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## **An Assessment of Electoral Violence and Voter Turnout in Northern Nigeria: 1999-2016**

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### **Abstract**

Electoral violence has been associated with the electoral process and elections in Nigeria since the twilight of the colonial period especially in 1959 elections. Over the years, electoral violence has grown in intensity and the perpetrators have become even more brazen in their acts of violence especially where they are members of the ruling party. The general assumption is that when electoral violence occurs, the voter turnout declines. However, this paper argues that there are certain situations where contrary to general assumptions, political parties resist the intimidation and violence and try to protect their votes. The paper also argues that because of the material benefits that voters collect from political parties and candidates, they are compelled to vote and so voter turnout does not necessarily decline when election violence occur.

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### **Introduction**

The conduct of free, fair and peaceful election is very critical to the flourishing of democracy and the development of a democratic culture. Although holding elections alone cannot make a state democratic, the conduct of elections provide the citizens the opportunity to participate in choosing their representatives. This is not only an important civic duty, but also affords the citizens the opportunity to participate in politics, which is one of the important requirements that qualify a political system as a representative democracy. Other importance of elections in a democracy is that it provides a peaceful means of transiting power from one government to another and this gives legitimacy to the incoming government as it would have emerged from the popular will of the people.

Although elections are meant to be a peaceful means of transiting power from one elected government to another, elections in Africa have become a major source of conflict and crises in the continent. Most elections in the African continent, except for a few countries like Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana etc. who have had peaceful elections, others elections held in countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa have been marred by violence and conflicts which have led to loss of lives and property. Electoral violence in Zanzibar (2005), Togo (2005), Democratic Republic of Congo (2006), Lesotho (2007), Kenya (2007/08, Zimbabwe (2008), Guinea Bissau (2008) etc. led to the death of thousands of people, the destructions of property and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes (Bekoe, 2010; Motsamai, 2010). For example the presidential elections in Kenya which was held in December 2007 ended in violence and bloodshed owing largely to the inability of President Mwai Kibaki to honour the agreement that led to the formation of the National Rainbow Coalition (NRC), a new political party which was formed through an alliance of the major tribes in Kenya. This led to the outbreak of violence which left over 1,200 people dead and over 350,000 displaced (Roberts, 2009). In Cote d'Ivoire, dispute over who won the elections between the two contestants Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara heightened tension and sparked violence which led to the death of hundreds of people and displacement of thousands from their homes (Cook, 2011).

The same can be said of Nigeria whose history of elections is replete with fraud, irregularities, arson, kidnappings, assassinations, ballot box snatching, violent threats etc. Since the commencement of elections in 1964 after the departure of the British colonialists, elections have always been accompanied with varying degrees of violence. The return of Nigeria to multi-party democracy in 1999 after a protracted military rule was another opportunity for the country to correct the wrongs of the past and build a democracy that is based on elections that are not only free and fair, but also, devoid of violence.

However, from what has transpired in the electoral process so far, politicians in Nigeria do not seem to have learnt from the mistakes of the past. Most politicians have carried on with the same politics of acrimony and rancour driven by greed and the desire for self-actualization which led to the truncation of previous civilian regimes of Alh. Tafawa Balewa in 1966 and Alh. Shehu Shagari in 1983. Although the elections that held in 1999 were relatively without much violence, those of 2003 and 2007 were marred with significant levels of violence. The April 2011 elections were also marred with bomb blasts which occurred in some states in the northern part of the country. The worst violence occurred following the announcement of the presidential election results on 18<sup>th</sup> April over a thousand people were killed, thousands more were displaced and several homes, Churches, Mosques and businesses were torched (ICG, 2011). Electoral violence also manifested itself in the general elections in 2015 in a number of states notably Rivers, Yobe, Gombe and a number of other states and several people lost lives and property (ERM, 2015).

The literature on electoral violence suggests a linear inverse relationship between electoral violence and voter turnout. This means that as electoral violence increases, voter turnout necessarily declines (Bratton, 2008; Collier & Vincent, 2008; Garcia, 2009; Otohile, 2009; Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010; Trelle & Carreras, 2012; Ikelegbe, 2013). However, statistics from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) reports for voter turnout for 1999-2019 general elections do not support this dominant view. Elections have generally continued to have steady levels of participation across the country in spite of the attendant violence that has continued to be part of the electoral process. How then can we explain this?

This paper investigates into Nigeria's general elections from 1999 to 2019 and voter turnout in spite of the violence in the polity. We shall attempt to analyse and explain why in spite of the significant levels of violence which occurred especially in 2003 and 2007, the post-election violence of 2011 and the election violence which occurred in some parts of the country in the 2015 election, there has not been a significant decline in voter turnout in most of the states especially in the northern part of the country as expected.

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## Theoretical framework

This work is anchored on political economy method of analysis because it adequately captures and explains the phenomenon of electoral violence in northern Nigeria and its impact on voter turnout. As a tool of analysis, political economy method of analysis "probes into the depth of issues, the interconnection of phenomena with a view to knowing their class origin, character and composition and the logic of their existence and future" (Momoh & Hundeyin, 1999). This approach goes beyond the superficial to examine and analyse socio-economic and political issues in the society. It is "a science for the study of society and shows how those who own and control the means of production (the ruling class) also control all the facets of society, and how invariably, they deploy their resources to either directly or through proxies, gain access to political power and ultimately the resources of the state. The political economy approach therefore helps in understanding these issues and also how best to address them for a society to be fair, equitable and just.

The political economy approach helps to explain the Nigerian state, which like other African states, controls enormous resources and those with political power invariably have access to these resources. Politicians in Nigeria, in most cases, seek to acquire political power so as to have access to state resources to first consolidate their economic base and also to dispense patronage to political godfathers, party officials and loyalists, kinsmen, town's men, and other followers etc. Politicians who are in power and who control the resources of the state do so to the total exclusion of the opposition. In fact, in most cases, what they try to do is to use their power (political and economic) to emasculate those in opposition and ruin their businesses or means of livelihood. So those in power have political as well as economic power while those outside political power have nothing. In their desperate desire to cling to power, they often whip up tribal, ethnic and religious sentiments among their people and create the impression that the opposition, especially if they belong to a different ethnic or religious group, are their enemies. As Ake (1981) puts it, the struggle to control and use state power becomes warfare. This explains why the stakes are very high in the quest to acquire political power in most African countries including Nigeria. This is also why those who are in power are willing to do anything to keep it, while those wanting to acquire political power will also try to do anything and everything possible to wrest power from the incumbents including the resort to violence where necessary.

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## Electoral violence and Nigeria's elections

Electoral violence is a limited aspect of political violence and it can occur at any point in the electoral cycle i.e. before, during and after the elections. Electoral violence has many manifestations e.g. murder, arson, abduction, assault, violent seizure and destruction of electoral materials. And they can be perpetuated by individuals and groups with the intention of influencing the outcome of the elections or deter elected officials from consolidating their positions after elections (Jegade, 2003); Ogundiya (quoted in Ogundiya & Baba 2007, p.249) defined electoral violence thus;

Electoral violence include all sorts of riots, demonstrations, party clashes, political assassinations, looting, arson, thuggery, Kidnapping etc., spontaneous or not, which occur before, during and after elections. It could be regarded as elections motivated crises employed to alter, change or influence by force or coercion, the electoral behavior or voters or voting patterns or possibly reverse electoral decision in favour of a particular individual, groups or political party.

The authors observe that electoral violence could be extensions or carryover of deep seated and age long conflicts between or among individuals, families and communities as have been observed with some communities where communal rivalries and chieftaincy disputes translated into political as well as electoral violence. They conclude that electoral violence has diminished the chances for Nigeria's democracy to flourish and also the citizen's affection or belief in democracy as a suitable model of government. They advocate for value orientation for the political elite and the altering of the ideological and philosophical bases of the political parties which are deeply rooted in ethnicity and religious sentiments (Ogundiya and Baba, 2007).

For Adesote & Abimbola (2014), electoral violence can be better understood by situating it within its political history and the foundation was laid by British colonialists. For them, the introduction of the elective principle in 1922 and the emergence of the Richards constitution in 1946 increased dissatisfaction and tension in the polity which led to the intensification of political agitations in the 1950s. The authors argue that massive electoral irregularities led to the outbreak of unprecedented electoral violence which led to the fall and collapse of the first and second republics. This disturbing trend unfortunately, continued largely unabated until 2011 when INEC in collaboration with security agencies took steps to arrest the worrying trend. They conclude that for democracy to survive and be consolidated, Nigerian politicians and other stakeholders in the electoral process have to adhere to the ideals and principles of electoral process as practiced in other democratic societies.

Electoral violence is introduced in the electoral process by both the incumbents and the opposition to harass and intimidate the other candidate(s) and their supporters for the sole purpose of preventing them from participating fully at the polls and thus reducing their chances of electoral victory (Unom & Ojo, 2010). Party officials and loyalists, community members and other supporters mobilize and participate in registration and voting because some material benefit accrues from it and what is even more is that there is prospect for more should their candidate win at the polls.

Interestingly, perhaps due to the intense monitoring of the polling day activities, electoral violence mostly occurs before the elections or immediately after the results have been announced (Laakso, 2007). The question to ask here is whether this can have any significant impact on the level of voter turnout. Interestingly also, from the works that we have considered, electoral violence is portrayed as largely driven by political interest. This paper believes that in Nigeria issues like religion and ethnicity are also very strong determinants of political inclinations and actions. It will be very helpful to examine how these affects electoral violence and voter turnout because from the literature that we have considered, there does not appear to be adequate attention focused on the implications of electoral violence for voter turnout especially in northern Nigeria where elections have continued to be marred with kidnappings, arson, assassinations, ballot box snatching, attack during campaigns etc.

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### **Ethnicity and religion in elections**

Ethnicity and religion have been used to mobilise voter across Nigeria since the first republic when the political parties founded by the founding fathers of Nigeria were established along ethnic and regional lines as well as religious connotations. Ethnicity has been defined by Osaghea as quoted in (Ukiwo, 2005) as the employment or mobilisation of ethnic identity and difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation. Ukiwo also observed that ethnicity is a product of conscious effort by social actors and does not only manifest in conflictive or competitive relations but also in the context of cooperation for example voting, community service and violence (Ukiwo, 2005p4).

Ethnicity and religion are very closely related in Nigeria especially in the northern part of the country because most ethnic groups inclined to one religion or the other. For example the Hausa/Fulanis who are considered as the majority in the north are mostly members of the Muslim faith while other smaller ethnic groups in across the north are mostly Christians. So most ethnic agitations are generally considered as religious as well because the two are often closely associated. This perhaps explains why politicians find it very profitable to mobilise voters along ethnic and religious lines because that is sure to get the attention of the electorates and bring them out to vote. The fear of domination and political exclusion by ethnic and religious groups has often led to tension and sometimes violence during elections. Religious and ethnic organisations have been known to be involved in electoral violence in northern Nigeria for example in Bauchi state 32 Christians and 72 churches were burnt over presidential elections results in April 2011 by attackers who were mainly Hausa thugs encouraged by Muslim preachers (Bello, 2005). In plateau state ethnicity and religion marred local government elections turning it into a killing spree which led by the time it was over left over 1000 people dead in 2001 and between 400 to 600 dead in 2008 (Ostein, 2009). Similar incidents have occurred in Kaduna state and other parts of the north during elections.

So why do people want to secure political office for either a members of their ethnic or religious group to the point of resorting to violence if necessary? This paper is of the view that beneath the ethnic and religious guise, is the desire to control political power to gain access to state resources. Ethnicity and religion on their own are not a sufficient explanation for electoral violence because own their own they do not say much. A more plausible explanation is that ethnicity and religion give access to people in power especially if they also belong to the same ethnic or religious group. That in turn leads to access to patronage like job opportunities, contracts, and cash gifts etc.

Consequently, voters especially where the candidate contesting for elections belongs to the same ethnic group or is of the same faith, are very likely to support and resort to violence where necessary to defend what is seen as a means of livelihood. For the incumbent, supporters rally to keep him/her in office including resorting to violence while for the opposition, it is a fight to oust the person standing between them and all that they stand to enjoy should their candidate get into the office. This is the reason why in places where mobilisation of voters based on religion and ethnicity leads to higher voter turnout because these are not just very strong sentimentally feelings but they also have material benefits as well.

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### **Inducements and elections**

The use of inducement by politicians to gain electoral victory has gained prominence over the years become a source growing to well-meaning Nigerians because of the many negative implications that it has on the country's politics. Inducement in this paper is taken to mean all financial or material gifts including promises of appointment, contracts or siting of projects that political parties or their candidates give or promise to deliver to individuals, groups or their communities in order to make them support and vote for that particular candidate or political party. This concern has necessitated the inclusion of such an act as an offence punishable under the law. According to the Electoral Act 2010, Article 130 : A person who - (a) corruptly by himself or by any other person at any time after the date of an election has been announced, directly or indirectly gives or provides or pays money to or for any person for the purpose of corruptly influencing that person or any other person to vote or refrain from voting at such election, or on account of such person or any other person having voted or refrained from voting at such election; or (b) being a voter, corruptly accepts or takes money or any other inducement during any of the period stated in paragraph (a) of this section, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of N100,000 or 12 months imprisonment or both (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010).

Perhaps because the punishment for this offence is not very stiff, politicians and their agents have continued to brazenly break this law and voters have continued to accede to the wishes of their benefactors by voting in whatever way the paymaster requires. Neither the electoral commission nor security agencies have been able to curb this growing trend despite all the noise they have been making about apprehending offenders.

The question to ask is why would anyone want to sell his/her vote? For some, the reason why some voters decide to collect some kind of financial or material inducement in exchange for their vote can be attributed to the growing distrust for politicians (Dalton, 2004). However, this paper is of the view that a more sufficient explanation is the one given by the political economy approach i.e. the need for material benefits. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2012) northern Nigeria is the poorest region of the country with the highest number of poor people in the country for instance the North East and North West having about 70% of their people in the firm grip of absolute poverty. These are the same people who vote during elections and for such people for whom every day is a struggle to eat and survive, election time is akin to harvest time where they collect what they can from politicians because they know they would not see them again until another election season. This point is corroborated by a research conducted in Ghana where voters see elections as the time when they get to 'chop' from their social superiors seeking for political office (Nugent, 2007). And because the exchange between the candidates or their representatives and the voters is seen as a transaction, the voters are obliged to comply with the wishes of their benefactors to vote on election day even if there is threat of violence.

To ensure compliance, the agents of the candidates usually give only some part of the inducement to the voter, the rest is given after the voter has complied with their wish. Usually the agents hang around the polling station at some distance to ensure compliance and if satisfied, the balance is then remitted. The sheer number of people who have collected one form of inducement or another from politicians or their agents especially in the north where there is a growing army of poor and unemployed people ready and willing to collect whatever they can get in exchange for their votes explains why voter turnout continues to be high in spite of the violence that occurs during elections.

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### Political parties and electoral violence

Political parties in Africa and Nigeria by extension have been accused of using violence to further their course especially during the elections. Incumbent parties have used the security agencies under the control of the state to harass and intimidate the opposition and their supporters to ensure electoral victory. Electoral violence is therefore used as a means of dominance by the state and government parties to rig elections and stay in power (Mehler, 2007).

Opposition parties have also been alleged to use violence either as a means of defence or also to show that they have the capacity to reciprocate the harassment and intimidation that they suffer in the hands of the incumbent party and its supporters as well. This was the case with the southern part of Nigeria during the 2015 elections where the level of electoral violence was considered very high because the People's Democratic Party (PDP) wanted to retain power in the state by all means possible (Ladan-Baki, 2016).

Violence manifest itself at various points in the course of elections especially during party primaries and nomination of candidates, during campaigns, on elections day and after the announcement of the election results. According to Mehler, (2007) electoral violence has continued to accompany elections in Africa due to the fact that there is an absence of the legitimate monopoly of violence by the state. This means that all those who have the capacity to mobilise violence like big party men, candidates or their agents, criminals and a host of others can do without any hindrance. This explains why politicians recruit and arm youths during electioneering period and the high risk of violence that often occurs as they compete outdo each other at the polls in the guise of self-defence because the state is weakened and has lost its control over the monopoly to violence.

The implication for voter turnout is that parties mobilise to protect their stronghold to secure the votes that they can get while making incursion into the camp of the opposition to get whatever number of votes they can salvage from there. It is simplistic to assume that once there is violence, voters and party faithful's just scamper off and the aggressors get to do whatever they want. What has been observed over the years is that every political party has its own armed group who protect the voters, the elections officials and their materials to ensure that they do not loose. For example Premium Times quoted in Ladan-Baki (2016) reported that the then governor of Katsina state Shehu Shema ordered his people to kill the opposition party members because they are cockroaches.

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### Conclusion

There is no doubt that electoral violence has negatively affected the conduct and the outcome of elections in Nigeria to the point where the governments that emerge from these violence filled elections tend to be seen by most Nigerians to have very little legitimacy. Although electoral violence is not new in Nigeria because it has been occurring even in pre-colonial Nigeria, the scale and frequency is becoming very concerning as it has in certain circumstances negatively affected voter turnout. However, political parties especially those who do not have the control over security agencies have also devised various means by which they mobilise voters and protect them in their quest to wrest power from the incumbent party in government. This perhaps explains why there has not been a significant decline in the voter turnout in spite of the violence that has accompanied elections since 1999. Our hope going forward is that we will witness less acrimony in our elections and begin to see the strengthening of our fledgling democracy.

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