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Curbing Electoral Violence in Nigeria: The Imperative of Political Education (Pp. 99-110)

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Abstract

Both domestic and international political sociologists based on empirical investigations argue that the greatest obstacle to democratic consolidation in Nigeria is electoral violence. This is as a result of the rascal politics that the political elites engage in. Sometimes, the violence is intra-party, and most of the time, it is inter-party. Apart from that the fact that this phenomenon affects the credibility of the electoral system, the democratic system and the rule of law, the nature, extent and magnitude of violence and rigging associated with elections in Nigeria had assumed alarming proportions that necessitates intellectual excursion to the realm of possible solutions. Education has been discovered to be a major strategy and weapon to curbing this democratic impediment. To this end, this paper examines the imperative of political education in curbing this ugly trend if the nation is to enthrone enduring and sustainable democratic order that would be a delight to behold.

Keywords: Election; Electoral Violence; Political Violence

Introduction

Election is an irreducible feature of democratic governance. Democracy here is defined as a social system of administrating a nation-state where political parties and independent candidates compete for elective positions in a free and fair election atmosphere, and in which the citizens are legally empowered to choose those who will run the affairs of the state in a given period.

According to Wikipedia (2009) such elections are supposed to be competitive, free and fair both substantively and procedurally; and in which the ability of the elected representatives to exercise decision-making power is subject to the rule of law, and usually moderated by a constitution that emphasizes the protection of the rights and freedoms of individuals, and which places constraints on the leaders and on the extent to which the will of the majority can be exercised against the rights of minorities. Despite the legal framework that guides the electoral process, there is usually a contest between those who want to acquire power and those who are likely to lose power. The contest normally put the toga of violence because some politicians usually want to cut corners. A cursory look at democratic history of Nigeria reveals that of electoral cum political violence that sometimes threaten the country to its very foundation. This development in part had made democratic consolidation somehow problematic, and on the other hand has made it difficult for Nigeria to be referred to as a democratic state even though operators vehemently lay claim to it.

The point has to made that historically, violence is a major feature of political life everywhere around the world. Only that politics-related violence varies in intensity, trends and dimensions from one political system to another. As a matter of fact, comparative political scientists agree that from time immemorial, violence has been a constant of human societies all over the world, and in particular, today's world is awash with violence (see Ayeni-Akeke, 2008). Despite the fact that several theories could be used to explain the phenomenon of electoral violence in Nigeria's political landscape, transparent electoral system that helps to put in place a transparent political transition is what Nigerians are seeking after experiencing several years of harrowing military dictatorship. As a matter of fact, high premium has been globally placed on democratic governance attained through successfully conducted elections that meet international standards set by democracy-inclined citizens, and multilateral organizations.

Since electoral violence with concomitant effect had been the bane of Nigeria's democratic transition, there has been the need to set in motion a machinery to curb the menace. How can Nigeria curb electoral violence and all that is wrong with the electoral process? How can Nigeria consolidate democratic rule and limit the fissiparous forces that war against it? A major way out of this malaise is political education. To this end, this paper is set out to answer these and other questions.

Conceptual clarifications

Election

Election is an integral part of a democratic process that enables the citizenry determine fairly and freely who should lead them at every level of government periodically and take decisions that shape their socio-economic and political destiny; and in case they falter, still possess the power to recall them or vote them out in the next election. This was why Rose (1978) and Dye (2001) aptly defined election thus: Election is a major instrument for the recruitment of political leadership in democratic societies; the key to participation in a democracy; and the way of giving consent to government (Dye, 2001); and allowing the governed to choose and pass judgment on office holders who theoretically represent the governed (Rose, 1978).

Political violence

Political violence are a sum total of violence that are associated with the political process. It could come from within or outside the country, and manifests in various forms. A summation of the array of definitions in the literature see political violence as the use or threat of physical act or a considerable destructive use of force carried out by an individual or group of individuals within a political system against another individual or group of individuals and/or property, with the intent to cause injury or death to persons and/or damage to property, and whose objective, choice of targets or victims, surrounding circumstances implementation and effects have political significance, that is intended to modify the behaviour of others in the existing arrangements of a power structure; or directed to a change in the politics, systems, territory of government and hence also directed to changes in the lives of individuals within societies (Honderich, 1989; Anifowose, 1982; see Edigin and Obakhedo, 2010).

Electoral violence

There is no agreeable definition of electoral violence. This is because of the contentious issue of ‘violence begets violence’ developed by Frantz Fanon in the era of anti-colonial struggles. The Fanonian argument is predicated on the fact that ‘violence provokes violence’. So those who retaliate to the first violence of political opponents do not agree that they are perpetrating violence. They simply argue that they are countering violence. From the array of definitions available, one can glean an operational definition. Operationally, electoral violence connotes all forms of violence (physical, psychological, administrative, legal and structural) at different stages engaged in by participants, their supporters, and sympathizers (including

security and election management body staff) in the electoral process (Balogun, 2003). These forms of violence take place before elections, during elections and after or post-election, and could also be intra- or inter-party.

The anatomy of the causes of electoral violence in Nigeria

Suffice it to say that contingent upon the debilitating effect of electoral violence on the nation's political landscape, a galaxy of questions and posers about the causes of electoral violence had been raised. A cursory look at the literature reveals suggests a number of reasons. The answer can be found in the array of causes of electoral violence that have been identified in the literature. Some scholars contend that the causes are: greed; electoral Abuses, and rigging of elections; Abuse of political power; alienation, marginalization and exclusion; and the political economy of oil (Igbuzor, 2009). Yet, other scholars adduce the following as the causes of the phenomenon: poverty/unemployment (Maslow, 1954); ineffectiveness of security forces and culture of impunity; weak penalties; weak governance and corruption (Galtung, 1969); and, proliferation of arms and ammunitions. In the same vein, other pundits argue that the causal factors are: lack of security; partisanship of traditional rulers who were supposed to be the custodians of our cultural heritage; abuse of office by elected officials; zero-sum politics or winner takes it all syndrome; lucrative nature of political office; poor handling of election petition, and lack of faith in the judiciary; and lack of compliance with the extant electoral law and enforcement of the enabling laws; the partisan disposition of the police, and other security agencies detailed to monitor the election, and secure lives and property; corrupt INEC staff and ad-hoc officials who connive with the politicians; conflict of interests between and among politicians; and greed and selfish interests of politicians coupled with ideological bankruptcy (Ugiagbe, 2010).

However, prevalent forms of political violence in Nigeria exude in political assassinations, arsons, violence-pruned campaigns, thuggery, election-related ethno-religious crisis, snatching of ballot boxes and so on and so forth. Analysts agree that this has been possible because election in Nigeria is seen as a "do or die affair". This violence is most often carried out by gangs whose members are openly recruited and paid by politicians and party leaders to attack their sponsors' rivals, intimidate members of the public, rig elections, and protect their patrons from similar attacks. The architects, sponsors, and perpetrators of this violence generally enjoy complete impunity because of both the powers of intimidation they wield and the tacit

acceptance of their conduct by police and government officials at all levels (HRW, 2007).

It is against this backdrop that the Nigeria's governing elite have been widely implicated in acts of electoral violence, corruption and fraud so pervasive as to resemble criminal activity more than democratic governance (HRW, 2007). It is intriguing to note that members of the political class responsible for instigating this plethora of violence as well as their foot-soldiers who undermine the electoral process by perpetrating these violent acts are never brought to book. Political behaviouralists have argued that violent electoral behaviour which is either intended to hurt or kill political opponents or their supporters has a devastating human rights impact on ordinary Nigerians. In the same vein, they contend that the scenario is prevalent because of the nature of the political system, the prevailing political culture and the level of political socialization. In the Nigerian case, electoral violence is more entrenched because our political system is supportive of zero-sum game politics. This was why Otoghile (2009) described electoral violence as the radioactive by-product of some structural and attitudinal dislocations in the society which affects the level of political participation of the citizenry.

The sociological discourse on the theory of violent conflicts and violent political behaviour that exude in electoral violence contends that such acts hinge on the following theories: relative deprivation; rising expectation; frustration-aggression; systemic hypothesis; and group conflict theories (Okanya, 2001). All of them can be used to explain electoral violence in Nigeria but the one that best captures the general phenomenon of electoral violence is the systemic hypothesis. It lays emphasis on the variable which often contributes to the maintenance of a political order or disorder, such as the breakdown of consensual norm, instances of political alienation, the cohesiveness of a ruling group and its legitimacy, and the attendant effect on the social structure and the political process (Okanya, 2001; Anifowose, 1982).

Pre-election campaigns, election-time, and post elections periods are usually violent, with campaigning in many areas beset by political killings, bombings and armed clashes between supporters of rival political factions (see Abutudu and Obakhedo, 2009). Even though this plethora of violence forms part of a broader pattern of violence and abuse that is inherent in Nigeria's largely unaccountable political system; often times, perpetrators are never punished leading to a great distortion of our democratic practice. As a matter of act,

examples too close for our comfort abound of Nigeria's system of politics has actively rewarded corruption and violence with control over governorships, parliamentary seats and other positions of public trust despite existing law (HRW, 2007).

Historical perspective on electoral violence in Nigeria

The nation's political history is replete with instances of electoral violence. We cannot discuss all in one paper like this. To this end, some of them would be discussed here. Since Nigeria became independent on October 1, 1960 with pomp and pageantry, the history of elections has been written in violence. The Human Rights Watch (2007) in its follow up of post-independence events describes the nation's post-independence history as being overshadowed by the depredations of a series of corrupt, abusive, and unaccountable governments. This description is apt because it appeared that Nigerians seem to have acquired a culture of electoral violence as six of the seven general elections conducted since independence in 1960 have been violence-ridden – 1964/1965, 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003 and 2007 (Malu, 2009). For example, at independence, the country adopted a parliamentary system of government akin to the British type. The first post-independence election organized by that government led by Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa/President Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1964 and 1965 were characterized by widespread complaints of fraud, violence and intimidation (Osaghae, 1998). Protest in the wake of the regional elections, which in some areas degenerated into a violent exercise in competitive rigging, led to widespread violence and inter-communal rioting that claimed more than 200 lives (Anifowose, 1982; HRW, 2007), and later in January 1966, the military struck and the fledgling Nigerian democracy was thwarted by the action of its very own practitioners.

From 1966, the military held sway until 1979 when they handed over to another civilian government headed by Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN). The Shagari-led government organized a civilian to civilian transition election but again like its First Republic counterparts repeated history and massively rigged the 1983 general elections through very violent means in connivance with the election management body, Federal Election Commission (FEDECO) and security forces. That again set the stage for the second wave of military intervention in the nation's politics on December 31, 1983. The military from then remained in power until May 29, 1999 after several attempts to democratize. Suffice it to say that between independence in 1960 and 1999 when civilian rule was restored, Nigeria

produced only two elected governments and both were overthrown in military *coup de'tats* before completing a second term in office. All told, Nigeria's military ruled the country for nearly 30 of its first 40 years of independence, excluding the three months of short-lived Interim National Government (ING) (HRW, 2007).

Since the restoration of civil rule, attempts have not been made by politicians to deepen and strengthen democracy. Instead, Nigeria has only added to its history of fraudulent and violent elections. The 1999, 2003 and 2007 general elections that brought President Olusegun Obasanjo and later late President Umaru Yar' Adua to power were marred by such widespread violence and fraud. For example, this was how the US-based Jimmy Carter Centre for Democracy which monitored the 1999 election as an international observer concluded its report on the outcome of the presidential election like the others before it: "It is not possible for us to make an accurate judgment about the outcome of the presidential election" (HRW, 2007). In the same vein, the 2003 elections were more pervasively and openly rigged than the flawed 1999 polls, and far more bloody.

These events set the stage for the 2007 elections which both domestic and foreign observers succinctly described as the worst in Nigeria's history ranking among the worst conducted anywhere in the world in recent times (HRW's interviews with voters and observers on the April 2007 elections). For instance, the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) stated in its post-election statement that the electoral process "failed the Nigerian people" (NDI, 2007). The Human Rights Watch (2007) which monitored the election in its report said the Nigeria's failed April 2007 polls cast a harsh and very public light on patterns of violence, corruption and outright criminality that have come to characterize Nigeria's political system—and on the extent to which officials and institutions at all levels of government accept, encourage and participate in those abuses (HRW, 2007). The 2007 general elections had come and gone with some cases still in courts, Nigerians are afraid of future elections especially the 2011 elections that are a stone throw away.

Political education: a strategy for curbing electoral violence in Nigeria

There is a galaxy of ways that Nigeria could use to curb electoral violence and strengthen democratic governance. They include: constitutional amendment; electoral reform; pressure from civil society groups through agenda-setting; change in the character of the elite; political education etc.

The most important of them which forms the fulcrum of this paper is: political education. All others rest on its effectiveness.

It has been argued at several fora that the significance and utility of political education cannot be over-emphasized. This is because political education as it were is the conduit-pipe through which the political cultural values and behavioural patterns of the society are imbibed and internalized political socialization. In any case, since Nigerians tend to be very religious, religious books emphasize the need for acquisition of knowledge as an instrument for guiding and girding against the wiles of the enemy in all societies, Nigeria inclusive. Therefore, there is the need for Nigerians to have a fore and deeper knowledge of causes, manifestations, dimensions, consequences and ways of curbing the phenomenon.

Since education has been identified as the launch-pad of a nation-state's development agenda, political education constitutes a herculean task for the several agents of education in Nigeria; namely: the family; peer groups; schools (primary, secondary, and tertiary); religious institutions; civil society organizations and the fourth estate of the realm (the mass media).

For schools as agent of socialization and social change, the need to abhor all forms of violence must be incorporated into our school curriculum. The political education that the pupils and students would receive will both in the short and long term deepen our political culture and socialization processes. Therefore, Nigerians should know the dynamic nature of our politics, and the emerging trends that shape the political culture and determine the direction of political socialization, and in relation to electoral violence, should learn, imbibe and internalize the political sociology of electoral behaviour education. This would help the nation to either make or mar its emerging democratic order.

Sociologically, politics marred by violence is synonymous with the politics of bitterness that would create an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and arson; and would not allow the people to choose their leaders. Such politics undermine competitive electoral politics and alienate the citizens politically and make them politically apathetic, and create a fundamental disjuncture between the civil society and the state. This deeply-rooted problem contributes to growing cases of mass disenfranchisement of the citizens with its attendant political normlessness and exclusion which does not help to deepen and consolidate our democracy.

The citizens also need to know and appreciate the workings of the nation's election management body (Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC) including the enabling legal framework. This framework outlines the amendment of the 1999 Constitution, the 2010 Electoral Law (Act), and other related regulations and rules to enhance the integrity, relevance, and adequacy of the institutional reform of INEC. That understanding must include citizenship education that encompasses a good understanding of the legal basis of electoral governance with a very useful model that operates at three levels: (a.) rule making; (b.) rule application, and, (c.) rule adjudication (Aiyede, 2008 while quoting Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002). This legal basis stipulates the punishment to be meted out to electoral offenders no matter how highly placed. Legally and constitutionally too, an Election Malpractice Tribunal should be established as recommended by the Justice Muhammadu Lawal Uwais' Electoral Reform Committee. The Tribunal would enable cases to be discharged expeditiously. With the necessary political will, this development would help stamp out the culture of impunity so that perpetrators of electoral offences can be prosecuted and be held accountable for such offences. There must be evidence of prosecution of violators since a climate and culture of impunity will undo the best rules or regulations (see Joseph *et al*, 2005). It is based on the above that scholars have argued that government should ensure that the Justice Mohammed Uwais Electoral Reform Recommendations are fully implemented through legislation by the National Assembly (Joseph *et al*, 2005; Mahmud, 2008; Opadokun, 2009:38).

Politically, and in terms of development, leaders who emerge as products of violence-prone elections are not likely to be the people's choice, and are not likely to consider the peoples' opinion on policies and issues that affect their daily lives. While such leaders lack legitimacy by procedure, they may spend their entire term in office trying to secure legitimacy by results which may lead to necessary people-oriented policies because aggrieved citizens that had suffered mandate theft may withdraw into their cocoon, and from the arena of the state. In this regard, a state that have agenda of development and yearns for sustainable national development should educate its citizenry about the inherent dangers of allowing an entrenched culture of electoral and political violence as part of the features of the political system. Unless this is achieved, the problem of electoral violence remains politically topical for a while in Nigeria.

Concluding remarks

Empirical evidence abounds of how electoral violence affects the credibility of the electoral system, the democratic system and the rule of law. This ugly trend raises a fundamental question about the capacity and ability of the Nigerian state to curtail electoral violence and fraud since security agencies and INEC officials are implicated in the macabre dance of violence that dots the nation's electoral history. In fact, the nature, extent and magnitude of violence and rigging associated with elections in this country are posing a serious threat to the national quest for stable democratic transition, as well as the attainment of the long term goal of consolidated democracy (Malu, 2009). And as a problem that has ravaged and permeated the entire bloodstream of our political system, it has become imperative for Nigerians to know the danger that it poses to strengthening and deepening the nation's democracy with concomitant effect on national development.

For the nation to be able to achieve this and strengthen democratic institutions and deepen democracy, politicians, their supporters and the electorate alike should shun all forms of electoral and political violence. After this sustained process and strategy of political education, apprehended perpetrators of electoral violence and politics of bitterness should be punished according to the existing law. It is only through this strategy that the battle can be won.

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- dancing to the whims and caprices of politicians in utter disregard to the code of ethics and national interest that they swore to uphold.