
ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND VOTER TURNOUT IN THE NIGERIAN 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION BUILDING

Ahmed Ladi Ibrahim, Ph.D.

Department of Political Science
Federal College of Education, Zaria
ladiahmedibrahim@yahoo.com

&

Muhammed Sultan Ibrahim

Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution
National Open University of Nigeria
ibrahimmuhammedsultan16@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of electoral violence on voter turnout during the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria and its implications for the country's nation-building process. The paper adopts the political economy theory of dialectical materialism as its theoretical framework. Relevant data were collected through secondary sources, and the method of data analysis is descriptive. The findings of the paper reveal that electoral violence had significant impact on voter turnout in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria. It identifies various factors that fuelled electoral violence during the elections including, fierce struggle for power by politicians, lack of issue-based campaigns, hate speech, exploitation of ethnic and religious sentiments, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment, weak institutions, inadequate security on election day, and impunity of violent offenders. The paper argues that electoral violence does not only contribute to low voter turnout in election, but also undermines the legitimacy of the elected leaders and the country's nation-building process. It recommends the need for good and inclusive governance, youth empowerment, public awareness through political education, issue-based politics, strengthening of institutions, effective electoral laws, and prosecution of electoral offenders to curb electoral violence in future elections.

Keywords: Electoral violence, Election, Voter, Voter turnout, Nation-building

Introduction

Election is the hallmark of a democratic society which facilitates peaceful transfer of power from one government to another. It is the bedrock of a genuine democratic system, through which the electorates are given the opportunity to vote for their preferred candidates to represent their interest at the highest level of policy-making. According to Ominabo (2022), elections play a pivotal role in fostering citizens participation in nation-building and leadership recruitment process. It reinforces citizenship and amplifies the stake of citizens in their nation. Nigeria is a democratic

state operating a federal system of government, where citizens at all levels, including the federal, state and local government have the right to participate in a peaceful, free and fair elections to choose their leaders.

Since the transition from military rule to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has conducted seven general elections - 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 with the most recent being in 2023. The 2023 General Elections in the country stands out as a significant departure from the six previous elections. Notably, it had the largest potential electorate in Nigeria's history, with a total of 93,469,008 registered voters. Furthermore, the 2023 elections recorded the largest youth registered electorate, with 37,060,399 registered voters in 18-34 years' age category, representing 39.65% and accounting for the highest percentage of total registered voter (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2023). The 2023 General Elections also marked the use of the Electoral Act, 2022 which legalised the use of technology, such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) which combines fingerprint and face biometrics to verify voters' identity. Additionally, unlike the previous elections which have been dominated by two political parties, the 2023 elections were largely between four major candidates of the All Progressives Congress (APC), the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the Labour (LP), and the New Nigerian People's Party (NNPP) vying for power.

The unique electoral landscape generated hope among many Nigerians, making them believe that the 2023 General Elections would be completely different from the previous. This boosted confidence in the credibility of the electoral process and attracted support from Nigerians, especially the youths. However, despite these promising developments, the voter turnout in the elections did not surpass that of the previous elections. The trajectory of voter turnout in Nigeria's general elections indicates that in 1999, only 52.3% of the registered voters voted during the election, the figure rose to 69.1% in 2003, then dropped to 57.3% in 2007, 55.4% in 2011, 42.4% in 2015, 35.66% in the 2019, and 26.72% in 2023 (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2019; INEC, 2023). This declining trend in voter turnout over the years is worrisome in a democratic system, where sovereignty rests with the people, who are expected to fulfil their civic duties by voting during elections.

Citizen's participation in elections is crucial for several reasons; it gives legitimacy to the electoral process and political leaders. It also fosters adequate representation and promotes a healthy democracy. However, one of the factors contributing to the declining voter turnout in Nigeria's general elections is the issue of electoral violence. Despite 63 years of independence and over 24 years of unbroken democratic governance, Nigerians are deeply worried and concerned about the persistent electoral violence that is pervasive during both off-season and general elections. According to Jega (2019), all over Africa, and indeed to some extent, throughout the developing world, the electoral process is failing to entrench good governance and stable sustainable democratic political system as a result of what can be termed as a deficit of electoral integrity. Deeply embedded unwholesome

practices, such as use of money, violence, incumbency powers, and a range of fraudulent activities in the electoral process grossly undermine its utility as a vehicle for liberal democratic development.

Electoral violence instils fear in voters and prevents them from participating in the electoral process, which has implications on the leadership selection process, and nation building. This issue of electoral violence goes unabated, and the government has not demonstrated any seriousness in tackling the problem. This signalled the urgent need to address the menace with a view to suggesting how best to overcome the challenge, and to deepen democracy and enhance credibility and transparency of elections in Nigeria. This paper therefore examines the impact of electoral violence on voter turnout during the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria and its implications for the nation-building process. The paper relies on secondary sources of data collection, and the method of data analysis adopted is descriptive. Relevant data were drawn from Reports of Electoral Observation Missions on the 2023 General Elections, INEC, journals, text-books, newspapers and online sources were explored to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The paper is structured into six sections. The first section provides an introduction. Section two dwells on the literature review and theoretical framework. Section three takes a look at electoral violence and voter turnout in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Section four focuses on the factors that triggered electoral violence during the elections. Section five provides an overview of the implications of electoral violence for nation-building in Nigeria. Section six presents the conclusion and recommendations.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Electoral violence is any act of violence perpetuated in the course of political activities, before, during and post-election periods. These include thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral processes (Igbuzor, 2010). The term electoral violence is often used interchangeably with political violence. Although, the two concepts are related, but they are different in terms of focus and context. According to Dauda (2014), political violence occurs in different kinds of political system that may not necessarily be democratic, whereas electoral violence is limited in scope, and associated with the process of election in democratic states. This suggests that political violence is wider than electoral violence and may include riots, localized rebellion, assassination, coups d'état and terrorism, whereas electoral violence is specifically linked to the electoral process.

Albert (2007) gives an expansive definition of electoral violence. He describes it as “all forms of organized acts or threats, physical, psychological, and structural aimed at intimidating, harming, or blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view of determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process” (p. 133). Nwolise (2007) outlines three dimensions of electoral violence, including physical, psychological and structural, and identified several

components within these dimensions. These includes any spontaneous or organized act by candidates, party supporters, election authorities, voters or any other actor that occurs during an electoral process, from the date of voter's registration to the date of inauguration of a new government. These actions involve the use of physical harm, intimidation, blackmail, verbal abuse, violent demonstrations, psychological manipulation, or other coercive tactics aimed at exploiting, disrupting, determining, hastening, delaying, reversing, or otherwise influencing an electoral process and its outcome (Ekanem & Okafor, 2018; Majekodunmi & Adejuwon, 2012; Okafor *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, electoral violence is any organized act or threat perpetrated before, during or after election with the intent of intimidating voters or influencing the outcome of the electoral process.

The impact of electoral violence on voter turnout in elections has been a subject of extensive study. Voter turnout refers to the extent to which eligible voters cast their votes on election day (Solijonov, 2016). It simply means the percentage or voting age population (or the percentage of registered voters) who actually came out to vote in an election (Mahmud, 2015). Voter turnout is one of the crucial yardsticks of measuring how citizens participate in deciding who represents or govern their affairs. High voter turnout is, in most cases, a sign of the vitality of democracy, while low voter turnout is usually associated with voter apathy and mistrust of the political process.

Research indicates that electoral violence contributes to low voter turnout in elections, as citizens who experience threats of violence are less likely to vote, and participate in the electoral process (Bratton, 2013; Burchard, 2015). Shenga and Pereira (2019) present a contrasting view, suggesting that awareness of electoral violence motivates citizen's active participation in the electoral process. However, despite the differing findings, Shenga and Pereira (2019) notes that violence in general, and not just electoral violence has a negative effect on participation. They argue that Africans who perceive violence in their neighbourhood are less likely to attend election campaign rallies, and those who perceive a fear of violence by extremist groups tend not to work for parties or candidates. They added that when voters see their neighbourhood as unsafe, they might relocate their residential location, thereby making them lose the opportunity to vote in the neighbourhood where they were registered to vote. Their assertion is consistent with the view of Bekoe and Burchard (2017) who note that electoral violence is used to depress turnout to mobilize supporters, or to punish victors. Van Baalen's (2023) research also indicates that electoral violence has a negative impact on voter turnout in election. However, the study reveals that in areas where the incumbent was stronger, electoral violence was associated with voter turnout, while in opposition strongholds, electoral violence did not have the same impact on voter turnout.

The Goodluck Jonathan Foundation (2021) points to the growing trend of electoral violence as a factor responsible for low voters' turnout in Nigerian elections. Voter participation in the electoral process is hampered by widespread violence and feeling

of insecurity. As a result, many eligible voters chose to abstain from participating in the electoral process, resulting in abstention and apathy among the electorate (Igiebor, 2021; Ighodaro *et al.*, 2022). In the same vein, Adigun (2020) found a connection between violence and voter turnouts, indicating that violence contributed to low voter turnout in the 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria. This finding is also consistent with the view of Salihu and Yakubu (2020) and Yiaga Africa (2023) which stress that voter suppression in whatever form, has a direct impact on voter turnout and electoral outcomes. The integrity of democratic processes, political stability, and societal well-being are threatened when confronted with complex and varied threats of violence in elections.

Therefore, the implications of electoral violence extend beyond low voter turnout, but also affects the leadership selection process and nation building in Nigeria. According to Unya and Onyemuawa (2021), nation-building is the process of national integration and consolidation that leads individuals and groups to cultivate a sense of love for their nation and to accept their commitment to the nation-state. Nation-building contributes to sustainable development through the unification of the people within and outside the nation, and ensuring that the nation remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Okonjo-Iweala (2023) emphasizes that nation-building is a continuous process, and in a country like Nigeria, given its size, diversity, and economic development challenges, the task of nation-building is particularly herculean. In the view of Atiku (2021), development and nation-building do not happen by themselves, but are guided by the people, especially thoughtful, insightful, and visionary leaders who are willing to make sacrifices and reach compromise. The leaders give direction and the examples they set determines the extent to which their followers will trust them. Therefore, nation-building is the process of uniting different people from various backgrounds within a state, with the aim of establishing a shared national identity, and to promote peaceful coexistence and stability. This implies that nation-building in Nigeria is a long and challenging political process which involves the participation of both the leaders and the citizens. Election serves as an opportunity for citizens to engage in nation-building and democratic consolidation. Through elections, leaders are chosen by the citizens and entrusted with the responsibility of piloting the affairs of the nation towards progress and development.

Marxian Political Economy Theory of 'Dialectical Materialism' is adopted for the purpose of analysis in this paper. Dialectical materialism is a philosophical framework, developed by Karl Marx (1811-1813) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) in the mid-late eighteenth century. Dialectical materialism argues that political and historical events are due to the conflict of social forces caused by man's material needs (Wambui, 2011). This philosophical approach contends that all human beings must engage in economic activity for the necessities of life. This presupposes that every society relies on its mode of production, and institutions of that society must therefore follow from that mode, adapt to it, failing which they will be eliminated from the system (Volle 2022). The theory explores the relationship between the

economy and the state, and therefore becomes crucial in understanding how individuals seek to leverage on state for economic gain.

In the Nigerian context, electoral violence often emerges from the conflicting interests and power struggles among politicians seeking to control the state's economic resources. Abah and Nwoku (2015) emphasizes the intricate connection between politics and economics, and posits that the political system reflects the economic structure of a state. They argue that the Nigerian governing elites brazenly manipulate the electoral process, many times with impunity in an attempt to capture state power. Therefore, political power is intricately linked to economic power, with the ruling class deriving influence from the ownership and control of the means of production. Alemika (2008), observes that both the ruling and opposition classes see violence as an instrument of retaining or capturing power, often disregarding the electoral choices of the citizens. This instrumental use of violence in elections has been identified as one of the factors contributing to low voter turnout, which has far-reaching implications for nation-building in Nigeria. Dialectical materialism has been criticized for assuming that human culture is shaped almost entirely by economics. However, despite the criticisms, the approach remains relevant in providing an understanding to the issues of electoral violence, voter turnout and nation-building in Nigeria.

Electoral Violence and Voter Turnout in Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

The 2023 General Elections in Nigeria were marked by various incidents of electoral violence and security challenges. These incidents occurred throughout the electoral cycle, especially during the campaigning and voting period. Various reports shed light on the extent of these electoral violence. A report by Habib (2022) indicates that 52 cases of electoral violence were recorded in 22 states in one month, between 8 October and 9 November 2022. Additionally, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED, 2023) recorded over 200 violent events involving party members and supporters, resulting in nearly 100 reported fatalities 12 months preceding the election. According to the report, the South-East and South-West regions recorded the highest number of violent events involving party supporters before the 2023 elections, with 46 and 45 events respectively, followed by the South-South (38) and North-Central (32) areas. Another report by Jimoh and Ibrahim (2022) reveals that pre-election violence led to the death of 24 persons, while over 20 others were injured. These reports were further corroborated by the final reports of different Elections Observers Missions on the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria.

According to the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute International Election Observation Mission's (IRI/NDI IEOM, 2023) final report, electoral violence had significant impact on the 2023 elections. The report identifies incidents of electoral violence such as assassinations and attempted assassinations of party candidates and party officials, attacks on supporters and rallies of opposing parties, and attacks on INEC facilities, voter registration

processes, and personnel. The report also notes that campaigns were marred by violence between party supporters, with party leaders using hate speech and inflammatory language during the campaign trail and on online media. Notably, the report mentioned the killing of Victoria Chintex, the Kaduna State Labour Party Woman Leader, and the assassination of the Labour Party Senatorial Candidate for Enugu-East, Oyibo Chukwu, along with five of his supporters. The report further indicates that the election-day itself was marred by violence, with incidences of ballot box snatching and disruption at polling units, attacks on election officials, observers, and security personnel. These incidents, according to the report, occurred in 22 states and the FCT on February 25 during the Presidential and National Assembly Elections, and 21 States during the Gubernatorial and State House of Assembly Elections on March 18.

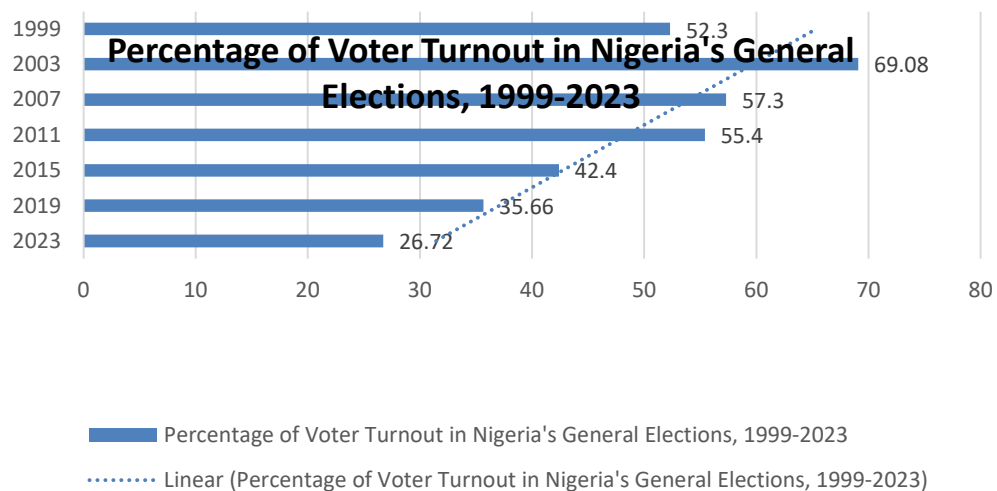
In the same vein, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM, 2023) in its final report, indicates that the 2023 elections in Nigeria were marred by orchestrated violence aimed at subverting the process and manipulating the elections. According to the report, these violence incidents increased before the election days, and it was prevalent in both federal and state-level polls. The EU EOM recorded 101 cases of campaign related violence resulting in 74 fatalities, with majority of recorded incidents relating to state-level elections. Furthermore, the report highlights coordinated violent attacks against the three leading political parties in Enugu-East Senatorial District on 23 February, two days before Presidential and National Assembly elections, resulting in the death of 7 persons, 6 of them being Labour Party (LP) members, including the LP senatorial candidate. The report also indicates that in Lagos State, threats were made against certain ethnic groups by thugs and prominent APC party members.

Yiaga Africa's Report (2023) similarly points out the tactical use of violence to intimidate political opponents, prospective voters and democratic institutions like INEC. The report highlights the vandalism and destruction of properties belonging to political parties and candidates, including campaign billboards, and attacks on party supporters in almost all of the 36 states and FCT. The report notes voter suppression, where voters were profiled based on political affiliation or ethnic identity and denied the opportunity to access polling units to vote, particularly in Lagos and Kano States. Corroborating this statement is the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) report, which indicates that voter suppression, voter intimidation and the destruction or theft of election materials predominantly by political party agents and politically aligned thugs was recorded across all six geopolitical zones. It notes that violence occurred in 10.8 per cent of the observed polling units, and this was more pronounced in the North-West (19.9%) and South-South (11.6%) geo-political zones, with Bayelsa and Zamfara States being the two states where the most incidents were recorded.

Furthermore, another report by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) reveals that 109 deaths were recorded as a result of election related violence from

the start of 2023 to 10 March, 2023 (Onyedinefu, 2023). The Commonwealth Observer Group (2023) also highlights incidents of election-related violence and insecurity, some of which resulted in loss of lives and postponement of elections in some polling units. In addition, a report by Opejobi (2023) indicates that at least 39 lost their lives in different parts of the country, with violence being reported in states like Lagos, Abia, Nasarawa, Benue, Kano, Akwa Ibom, Osun, Edo and Taraba during the general elections. Among those who lost their lives include policemen, politicians, hired thugs and ad-hoc staff of INEC.

According to the Kimpact Development Initiative report, cited by Olorokor (2023), a total of 238 violence and 28 deaths were recorded during the 2023 general elections. The report specified that a total of 98 violence occurred during the February 25 Presidential Election, while 140 were reported during the March 18 Governorship and State House of Assembly Polls. Although, the incidents of electoral violence provided in these reports are staggering, but they are relevant and collectively emphasize that the 2023 general elections in Nigeria witnessed several incidences of electoral violence. The above incidents of electoral violence, along with various other factors collectively prevented many eligible voters from participating in the 2023 General Elections, and ultimately leading to low voter turnout.



Source: CDD, 2019; INEC 2023.

The figure above illustrates the percentage of voter-turnout in Nigeria’s general elections from 1999-2023. In 1999, only 52.3% of the registered voters exercised their right to vote. This increased to 69.1% in 2003, but subsequently declined to 57.3% in 2007, 55.4% in 2011, 42.4% in 2015, and further dropped to 35.66% in the 2019 elections. The 2023 general elections recorded 26.72% voter turnout, the lowest in Nigeria’s history.

Contributing Factors to Electoral Violence in Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

Electoral violence during elections can be attributed to various factors, which are often rooted in the political, social and economic dynamics. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA, 2010), the root causes of election-related violence can be grouped into three main categories; (a) fierce contestation over state power, especially in situations where winner-takes-all electoral system exists; (b) mismanagement and politicization of identity or diversity, especially, ethnicity, religion; and (c) structural socio-economic and political inequality propelled by poor distribution and management of the country's resources, including natural resources, among other causes. This paper adopts these three-categorization to explain the factors that influenced electoral violence during the 2023 general election in Nigeria.

a) Fierce Contestation over State Power

Nigeria operates a 'winner-takes-all' electoral system. As a result, many politicians perceive elections as a 'zero-sum game' or a 'do or die affair'. This assertion is consistent with the view of Obiagu *et al.* (2021) who note that Nigerian elections are contentious and intense because of the lucrative nature of political offices winner-takes-all or loser-loses-all electoral system. Emphasizing this factor, Jega (2019) points out that in most African countries, and Nigeria in particular, elections are engaged by contestants, especially the incumbent office holders and/or governments with what is commonly called a 'do-or-die' disposition; to be won by any means necessary. Winning elections is therefore seen as an end in itself. In line with this argument, Dauda (2014) posits that electoral violence in Nigeria is a manipulation by the elites in their struggle for political power. This aligns with the view of Salihu and Yakubu (2021) who submit that political parties, incumbents, opposition and politicians deliberately deploy violence as an election strategy. Dauda (2014) further argues that politics and political offices are seen as an investment and as an avenue for acquisition of extra-ordinary wealth through corruption, which is otherwise not possible through any form of legitimate enterprise. As a result of this perception, Nigerian politicians turn electioneering and elections into warfare in which ethnic, religious and other forms of primordial sentiments and prejudices are employed. Consequently, political parties, candidates and their supporters do resort to unethical and violent tactics in order to gain electoral advantage. This intense competition for political power by politicians both at the federal and state levels generates and heightens tensions in the polity.

Bukarti (2022) stresses that the use of political thugs to disrupt and influence the outcome of elections has been a feature of Nigerian politics since the country returned to democratic rule in 1999. The International Republican Institute (2021) echoes that fomenting violence close to voting is a strategy that elites routinely, and deliberately, employ to shape political outcomes. According to the IRI/NDI IEOM (2023), much of the violence in the 2023 elections in Nigeria were targeted political violence seemingly organized by, or at least conducted with the support of, politicians and/or party officials. The EU EOM report (2023) also submits that the

primary instigators of electoral violence were politically sponsored thugs who were deployed to intimidate opponents, obstruct opposition campaign activities, and deter supporters and voters from participation by creating a precarious environment. The CDD's report (2023) identifies non-state actors, political thugs and political party agents as the three main groups that sought to disrupt election processes with violence.

b) Mismanagement and Politicization of Identity or Diversity

Nigeria is country with diverse ethnic group, religion, and regions, and politicians usually employ these divisions to mobilize support. The lack of a coherent national identity in Nigeria and the overarching reliance on ethnicity, religion and regionalism for political identity have historically accounted for electoral violence (Hassan, 2023). This argument is supported by Alabi *et al.* (2023) who posits that the impact of identity politics on the electoral process in Nigeria is not always positive, as ethnic and religious identities have often been used to mobilize violence and undermine the democratic process. Bukarti (2022) further submits that candidates standing for an election can spark violence by using ethno-religious messages or framing an election as a competition between regions to mobilise their constituencies. Identity politics therefore exacerbates tensions and divisions and subsequently leads to violence.

Moreover, the 2023 Presidential Election featured four frontline candidates representing different regions, religious and ethnic groups. These are, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Congress (APC) from the South-West; Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) from the South-East; Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP) from the North-West; and Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) from the North-East. Many had expected that contest between the four leading candidates would be interesting in terms of issue-based campaigns and quality debate. However, the identity card took the shine on the build-up to the poll, including evoking ethnic and religious sentiments by the presidential candidates, on one hand, and their supporters on the other hand. The flag bearer of the APC declared in a gathering in Ogun State in 2022 that "*Emi Lokan, Yoruba Lokan*" (It is my turn, Yoruba's turn); his counterpart in the PDP also declared in Kaduna that what the North needed was a Northern President, asking the voters not to elect other ethnicities. Similarly, those in the East were in support of an Eastern President (Nwosu, 2023). Rabiu Kwankwaso of the NNPP was also reported to have said that the Igbos are only good in business and are well talented, but they should learn politics, noting that "in politics they are at the bottom line" (Nwaneri, 2022).

The 2023 elections also played out on religious sentiments. Tinubu, who is a Southern Muslim, broke the long-established tradition by picking a fellow Muslim from the North as his running mate to gain the support of the Muslim North which is the country's largest voting bloc. Conventionally, leading parties have sought to balance their presidential tickets to ensure that both faiths are represented. However,

Tinubu pursued a joint presidential ticket with a Muslim-Muslim combination. Senator Kashim Shettima, former Governor of Borno State was picked as his running mate. Religion was also used as a tool for intimidation during the elections. For instance, during the governorship elections in Lagos State, political thugs hide under the guise of the 'traditional *Oro* Festival' to intimidate citizens who they felt made them to lose the presidential election to Labour Party in the state (Nwosu, 2023). This is corroborated by Yiaga Africa's report (2023) which notes that voters were profiled based on political affiliation or ethnic identity and denied the opportunity to access polling units to vote, particularly in Lagos and Kano States. CDD's report (2023) also cites instances of vote disenfranchisement on basis of ethnicity.

The politicization of identity or diversity is a distraction from the real issues that Nigerians face, including insecurity, unemployment, poverty, corruption, and poor infrastructure. The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (2023) notes that political campaigns in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria were typically not based on issues, but are rather preoccupied with hate speeches, indecent language, mobilization of ethnic and religious sentiments, and attacks on the personality of specific contestants. This was further corroborated by the IRI/NDI IEOM (2023), which indicates that campaigns were marred by violence between party supporters, with party leaders using hate speech and inflammatory language during the campaign trail and online. The CDD's report (2023) also maintains that Nigeria's identity divisions have been more pronounced in the 2023 elections, with narratives amplified by online discourses further contributing to accentuating this diversity. Politicians whipped up ethnic sentiments to support voter bases and this played a significant part in heightening the sensitive political climate, and led to an acrimonious voting process. The situation is worsened by failure of political parties to identify with specific ideological positions and to hinge their campaigns on these positions. In the absence of ideological polarities offering contrasting perspectives on governance, campaign rhetoric drift into personal abuse, slander and overcharged verbal contestations (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023).

c) **Structural Socio-Economic and Political Inequality**

Socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment make individuals susceptible to manipulation by political actors. Poverty is defined as the inability to live a fundamentally basic progressive life that would guarantee a sustainable and prosperous future. Poverty exists when a person or group of people are unable to meet their basic needs. Poverty rates in Nigeria have remained consistently high. According to a Multidimensional Poverty Index study carried out by the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), 133 million Nigerians, or 63% of the country's population, are multi-dimensionally poor. The study found that 86 million of multi-dimensionally poor Nigerians or 65%, live in Northern Nigeria, while 47 million or 35% live in Southern Nigeria. According to Moghalu (2022), citizens of a nation who live in poverty suffer economic, cultural, political, and environmental deprivations. People live in poverty for a variety of reasons such as inequality and

marginalization, conflict, a lack of employment or other means of support, inadequate social welfare and social security programs provided by the government, and unchecked population growth. This makes voter believe that their votes may be bought. The CDD's report (2023) indicates that vote trading was more pronounced during the Governorship and House of Assembly Elections, than the Presidential and National Assembly Elections, with both cash and goods used by all political parties in an effort to entice voters to cast their ballots in their favour with 25.3% of observers recording vote buying at polling units across the country with the highest figures reported in the South-East (41.4%) and North-West (35.4%). This pervasive poverty situation encourages unemployed youths to indulge in electoral violence.

The number of youth unemployment is humongous and continue to escalate year-on-year basis. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), about 53.40 per cent of youths are unemployed. This development is worrisome and constitutes a threat to national security. This segment of the demography is readily available for recruitment as thugs, thereby reinforcing the menace of electoral violence in Nigeria. According to Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (2022), youths are usually recruited and deployed as political thugs to cart away election's materials, disrupt the electoral processes (especially in the strongholds of opposition political parties and their candidates) and unleash violent attacks on those with political dissenting voices so as to prevent them from participating in the electoral process. This is corroborated by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2013) which notes that mobilisation of youths by desperate politicians to promote electoral violence in elections is alarming and source of concern. Furthermore, the number of people who cannot read is still significant and this make them to be vulnerable to recruitment by desperate politicians as political thugs during elections.

Other factors responsible for electoral violence in the 2023 general elections include, weak institutions, impunity, and inadequate security. Jega (2019) argues that the Nigerian electoral process has historically been flawed, and replete with profound challenges, including insecurity, conflicts, violence and disruption of polling day activities due to inadequate and ineffective role by the police and other security agencies. Weak electoral institutions, in some cases INEC, undermines the credibility of elections and creates opportunities for manipulation, fraud and disputes which can escalate into violence. The CDD's report (2023) notes that the patchy deployment of security personnel in states such as Bayelsa, Enugu and Bauchi reduced the ability or willingness of security agencies to intervene to prevent critical violent incidents. According to Kwaja (2022), the success or otherwise of an election is highly dependent on the nature of security infrastructures put in place, which makes security indispensable in the conduct of credible and violence free elections.

Furthermore, Nigeria has a history of violence with little or no consequences for perpetrators. Many individuals engage in electoral violence with the belief that they would face no legal consequences. According to IRI/NDI (2023), this culture of impunity among violent offenders continues to hamper a constructive path forward.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is saddled with the responsibility of prosecuting electoral offenders in Nigeria. However, the enforcement of the prosecution of the Electoral Act i.e., prosecution of perpetrators of electoral violence remains a major challenge. A report reveals that over 1,542 suspects arrested for electoral violence in the 2019 General Elections were released without prosecution (Olokor, 2020). During the 2023 General Election, the police arrested 781 electoral offenders across the country (Odit, 2023). Reports also indicate that the Inspector General of Police forwarded 215 case files of electoral offences to INEC for the prosecutions of the arrested persons during the 2023 General Elections for various shades of electoral offences, including dereliction of duty, criminal conspiracy, disorderly conduct at election, being in possession of offensive weapons, destruction of electoral materials, political thuggery, electoral violence, snatching of ballot box, stealing of sensitive materials among others (Olugbode, 2023). However, it remains unclear how many of these arrested offenders have been prosecuted and sanctioned. The lack of capacity of INEC, in terms of power to investigate and arrest electoral offenders, have been identified as factors militating against effective prosecution of electoral offenders over the years.

Implications of Electoral Violence for Nation-Building in Nigeria

The prevalence of electoral violence during the 2023 General Elections severely undermines nation-building efforts in Nigeria. As highlighted by Igiebor (2021), elections in Nigeria have turned into a charade causing serious political turmoil and threatening the survival of democracy and Nigeria's corporate existence. Elections are crucial avenue for citizens to choose leaders that would effectively pilot the affairs of the nation. However, the intense competition for political power by politicians, leading to electoral violence significantly discourages citizens participation in the process. Onyekpere (2023) underscores the detrimental impact of denying citizens their right to vote, noting that it jeopardizes the foundation for nation-building. The ethno-religious nature of electioneering campaign, exploitation of ethnic and religious sentiments by politicians during the 2023 General Elections have further widened the divisions and inequalities within the country. The tactic does not only generated tensions and conflicts, but is also creating instability which hinders national development and the affects the existence of Nigeria as a corporate entity.

Building on this context, Okoye (2023) asserts that there is a nexus between national development and the quality of political leaders piloting the affairs of the country. The realization of democratic stability depends solely on the selection of leaders through a free, fair and credible electoral process (Ikyase & Egberi, 2015). The International Crisis Group (ICG) (2023) stresses that a peaceful election is crucial to Nigeria's cohesion, and also critical for the eventual winner of the election to govern effectively. Therefore, a free, fair, credible and peaceful election is imperative for the emergence of qualified leaders who have the necessary qualities for the arduous task of nation-building in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Elections serve as an avenue through which citizens choose their leaders. The active participation of citizens in these processes is of paramount importance because sovereignty rests with the people, from whom the leaders derive their power and legitimacy. This paper argues that despite measures put in place to improve the transparency of elections in Nigeria, electoral violence remains a big issue and a clog in the wheel of nation-building as politicians continue to deploy ethnic and religious sentiments to undermine corporate existence of the country. Electoral violence instils fear in voters and prevents them from participating in the electoral process. This paper indicates that the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria were marred by various incidents of electoral violence and security challenges. The paper identifies various factors that fuelled electoral violence in the 2023 General Elections including, fierce struggle for power by politicians, lack of issue-based campaigns, the use of hate speech, exploitation of ethnic and religious sentiments, poverty, illiteracy and unemployment, weak institutions, inadequate security on election-day, and impunity of violent offenders. The paper concludes that electoral violence not only prevents voter participation, but also undermines the legitimacy of the elected leaders and the country's nation-building process. Consequent upon this, the paper suggests the following measures to tackle the conundrum of electoral violence in future elections:

1. Governments at all levels should embrace proactive measures to stem the tide of electoral violence and continue to improve on election security to build confidence among the electorate to encourage voter turnout.
2. Laws against the use of intemperate language and indiscreet public commentary by politicians should be strengthened and enforced to guard against sowing the seed of violence before, during and after the elections.
3. Governments at all levels, the civil society and the citizenry should work towards good governance, voter education, equality, transparency and accountability, inclusion, and social justice.
4. Strengthening the elements of direct participation of citizens through the application of modern technology in election management.
5. Strengthening Nigeria's electoral laws to criminalize the culture of electoral violence, and an Electoral Offences Commission should be established to investigate and prosecute electoral offenders.

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