

Insecurity and Election Related Violence in Nigeria: Interrogating the 2023 General Elections in a guided Democracy.

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Abstract.

Nigeria as country is bedeviled by a lot of security challenges, ranging from Bokoharam insurgency, separatist agitation, kidnapping, banditry, farmer-herder clashes, unknown gun men, armed robbery etc. These spate of insecurity was further exacerbated by electoral violence which led to loss of lives and properties both in North, South and Eastern part of the country. This study investigated the interplay between insecurity and election related violence in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The study unveiled the high level of compromised credibility during the 2023 general elections which other related studies failed to sufficiently address. The study adopted qualitative design with content analysis. Rational choice theory was adopted for the study. The study indicted policy framework of consensus candidate during party primaries and other electoral stakeholders of compromising credibility. Hence, there is fundamental need for national conversation of building solid reform for electoral management to ensure peace, free, fair and credible election in Nigeria.

Keywords: Insecurity, Election, Electoral Violence, Nigeria.

Introduction.

Before the 2023 general elections, Nigeria has been facing a lot of security challenges, ranging from Bokoharam insurgency, separatist agitation, kidnapping, banditry, farmer-herder clashes, unknown gun men, armed robbery etc. These spate of insecurity has consistently threatened the lives and wellbeing of Nigerians as well as the cooperate existence of Nigeria as a country. Paul and Doosuur (2022) noted that the far reaching effects of insecurity are obvious in various communities in Nigeria. This is so, owing to the fact that insecurity in recent years has been one of the major challenges facing majority of the Nigerian states as can be seen in states both in the Northern, Southern and Western part of Nigeria.

No country or society will ever make significant progress politically, economically, and otherwise if the socio-political and economic environment of such country is bedeviled by varying degrees of security challenges.

So many factors are responsible for the increasing level of insecurity that is being witnessed in Nigeria. Ewenta and Urhie,(2014); Achumba, (2013); Jafar, (2021); Ozoigbo, (2019); Rufa'i, (2021); and Adeleke, (2013) have noted thatpolitically motivated factors, bad governance, weak security system, injustice, porous borders, proliferation of Arms, pervasive

corruption, social inequality, unemployment, poverty, loss of cherished traditional values, moral decadence and illiteracy are the major factors causing insecurity in Nigeria. Efforts of the Nigerian government to nip these security menaces at the bud seems to have yielded little or no result hence, the security situation in the country have continued unabated with undermining effects on Nigeria's general elections, 2023 general elections inclusive.

The security situation in Nigeria especially during the 2023 general elections was further exacerbated by electoral violence which led to loss of lives and properties both in North, South and Eastern part of the country. A report by Kimpact Development Initiative, a civil society organization published by Punch newspaper on the 12th of May 2023, shows that a total of 238 violence cases and 28 deaths were recorded during the 2023 general elections. The report further reveals that, while 98 of the total violence occurred during the February 25 presidential election, 140 were reported during the March Governorship and State House of Assembly polls. This seriously undermined the credibility of the 2023 general elections because, Periodic elections as an essential aspect or characteristics of democracy should take place in a conducive environment devoid of all forms electoral violence.

IRIAD-The Electoral Hub(2023), noted thus:

that the rise in general insecurity across the country has contributed to election-related insecurity, as pre-existing insecurity tends to escalate during elections. The point is that those factors that drive insecurity in the country also aggravate violence during elections. This suggests that preexisting insecurity is likely to be worsened during elections, as the purveyors of such insecurity are likely to ramp up their activities to disrupt elections. In any case, it is usually the case that the same arms that are used to perpetrate violent crimes are also used for violence during elections, and criminals are likely to be recruited by politicians as armed phalanxes in electoral "wars"

It is against this background that this study investigated the interplay between insecurity and election related violence in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The study also unveiled how proliferation of small arms fueled electoral violence during the elections and its negative impact on voter turnout.

Conceptual discourses.

Insecurity:

Insecurity refers to the state of fear or anxiety stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection. (Beland, 2007). On the contrary, Achumba, Ighomereho, and Akpan-Robaro

(2013) analysed insecurity from two angles. Firstly, they noted that "When anything is in danger, it is said to be in a vulnerable condition because it is exposed to it or is likely to be in it. Secondly, they maintained that insecurity is the feeling of risk or anxiety, whereas anxiety is a general uncomfortable feeling experienced in advance of any bad luck". This dualised view of insecurity reveals a fundamental element of insecurity. This is so because, when insecurity manifests, individuals or persons who are affected by it are usually prone to the dangers and threats that may be present.

Election:

Election refers to the way by which electorates periodically choose their representatives into various positions of administration (Igini, 2013: 43).

The founding pillars of any democratic political system, whether considered fragile or established, remain undoubtedly elections which can simply be taken as the most critical and visible means through which all citizens can peacefully choose or remove their leaders, and which are evidently costly affairs (Anglin 1998:474).

Elections have technical and social significance. In the technical sense, they are the process through which an office or a post is assigned to a person by an act of volition that requires the simultaneous expression of many people's opinions. In the social sense an election is the process by which a person is linked to an office through the due participation of the people who will bear the weight of his or her authority. It is this social aspect of elections that generates the idea of governing a society with the consent of the governed, and this boils down to democracy and distinguishes election from appointment. (Akzin, 1960:706-8).

Electoral Violence:

The concept of electoral violence generally has to do with the various forms of organized psychological, physical, and structural threats/acts whose main goal is to intimidate, harm, or blackmail political stakeholder(s) prior to, during and or after an election in order to delay or influence an electoral process. This means that electoral violence can be multifaceted—it has physical, psychological, and structural dimensions. The physical dimension of electoral violence manifests in such acts as opposition politicians being assassinated, looting, arson, hostage taking and kidnapping, violent interruption of campaign rallies, raids on polling and tallying centres, armed snatching, and destruction of ballot boxes and ballot papers among others. (Abdulai, 2023).

Electoral violence is regarded as a physical violence unleashed by political thugs used in election rigging processes or by the masses of the people reacting against the theft of an election. It involves the use of physical force, psychic terror tactics, or official bureaucratic machinery to pursue improper electoral ends. (Nwolise, 2007).

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on the rational choice theory. The ideas behind rational choice theory are said to have originated from Adam Smith's essay, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1776). This essay proposed that human nature has a tendency toward self-interest, and this self-interest resulted in prosperity through the control of the so-called "invisible hand" — the collective actions of the self-interested human race.

Although rational choice theory stemmed from neoclassical economists such as Smith, the theory was adopted into the social sciences in the 1950s and 1960s through the works of George C. Homans, Peter Blau, and James Coleman. They related rational choice theory to social exchange stating that, a rational calculation of an exchange of costs and rewards drives social behavior. (Nickerson, 2023).

The central message of the rational choice theory is that every individual and their actions are rational and their decisions are made by considering costs and rewards. In other words, individuals use their self-interests to make choices that will provide them with the greatest reward.

Applicably, political aspirants who do not enjoy the popular support of the masses, out of their selfishness and hunger for power usually instigate violence in order to influence the electoral process in their favour. The decision to use violent approach to alter elections usually seems rational to them so long as the greatest reward being the outcome of the election will be in their favour. This is why such aspirants usually pay heavy prices and sometimes goes as far as eliminating their opponents; their belief is that whatever price that is paid to win an election even through violent means is worth it.

Methodology.

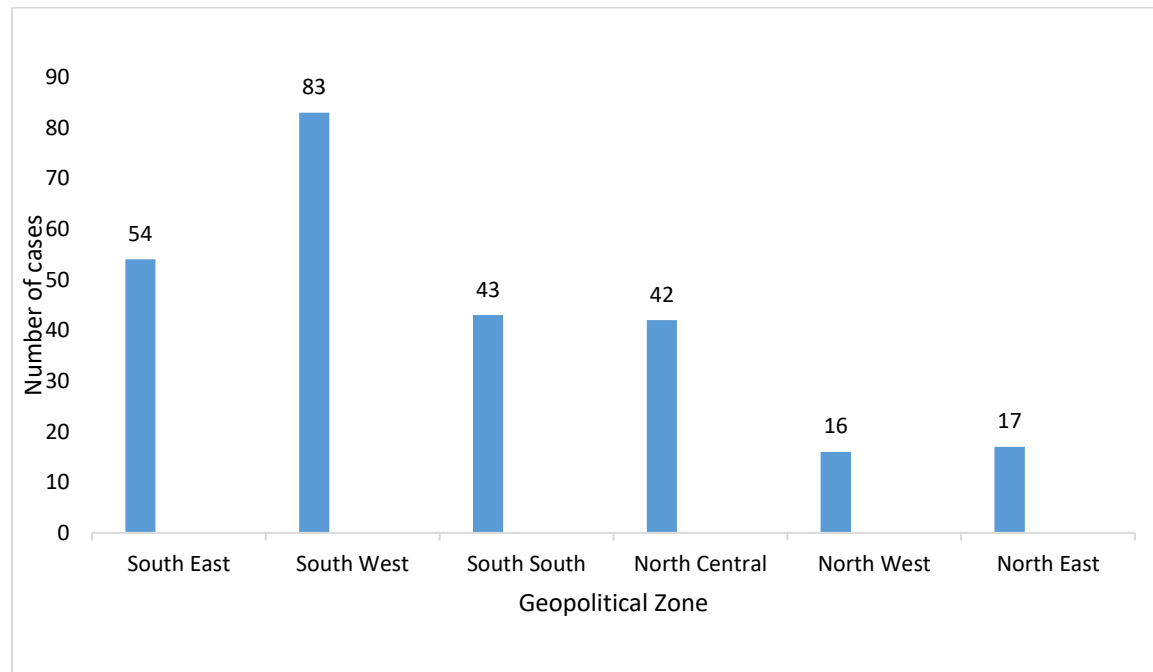
For the purpose of this study, qualitative design as well as content analysis was adopted. The sources of data utilised in this study is basically secondary sources. Data were drawn from published books, journal articles, and other internet materials that are relevant to the subject matter under investigation. This approach is appropriate as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the scope and nature of electoral violence.

Incidences of violence before, during and after the 2023 general elections.

In the buildup to the 2023 general elections, several cases of violence arising majorly from party primaries and campaign rallies were recorded. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), reported over 200 cases of electoral violence resulting in 100 deaths with south east and south south recording the highest number of violent cases. They further noted that candidates, election officials and politicians were violently attacked. Party militias, criminal gangs and other armed groups engaged in violence to suppress opponents, deter rival

candidates from running and influencing the electoral process. Several individuals, party leaders and candidates also lost their lives as a result of the violence. Specific examples of such cases as reported by ACLED (2023): includes but not limited to the case of the PDP candidate for Ideato North and South federal constituency in Imo state who was killed in his residence in Akokwa community in January 2023. In Abia state, a former PDP leader in was among the four people killed in Ohafia Local Government Area (LGA) in March 2022, while an LP leader in Kaura LGA of Kaduna state was also murdered in November after gunmen raided her house.

Figure1: Number of electoral violence cases per geopolitical zone 2023.

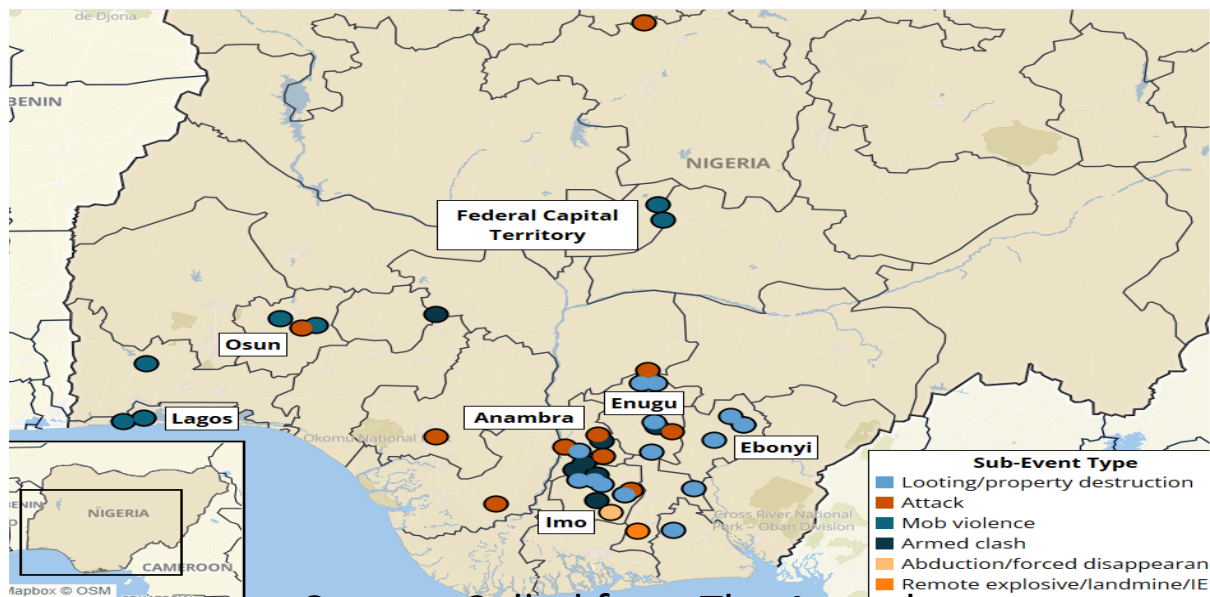


Source: Nwoba, Nwuze, Nwankwo, and Onwa 2025.

Figure 2: Violent attacks on INEC offices and staffs

Violence Against INEC Offices and Staff

1 January 2021 - 18 February 2023



Source: Culled from The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) report 2023.

Electoral violence and voter turnout.

Electoral violence creates an atmosphere of fear among voters. This unconducive atmosphere occasioned by fear of intimidation, assault, loss of life and harm from political thugs, usually discourage voters from participating in the electoral process. The premium newspaper of 8th march 2023 reported that in the 2023 General Elections, only 24,965,218 people representing just 28.71% of the total registered voters of 93,469,008 voted during the elections. Among other factors, electoral violence was identified as a major cause of this low turnout.

Powell (2000) noted that elections work well when they can provide the opportunity for most people to participate in politics while Norris (2014) observed that voter turnout tends to be high when there is electoral integrity – that is, when votes are counted fairly, elections are fair, voters are offered genuine choice in the elections and journalists provide fair coverage of elections. It tends to be low when there is electoral malpractice, for example, rich people buys elections, television news favoured the governing party, voters were bribed, opposition candidates were prevented from running and voters were threatened with violence at the polls.

Such was the case in the 2023 general elections and it accounted for much of the electoral violence witnessed before, during and the elections.

Electoral violence and proliferation of arms.

Greater percentage of the fundamental hindrances to peace and security in West African sub-region and Nigeria in particular are: elections and proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW). The proliferation of small arms constitutes a major source of disruptions to our democracy and outcome of elections. This has led to destruction of lives and properties and worsens inter-communal tensions leading to loss of confidence in our electoral system. (Okafor, & Agu 2021).

Haruna and Jumba (2011) noted that employing the services of thugs and equipping them with small arms throughout the election period has become a stock in trade for Nigerian politicians in order to achieve their political aims and targets. Elections instigates the widespread use of small arms thereby increasing tension among different political parties and those jostling for political positions. Small arms helps in perpetrating electoral violence in various ways, such as assault, arson, abduction, ballot box snatching and stuffing as well as assassination of political opponents or rivals. These violent acts are undertaken by individuals and groups with the aim of influencing the outcome of elections. The above trend not only poses a significant threat to peace and security of Nigeria, but also erodes a fundamental aspect of the nation's democratic processes.

Conclusion.

Electoral violence remains a significant threat to the future of democracy in Nigeria. However, understanding its root causes and implementing the proposed solutions, will place the country on a path towards a more inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous democratic system, devoid of all forms of election-related violence in future elections. To achieve this, stakeholders from every works of life ranging from political leaders to civil society organizations as well as the citizens, must make serious efforts to safeguard the electoral process and embrace a culture of non-violence, before, during and after every election cycle.

Recommendations.

The study recommends that:

1. Political parties must conduct their primaries in line with their respective constitutional provisions, ensuring that transparency and fairness is maintained during the process in order to avoid post-election violence arising from the conduct of party primaries.
2. Perpetrators of electoral violence must be arrested and punished accordingly in order to deter others from engaging in it.
3. Effective implementation of the legal framework against illegal possession of firearms and arms proliferation must be ensured by the security agencies and other concerned government agencies as a discouragement to those who engage in electoral violence.

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