminal code.

There is no universally accepted definition of electoral violence, but scholars have provided various perspectives. Hoglund (2009) states that "electoral violence is separated from other forms of political violence by a combination of timing and motive." The timing aspect relates to violence carried out during the election period, and the objective is to influence the election process and, by extension, the election outcome. Similarly, Laakso (2007) notes that "electoral violence is an activity motivated by an attempt to affect the results of the election"—either by manipulating the electoral procedures and participation or by contesting the legitimacy of the results.

Additional definitions come from Kehaila and Bardall. Kehaila (2014) distinguishes eight categories based on the perpetrators and reasons for violence:

1. Party-on-Party Electoral Violence
2. Party-on-Voter Electoral Violence
3. Party-on-State Electoral Violence
4. Voter-on-Voter Electoral Violence
5. Voter-on-State Electoral Violence
6. State-on-Voter Electoral Violence
7. State-on-Party Electoral Violence
8. State-on-State Electoral Violence

Bardall (2016) provides a rights-based definition, describing electoral violence as a subtype of political violence aimed at controlling or oppressing an individual's or group's right to participate in political processes and institutions. This violence can involve emotional, social, and economic force, coercion, or pressure, as well as physical and sexual harm. It may occur in public or private settings, including within the family, the general community, online, and via media, or be perpetrated or condoned by the state.

The perpetrators of electoral violence vary widely, including political party supporters, militia groups, and state security forces (Bekoe, 2011; Onapajo, Uzodike, and Whetho, 2011). The ultimate goal of this multifaceted vice is to disrupt the electoral process, deter participation, or manipulate the results to favour a particular interest group (Aghedo and Osumah, 2015).

Credible Election

The credibility of an election is vital to the health and functioning of a democratic society. It ensures that the government derives its authority from the consent of the governed, reinforcing the legitimacy of political institutions (Lindberg, 2006). When elections are free, fair, and transparent, they instill public confidence in the electoral system and the political process in general (Elklit and Reynolds, 2005).

Firstly, credible elections facilitate the peaceful transition of power. In a democracy, the losing party must accept the results, trusting that the process was fair. This acceptance is

crucial to maintaining political stability and avoiding the kind of post-election violence seen in many countries where electoral integrity is questionable (Collier and Vicente, 2014). For instance, the acceptance of election results in Ghana's 2012 elections was pivotal in maintaining peace and stability, contrasting with the violent aftermath of Kenya's 2007 elections, where disputed results led to widespread violence (Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis, 2014).

Secondly, credible elections enhance political accountability. Elected officials are more likely to be responsive to the needs and concerns of their constituents if they believe their political survival depends on it. This responsiveness is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance, driving policy decisions that reflect the will of the masses and studies have shown that in countries with credible electoral systems, there is a stronger link between public policy and public preferences (Powell, 2004).

Moreover, the importance of credible elections extends to social cohesion. When citizens believe in the fairness of the electoral process, they are more likely to engage in civic activities and contribute to societal development (Norris, 2014). Conversely, perceptions of electoral fraud or manipulation can lead to disenchantment and apathy, thereby undermining social trust and peaceful co-existence. The 2011 elections in Nigeria, for example, saw increased voter turnout and public participation due to perceived improvements in the electoral process, fostering greater social cohesion (Lewis, 2011).

Furthermore, credible elections are crucial for attracting foreign investment and fostering economic development. According to Collier and Hoeffler (2005), a peaceful environment and good governance are key factors that investors consider when making decisions. Electoral violence and the absence of peaceful coexistence can deter investment, hinder progress, and exacerbate poverty and inequality. This was also captured rightly by Nnajieto and Ahamefula (2015) that, there are numerous factors responsible for the poverty incidence. The causes are ubiquitous and in the psyche of the ruled and the rulers. While the ruled struggle to escape the poverty circle, the rulers are conscious of sliding back to experience poverty; thereby promoting corruption, misrule, injustice and other social vices. In summary, the credibility of elections underpins the legitimacy of democratic governance, fosters political accountability, enhances social cohesion, and attracts foreign investment, all of which are essential for sustainable development and peace (Diamond, 2008).

Ensuring the credibility of elections, therefore, should be a paramount objective for all democratic societies.

An Analysis of Indices of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Electoral violence has been a persistent challenge in Nigeria, undermining the democratic process and posing a significant threat to political stability. Understanding and contextualizing our antecedents by examining recent incidents of electoral violence are crucial for devising effective strategies to prevent it.

The Antecedents

Nigeria's past experiences of electoral violence date back to the pre-independence era. The first notable instance occurred during the 1964–1965 federal and regional elections. These elections were characterized by widespread violence, intimidation, and rigging, leading to political instability and contributing to the first military coup in 1966. The violence associated with these elections highlighted the deep-seated ethnic and regional tensions within the country (Sklar, 1963; Post and Vickers, 1973).

The return of civilian rule in 1979 did little to curb electoral violence. The 1983 elections were marred by significant electoral malpractices and violence, prompting another military takeover (Joseph, 1987). This cycle of violence continued into the Fourth Republic, which began in 1999 after years of military rule. The 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections were all dented by various degrees of violence. For example, Human Rights Watch reported that the 2007 elections were among the most violent in Nigeria's history, with over 300 people killed in election-related violence (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

Recent Incidents

Despite some improvements, recent past elections in Nigeria have not been free from violence. The 2015 general elections, although praised for the peaceful transition of power from Goodluck Jonathan to Muhammadu Buhari, witnessed significant violence, particularly in the pre-election period. The National Human Rights Commission documented 58 election-related deaths between December 2014 and February 2015 (National Human Rights Commission, 2015).

The 2019 general elections also experienced violence, with numerous reports of clashes between political party supporters, attacks on polling units/stations, and intimidation of

voters and electoral officials. The European Union Election Observation Mission reported that the elections were marked by a troubling level of violence and intimidation, especially in states like Rivers and Lagos (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2019). These incidents not only undermined the credibility of the elections but also discouraged voters from participating as many citizens feared for their safety.

In addition to the general elections, state and local elections have also seen significant violence. For instance, the November 2020 gubernatorial elections in Ondo State were marred by violent clashes between supporters of the major political parties contesting in the elections, resulting in several injuries and fatalities (Premium Times, 2020). Similarly, the 2021 local government elections in Kaduna State witnessed violent incidents, including the killing of a youth leader and attacks on election officials and materials (Daily Trust, 2021).

The impact of these violent incidents on the electoral process cannot be overstated. They lead to the loss of lives, destruction of property, and disruption of the electoral process. Voter turnout is often adversely affected, as fear of violence deters citizens from exercising their right to vote. Moreover, electoral violence erodes public confidence in the democratic process, fostering a sense of mistrust, deprivation, and apathy toward political participation (Bekoe, 2012).

Addressing Electoral Violence

Nigeria's recent experiences with electoral violence underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to prevent such violence. Addressing the root causes and implementing effective preventive measures are essential for ensuring credible elections and sustaining democratic governance in Nigeria. These strategies may include the reform of electoral laws to ensure transparency, accountability, and fairness; the strengthening of institutions responsible for election management and security; and the promotion of civic education to encourage peaceful political participation (Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2006).

Reform of Electoral Laws

Reforming electoral laws is crucial for creating a legal framework that supports free and fair elections. This includes establishing clear regulations for the conduct of elections, setting stringent penalties for electoral offenses, and ensuring that laws are consistently enforced.

By enhancing the transparency and accountability of the electoral process, reforms can help to restore public confidence and deter potential perpetrators of electoral violence. Ensuring that electoral laws are comprehensive and inclusive will also address issues of voter disenfranchisement and enhance the credibility of the electoral process (Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2006).

Strengthening Institutions

Effective election management relies on robust institutions that are capable of administering elections impartially and efficiently. This involves not only the electoral commissions but also the judiciary and security agencies. Strengthening these institutions requires adequate funding, capacity building, and ensuring their independence from political interference. Empowering institutions to act decisively against electoral malpractices and violence is critical for maintaining law and order during elections. Additionally, enhancing the professionalism and neutrality of security forces can prevent them from being used as tools for political intimidation and violence (Daxecker, 2012).

Promotion of Civic Education

Civic education plays a vital role in fostering a culture of peaceful political participation. Educating citizens about their electoral rights and responsibilities, the importance of nonviolent participation, and the mechanisms available for addressing grievances can reduce the likelihood of electoral violence. Civic education programs should target various groups, including voters, political party members, and security personnel, to ensure a broad understanding of democratic principles and the electoral process. By promoting critical thinking and informed decision-making, civic education can empower citizens to hold leaders accountable and demand transparency and fairness in elections.

Addressing Socio-Economic Inequalities

Socio-economic inequalities are often at the heart of electoral violence, as marginalized groups may resort to violence to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Addressing these inequalities involves creating economic opportunities, improving access to education, and fostering inclusive political processes. Economic empowerment programs, job creation initiatives, and educational reforms can provide marginalized communities with the tools they need to participate meaningfully in the political process. Inclusive political processes that give voice to underrepresented groups can help to mitigate

feelings of disenfranchisement and reduce the likelihood of violence (Collier and Vicente, 2014).

Creating Economic Opportunities

Creating economic opportunities is essential for addressing one of the root causes of electoral violence: economic frustration. Job creation initiatives, support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and investment in infrastructure can stimulate economic growth and provide citizens with alternatives to violence. Economic stability can reduce the appeal of violent tactics as a means of achieving political goals, thereby contributing to a more peaceful electoral environment.

Improving Access to Education

Education is a powerful tool for promoting social cohesion and reducing conflict. Improving access to quality education can equip individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to engage constructively in the political process. Educational reforms should focus on increasing literacy rates, reducing dropout rates, and ensuring that education is accessible to all segments of society, including marginalized groups. By fostering a well-informed electorate, education can enhance democratic participation and reduce the risk of electoral violence (Nnajieto and Ahamefula, 2015).

Fostering Inclusive Political Processes

Inclusive political processes are essential for ensuring that all groups in society have a voice in the electoral process. This involves creating mechanisms for political participation that are accessible to women, youth, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups. Political parties should be encouraged to adopt inclusive policies and practices, and electoral systems should be designed to reflect the diversity of the population. By fostering inclusivity, the political process can become more representative and less prone to conflict (Collier and Vicente, 2014).

Strategies for Preventing Electoral Violence and Achieving Credible Elections

Electoral violence prevention can be informed by sociological theories, particularly Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT posits that group dynamics and social identity influence behaviour, including conflict and violence. In the electoral context, SIT suggests that:

- Political affiliations and group membership shape behaviour and attitudes: Political parties and affiliations create strong social identities, which can drive competitive and sometimes hostile interactions between different groups.
- Competition for power and resources can lead to intergroup tensions and violence: The struggle for political control often heightens tensions and can lead to violence, especially in contexts where resources are scarce or unequally distributed.
- Social categorization and intergroup favouritism can fuel discrimination and conflict: People tend to favour their own groups over others, leading to discriminatory practices and conflict during elections.
- Social influence and norms can either perpetuate violence or promote peaceful behaviour: Group norms and social influences play a critical role in either escalating or mitigating violence.

Building on SIT, strategies for preventing electoral violence can include:

- Fostering inclusive political representation and addressing social inequalities: Ensuring that all social groups have a voice in the political process can reduce feelings of marginalization and the potential for violence.
- Encouraging intergroup dialogue and cooperation: Facilitating communication and cooperation between different political and social groups can help to reduce tensions and build mutual understanding.
- Challenging harmful social norms and promoting peaceful values: Campaigns and interventions aimed at changing harmful social norms and promoting peace can be effective in preventing violence.
- Supporting electoral education and critical thinking: Educating voters about their rights and the importance of peaceful participation can empower them to make informed decisions and resist incitement to violence.
- Promoting responsible media reporting and balanced coverage: Ensuring that media coverage is fair and balanced can help to prevent the spread of misinformation and reduce tensions.
- Strengthening institutional legitimacy and electoral integrity: Building strong, transparent, and accountable electoral institutions can enhance public trust and reduce the likelihood of violence.

- Encouraging nonviolent conflict resolution and peaceful protest: Promoting nonviolent methods of addressing grievances can provide alternatives to violence and help maintain peace.

As a complex phenomenon bedeviling society, a good understanding of the various causes of electoral violence is crucial to planning and implementing strategies. Some of these factors that engender violence during elections are summarized below:

1. Societal Factors: Exclusion of some ethnic and religious groups from positions of power can be a cardinal cause of electoral violence. Daxecker (2012, 2014) emphasizes that political exclusion based on ethnicity or religion is a significant driver of conflict.
2. Political Factors: Exploitations and feelings of disenfranchisement can lead to unhealthy rivalries and competitions among opposition parties, contributing to electoral violence.
3. Economic Factors: Economic inequalities, high rates of unemployment, hunger, and poverty are also major contributors to electoral violence. When people lack access to economic opportunities, they may resort to violence as a means of expressing their discontent (Ake, 1996).
4. Historical Factors: Historical grievances based on perceived injustices, betrayals, and dehumanization can also lead to electoral violence. Fjelde and Höglund (2016) note that past conflicts and unresolved grievances often resurface during elections.

Consequently, based on the catalogue of causes of violence during and after elections in Nigeria, some obvious consequences may surface:

- Dispossession of legitimate and qualified candidates from assuming office: Electoral violence can prevent competent candidates from being elected, undermining the democratic process.
- Deterrence of potential voters: Fear of violence can discourage people, especially women, from voting, leading to lower voter turnout and less representative outcomes.
- Usurpation of power by unscrupulous politicians: Violence can enable corrupt politicians to manipulate election outcomes and gain power illegitimately.

To ensure credible elections, electoral procedures must reveal the following:

1. Transparency: Clearly stated procedures without a breakdown in communication are essential for ensuring transparency in the electoral process.
2. Inclusiveness: Ensuring that all eligible voters can participate actively in the election is crucial for legitimacy.
3. Free and Fair Elections: No shady deals or manipulation of any kind should be allowed.
4. Accountability: Mechanisms responsible for addressing irregularities must be in motion.
5. Authenticity of Results: The outcome of every election must be verifiable, authentic, and reflect the will of the masses.
6. Acceptance by All: The results must be acceptable to all stakeholders, including the international community.

However, achieving a credible election requires deploying certain preventive strategies:

- Institutional Legitimacy: Establishing an autonomous and independent election commission ensures impartiality and reduces favouritism.
- Social Inclusion: Including all eligible voters in all communities helps to prevent disenfranchisement.
- Neutrality of Security Forces: Ensuring that security forces operate neutrally provides a safe environment for voters and reduces intimidation.
- Establishment of Social Norms: Screening eligible candidates thoroughly before participation promotes integrity and maintains social order.
- Freedom of the Press: Ensuring unbiased media reporting enhances decision-making and feedback from the public.
- Voter Education: Educating voters about their rights and obligations promotes informed and responsible participation.
- Global Monitoring: International bodies should observe the electoral process to ensure compliance with global standards.

- Post-Election Audits: Conducting regular post-election reviews helps to establish the integrity of electoral procedures and provides insights for future improvements (Alvarez, Hall, and Hyde, 2008).

Conclusion

In conclusion, adopting these strategies can serve as a panacea for achieving credible elections in Nigeria and other countries. By addressing the root causes of electoral violence and implementing effective preventive measures, it is possible to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections that reflect the will of the people.

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