

**VIOLENCE AS ANTI-TRUST: A THESIS ON POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S  
DEMOCRACY**

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**Abstract**

*This paper presents an insight into the violent nature of democratic politics in Nigeria with a view to theorizing why it is difficult to experience a violence-free electoral democracy in Nigeria in the current situation. The authors, using both primary and secondary data sources, argue that violence as perpetuated by political players (individuals and groups), serves as a means of preventing election fraud by the State and its agents, while for the State, violence is used as a tool of intimidation and harassment by incumbent regimes (both at national and regional levels) to retain political power. The paper concludes by maintaining that political violence will continue to thrive in the democratic politics of Nigeria unless the institutions of democracy, including Security Agencies in the country function in accordance with their constitutional mandates, as well as political actors conducting themselves by the rules of democratic practices in political activities.*

**Keyword :** Antitrust, Democracy, Election, Political Violence, Nigeria

**INTRODUCTION**

Democracy as a form of government remains, to many and the international community, the best form of government since it, supposedly, allows the people to elect their leaders through free and fair elections. Thus, in Nigeria, like many 'democratic' countries, elections take place periodically for the Nigerian people to elect those who will be trusted to steer the ship of the nation, at all levels, including the federal, states and local governments.

Since the return of democracy to Nigeria in its latest, and hopefully final, epoch of democratic voyages, there have been series of violence that have occasioned the experience, particularly pre-election day, Election Day and post Election Day violence. This violence that has become identical to democratic politics in Nigeria has seriously undermined the essence of democracy, as well as threatens its survival.

The account of violence in Nigeria's democratic politics is very alarming. According to Cohen (2014), over two thousand people have died from political violence in Nigeria between 2006 and 2014. Also, in an article describing electoral politics and its outcomes in Nigeria as criminal, Suleiman (2016) argued that electoral victory in Nigeria's democracy is linked to how effective candidates can utilise violence.

### **ACCOUNT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE ACROSS THE NATION**

While it is often difficult to find any part of the country that is exempt from reported cases of violence during electioneering in Nigeria, the following accounts of violence in the following states represent the most atrocious in the country's recent democratic competitions.

#### **RIVERS STATE**

Rivers have always been marked as one the hotbed for electoral violence in Nigeria's democratic politics. There has hardly been any electoral contest in Rivers state since 1999 that have been adjudged peaceful. However, the activities of politicians and their supporters preparatory to the 2015 general elections and its continued aftermath have been the highlights of political violence in Nigeria's democratic politics. The following emphasize some of the heinous crimes perpetuated by politicians and their accomplice among security agencies and political thugs.

The following is drawn from the testimony of a gang leader in Port Harcourt who was interviewed by Human Rights Watch on the eve of the 2007 elections. He, along with other youth who told HRW that they had worked to rig the 2003 elections, blamed broken promises on the part of the state government for much of the violence in which they had been involved:

*In 1999 and 2003, [Governor] Odili called us and told us we should work for him. He called other faction leaders of different groups in Port Harcourt. He worked through Asari [Dukobo of the NDPVF]...They gave some groups N5 million, 3 million, 10 million...We disrupted the election in favour of our governor and his candidates—we stood at the election ground so people would not come. There was no election.*

*After 1999, we waited and waited and there was nothing. In 2003 they called us again and said we should work for them and again they broke their promises. They promised us opportunities, empowerment. Instead [after the elections] they started chasing us and calling us cultists...They declared me "wanted" on radio and television.*

*After 2003 they went and called Ateke Tom and said he should chase us and kill the members of our group. We were chased out of our areas by Ateke who was working with law enforcement groups. They killed many of my boys.*

*We went for a peace parlay with Ateke in Abuja. They government promised us employment, empowerment... They then said we should refund our guns to them. We did. But we kept some for ourselves because we knew we could not trust them. We have not had to acquire new weapons—we had enough arsenal.*

*The government people approached me to mobilize my boys for the elections [in 2007] but they are not sincere. They destroyed my house and killed many of my members with JTF [the Joint Task Force of security agencies deployed to combat unrest in the Delta]. They now approached us again and asked us to work for them but we said no, because they are not sincere." (Human Rights Watch Interviews, Case study C: Rivers State, 2007)*

#### **KOGI STATE**

Kogi State has recorded some of the most heinous activities of brutality and killings resulting from politics. The state has been recorded as one of the most volatile states in terms of political violence. The height of this primitive form of politics was witnessed in the 2008 re-run governorship contest between Prince Abubakar Audu and Alhaji Ibrahim Idris. There were reported cases of intimidation of voters and all sorts of brutality against supporters of the leading opposition political parties by security agencies and political thugs of the ruling party. In response, the supporters of the opposition political parties engaged in violent reactions to the perceived intimidation and killings of their members. Elections were postponed in some places due to the level of violence.

#### **BAYELSA**

It has been generally reported by both national and international observers that elections do not always take place in Bayelsa state because of the violent confrontation among political actors and their supporters and thugs. The height of the violence in elections in Bayelsa state was witnessed in the 2016 gubernatorial

elections where weapons of all sorts were used by thugs of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which were the major contending political parties. At the end of the prolonged contest, which the incumbent, Dickson Seriake, was announced winner by the electoral umpire, unimaginable series of violence were reported. Polling stations have been blown up, homes of candidates and their supporters have been burned down and sporadic shootings are carried out on Election Day to scare of voters and officials. Several elections have been postponed, then cancelled, due to this level of violence, allowing for the incumbent's to carry on without elections.

### **CONCEPTUALIZING POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

Dowse and Hughes (1972) emphasized the need to understand the reality that politics is about power and its distribution, and that wherever political activities take place violence is seldom scarce. Similarly, C. Wright Mills (1954), in his classic: "The power elite", argued that 'violence is the ultimate kind of power'.

Political violence in Nigeria is certainly not new. At every stage of the political and democratic process, violence manifests as a tool to maneuver the process and 'triumph' in the contestations that come with democratic politics. For instance, the political party conventions which are intra-party activities are heralded by clashes by supporters of the opposing candidates, which lead to casualties of participants. This was the situation in the 2011 party primary election of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Kogi State between Alhaji Isah Echocho and Alhaji Isah Kutepa where the contest for the flag bearer of the party in the general election degenerated to violent contestation between the supporters of the two main aspirants as a means of either perpetuating or resisting obvious malpractices in the contest. The same scenario played out in Kaduna state in the gubernatorial primary election between Senator Isaiah Balat and Architect Namadi Sambo. The story was not different in Lagos State in 2007 gubernatorial primary election that produced Raji Babatunde Fashola as the flag bearer of the now defunct Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN). Also, in 2007 the race for the flag bearer of the Movement for the Restoration and Defence of Democracy (MRDD) pitched the supporters of Col. Suleiman Babanawa (rtd) against the Chairman of the party in Kogi State.

The threat of (and actual) violence between members of opposition political parties is worse than intra party battles as opposition political struggles is as deadly as a war situation in the Nigerian democratic context. For example, an incumbent governor of Katsina state threatened to unleash violence against opposition members when he openly made the following remarks at a campaign rally in preparation for the 2015 general elections.

*The opposition party in Katsina state are (sic) cock-roaches, hence when you see a cockroach you should kill it because cockroaches live in the sewers. Any opposition party member who harms you, you must retaliate because we the PDP in this state will no longer tolerate the actions of the opposition party.*  
*- Barrister Ibrahim Shehu Shema the Former Governor of Katsina state (Premium Times, 2014)*

### **VIOLENCE AS ANTITRUST**

The above account of politically motivated violence in Nigeria's democratic contestations is by no means exaggerated narratives. If anything, the details are really minimalist. The question, however, is: why this spate of violence in a democracy? While there are so many reasons for the high-level of violence in Nigeria's democratic politics, the author of this article has chosen to approach the answer from a different perspective. From the view of the author, violence exists as an antitrust in Nigeria's democratic politics. This means that because of the failings of democratic institutions to ensure free and fair elections, the actors and their supporters engage in violence as a form of self-help to resist the rigging of elections by those (that is, the democratic institutions) constitutionally empowered to conduct and ensure free and fair elections, and to do so in an acceptable democratic atmosphere.

Violence is introduced into the democratic process as an antitrust to achieve the following aims.

- i. **Warning:** in this context, the perpetrators of violence consider it a veritable means of resisting any foul plan by incumbents to use the electoral umpire or security agencies to undermine acceptable democratic procedures in the hope to rig elections in favour of the incumbents or

their favoured candidates in an election. In response to the threat or actual use of violence by government-opposed parties, the government at either state or federal levels would usually deploy security agencies to clampdown on the leaders and members of groups issuing such warnings through threats or actual violence. This situation leads to state violence against group or mob violence. The government justifies this response in the light of the fact that “punishment and legally sanctioned violence is an ever present reality and is the ultimate binding agent of the state” (Dowse and Hughes, 1972:405). Furthermore, the legitimacy of violence comes to the fore. While the government normally views its violent response to the violence of groups and opposition members as legitimate and justifiable, the opposition also views its ‘resistance’ to the violence of the state as ‘legitimate’ or at least, justifiable means of self-defense and self-preservation against authoritarianism or repression.

- ii. **Resistance:** It is not uncommon for politicians in Nigeria, particularly those belonging to opposition parties, to call on their supporters to “resist” planned rigging by incumbents through electoral bodies and security agencies. The call for resistance in this context is actually the call to exercise violent resistance to rigging of elections. To carry out the mandate of these political leaders to ‘resist’ rigging, political thugs are hired and empowered with dangerous weapons, including machetes and guns. An example of such resistance was witnessed in the gubernatorial election of Bayelsa state in 2016 where thugs unleashed mayhem on voters, electoral officials and security agencies as a means of resisting the perceived plan of the security agencies to rig the election in favour of Silva of the All Progressives Congress (APC), the ruling party at the Federal level, against the candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and incumbent governor, Seriake Dickson.
- iii. **Reprisal:** violence in this context is used as an act of vengeance, and it is perpetuated by either the state or political groups that have either won or lost electoral contests. In some cases both of these groups can perpetuate this act. In the first instance, where the State and its agents have been subjected to violent resistance that would have resulted in casualties of state agents or government officials, the state can decide to bring the “full weight of the law” on the actual or perceived perpetrators of the acts of violence against it. This was witnessed in 2007 under the regime of the former governor of Osun state when the state brought violence against the opposition. In the second instance, after the elections would have been won and lost, members of the political group or party that emerged winners will visit the members of the defeated political group/party with violence as a means of revenge for whatever harm or difficulty that they had undergone in the hands of the defeated political group members before, during or after the elections. This was the situation in the 2003 governorship contest between Prince Abubakar Audu of the defunct All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) and Alhaji Ibrahim Idris of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Kogi State. After the acrimonious contestation between the two candidates and their supporters, and the claimed violence against the PDP which was the opposition party in Kogi State at the time, the PDP which was declared the winner of the election engaged the supporters of the defeated incumbent, Prince Abubakar Audu, in series of violent attacks as a payback for the mayhem that was visited on the supporters of the winner of the election, Alhaji Ibrahim Idris. Thirdly, and finally, violence as a reprisal tool can be used by political groups or parties that have just lost elections. This was the case in the post 2011 presidential election where the supporters and sympathizers of the candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), particularly in the Northern part of Nigeria, used violence as an act of vengeance for the perceived rigging of the presidential election that denied its candidate at the time, General Muhammad Buhari, victory.  
The three circumstances of utilizing violence as reprisal are entwined such that it might be difficult to tell which comes earlier as an ‘action’ or later as a ‘reaction’, as the three forms of violence as reprisal devices might happen at same time.
- iv. **Violence as protest:** in Nigeria, protest is seldom peaceful even when protesters take up banners with inscriptions of “Peaceful protest”. Although it is the democratic rights of citizens

to protest any type of violations by individuals or governments, such protests often result in violence, and this situation persists whenever protests occur in Nigeria's democratic society. Nigerians have become impatient with democracy because of its failure to address the challenges that hitherto confronted them before the current democratic governance. For example, democracy has not brought collective wealth for the Nigerian populace, in addition to having failed to deliver the much desired dividends in the areas of security, infrastructural development, equality, freedom, and so on. Thus, dissatisfaction, anger, aggression and violence accompany protests and unruly protestations against the leaders and even the democratic project. This situation is justifiably explained by the ever-valid frustration-aggression theory of Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer and Sears (1939) which explains that aggressive and violent behaviours are responses to frustrations engendered by contraventions of established patterns or ideals by political leaders for which the consequences undermine democratic governance (Himmelweit, 1950). The resulting protests may lead to the frustrated individuals or groups to attack the believed source(s) of the frustration. This explains the usual protests against democratic institutions and violent attacks on security agencies, government officials and the offices and officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) each time elections take place in Nigeria.

In the 2015 general elections, for example, many INEC officials and ad-hoc staff, including members of the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) were attacked and killed, including the assassination of the State Resident Electoral Officer for Kano State.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, violence in Nigeria's democracy can be described as an 'antitrust' measure, engaged in by political players to achieve their political objectives and goals through undemocratic means. Violence as an antitrust measure is thus employed to play the roles of warning, resistance, reprisal, and protest. It is thereby evident that Nigeria's democracy is riddled with violence but this violence has a function and a goal that serves its engineers. This paper has attempted to create an understanding of violence and its role in politics of Nigeria by emphasizing that the distrust of political leaders for the voters to elect them into power in free and fair elections makes violence a necessary tool to achieve electoral victory. Similarly, voters and their sponsors also use violence as a tool to express their distrust for (and frustrations with) incumbents and the institutions that are entrusted with the mandate for credible democratic politics in the country. This understanding can serve as a platform for finding solutions to the scourge of violence in Nigeria's democracy.

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