

Full Length Research

Electoral Violence and Institutional Failure in the Niger Delta, Nigeria, 1999-2015

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There have been complex and divergent electoral violence in Nigeria following the political space created by democracy since 1999. A critical investigation of these violence has been important to understand the dynamics and patterns of the unfolding violence and its implications for institutional failure. This paper explored the patterns of these electoral violence with some case scenarios from the Niger Delta region between the period 1999 to 2015. It deployed the institutional theory framework and content analysis methodology. The aim is to review and analyze how and why election has increasingly assumed violent dimensions despite nascent democracy. The study concluded that much of the violence is attributable to the failure of institutional mechanisms and similar apparatus to provide a functional polity where compliance to electoral rules could redress violence. Alternative policy options to strengthen institutional capacity were made.

Keywords; Election, Violence, Democracy, Governance, Niger Delta

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INTRODUCTION

Electoral violence has been a common feature of Nigeria's politics since political independence in 1960. This forms part of the paradigm for explaining colonial legacy and patterns of post-colonial politics in Nigeria. Both Nigeria's first, second and aborted third republic experienced intense electoral violence. For instance, during the first republic, the Western region crisis of 1962 was a major springboard that created political tension at the immediate post-colonial Nigeria.

The term electoral violence is a very explosive and volatile one, increasingly arising as a result of the high stakes of politics, the intersection of the political class, quest for acquisition of political power, and the fear of the winner-takes-all or zero-sum game, the vested interest of the Nigerian ruling class and its military allies that midwived Nigeria's democracy since 1999 open up the political space to social forces that results in inevitable electoral violence.

Ogundiya (2003) defines electoral violence as all sorts of riots, demonstrations, party clashes, political assassinations, looting, arson, thuggery, kidnapping etc, Spontaneous or not, which occur before, during and after elections. It could be regarded as elections motivated crisis employed to alter, change or influence by force or coercion, the electoral behaviours of voters or voting patterns or possibly reverse electoral decision in favour of a particular individual, groups or political party.

At the aftermath of the first republic, Nigeria's second republic in 1979 took a more strident turn. However a key trigger of electoral violence namely rigging and irregularities within the ranks of political office holders persisted and resulted in all sorts of violence including verbal and physical inter party clashes (Graf, 1979; Joseph, 1991).

Similar violent scenario erupted at the aborted third republic following the annulment of the June 12th, 1993

presidential election adjudged the most credible in Nigeria. It appears that in Nigeria, a lot of premium is placed on gaining access to and control of political power. This perhaps accounts for persistent electoral violence. Election is a core component of democracy. Despite the return to democracy in 1999 one of its major challenges has been the conduct of non-violent elections. The term electoral violence equally suggests a situation of electoral irregularity in which violent means are deployed by a group to achieve a pre-determined objective against the laid down electoral rules (Hickman, 2009; Collier & Vicente, 2012; Bekoe, 2012). In this particular case, the aim of electoral violence is to either intimidate, overpower or scare political opponents in order to secure electoral victory. This process has often resulted in complex and unwholesome consequences such as loss of human lives and related problems. This trend has continued to mar elections in Nigeria.

This study will specifically focus on the Niger Delta region. This is partly because of the widely held notion that the region is a volatile oil rich area linked to increasing electoral violence (HRW, 2005). In particular, electoral violence accounts for the unique turn political participation had taken in the region since the return to democracy in 1999. This points out the need to explore some of the internal contradictions associated with electoral behaviour in the region within the context of violence.

A brief background to the post 1999 electoral violence in the region is traced to the late 2000s particularly in Rivers State where local youths and cult leaders were deployed by the political elite as political thugs to fight and intimidate political opponents. At post elections, these youths remained instruments of violence engaging in all sorts of social vices. This resulted in the proliferation Small Arms and Light weapons (SALWs), hooliganism and street fighting following the rise in local cultism in the Niger Delta notably *-Deebam* and *Deewell*, or Green Landers and Icelanders.

These local cult groups have been core machinery for electoral violence and irregularities. This creates renewed impetus to engage with the problem of electoral violence and what the violence means to the quality of elections in the region and democracy in general. The contradictions of electoral violence thus spawned in the locale and further underscores the role that youths play in perpetuating the violence. This has come to play in the lives of several unemployed youths often deployed as thugs before, during and after elections.

The analogy of the voters being at risk as victims of political hooliganism, fits into the political apathy paradigm as the electorates tacitly withdraw from active participation as a result of violence including voting at elections. Electoral violence has grown in stride with the failure of government in the Niger Delta (UNDP, 2006). In Nigeria as a whole, national, state, and local elections

since 1999 have been consistently rigged by means of violence and fraud (HRW, 2003).

As such, the construction of electoral violence has a number of undertones apart from contest among candidates to secure votes and emerge victorious at the polls. It also interrogates the logic of the dominant power blocs or the power brokers, rule of law, equality, transparency and freedom promised by democracy. This threatens the legitimacy of the political office holders in which laid down electoral rules could be rarely followed and good governance hardly guaranteed as the notion of prebendalism and corruption dominates much of the political space created by democracy (Joseph, 1991).

By the same token, electoral violence raises the fears of the electorate particularly women who are the most vulnerable. The particular Niger Delta experience since Nigeria's democracy has been rarely given adequate scholarly attention. A key issue in the Niger Delta is the relation of these trends to democracy amidst the context of armed struggle, shootings, carting away of ballot boxes and intimidation of perceived political opponents. This results in inequality and non-transparency which points to the opposite direction in a democratic order. Thus, within the dialectics of electoral violence, votes do not count as violence threatens the electorates and their relations with participation in a tensed environment. Yet, there is an acknowledgement that electoral violence in the Niger Delta could be complex, fluid and contingent upon calculations of vote accumulation ethos and machination by the various contending forces and groups. It also reflects internal cleavages, contradictions, cross inter-ethnic and intra-class alliances, which also show that the Niger Delta youths particularly local cult groups and similar movements are largely the defining factors and integral components of the dynamics of electoral violence in the Niger Delta.

Despite the contestations around the term electoral violence, it can be argued that within the dialectics of Nigerian politics, the term aptly captures, not one, but an aggregation of violence including shooting of guns at elections, carting away of ballot boxes, physical and verbal assaults on perceived political opponents etc. This is often linked to the disruption of the peaceful conduct of elections. These underline the social dynamics and political economy of Nigeria's electoral violence which involves disparate groups (as the Niger Delta is a multi-ethnic minority region), social and political factions including the political elite and related groups that constitute the political class often comes to play.

In the context of this paper, the concept of electoral violence is clearly hinged on the use of violent means to secure political victory or achieve a political objective. The state, which mediates relations between the people and the government has often failed to play active roles to check electoral violence or rather culpable of violence

or terrorism (Alapiki, 2015). This failure of the state and related institutions to mitigate electoral violence has resulted in surge in electoral crisis which threatens both human and institutional security as violence becomes a critical factor in Nigerian politics.

Against this background, this paper argues that political violence has become a dominant factor in elections in the Niger Delta. It demonstrates how this has negatively impacted the people with evidence of violence which are at variance with the ideals of democracy. It equally argues that electoral violence remains a contentious factor in the region since the return to democracy in Nigeria, such contentions stem from the complex interplay of class and hegemonic interests linked to the violence and how institutional structures have failed to radically foster electoral reform in Nigeria. The study will examine this from the institutional theory perspective. In this vein, the challenges of reconciliation and balance of power between and within the state institutions, the contending groups, and the electorates remains less investigated as violent forces often influence election results and determine the outcome.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Electoral violence has provided a complex mixture of interpretations. This among others includes arms struggle, killings, hooliganism and related violent experiences. The institutional capacity to conduct a violent free election in Nigeria has been a central challenge to Nigeria's democratic politics. North (1990) argued that the term "institution" denotes the formal rule sets. Institutional theory provides a theoretical basis to identify and understand these salient issues. Institutional theory attends to the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structure. It considers the processes by which structures, including schemas, rules, norms, and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior (Scott, 2004). It inquires into how these elements are created, diffused, adopted, and adapted over space and time and how they fall into decline and disuse. Although the ostensible subject is stability and order in social life, students of institutions must perforce attend not just to consensus and conformity but to conflict and change in social structures (Scott, 2004).

There are theoretical perspectives on the basis of institutional framework as integral to changes in group or individual political character. Institutional forces shape individual interests and desires, framing the possibilities for action and influencing whether behaviors result in persistence or change (Powell & Colyvas, 2016). This suggests that institutional structures and rules if adequately followed and implemented can influence both individual and group behavior. Traditionally, institutional theory examines the patterns of individual and group

conformity to laid down rules, norms and institutional procedures (Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Scott, 2007). These rules and norms which form regulatory dynamics broadly include, governmental agencies, laws, courts, professions, which suggest the need for conformity by the citizenry (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It follows that institutional theory captures the essence of regulatory, social and cultural influences that strengthen survival and legitimacy of an entity (Roy, 1997). This notion is reasserted within the understanding that institutions guide behavior through the rules of the game, monitoring and enforcement (North, 1990).

Institutional theorists such as Fjelde and Höglund (2014) argue that in places where democratic institutions are well established, prospects of electoral defeat are not sufficient to motivate politicians to engage in violent electoral tactics. They suggest that the strength of the formal institutions motivates actors to comply with democratic rules and to accept electoral defeat because they convey a certainty that the losers will still be allowed to advance their interests in the future.

In the African context, Fjelde & Hoglund (2014) posit that the workings of these formal institutions are influenced by powerful informal institutions that also shape the electoral contest. They argue that informal institutions, refer specifically to patterns of patron-client relationships which undermine the conduct of free, fair and credible elections.

The debate on institutional failure suggests the inability of formal institutions or structures to effectively implement laid down rules (Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson, 2002). In Nigeria, there have been a number of institutional mechanisms. However they have been less effective to transform the electoral system. One of the institutional frameworks that reinforced the understanding of election and electoral process is the 1987 political Bureau report which provided some of the basic features necessary for the conduct of free and fair elections as follows;

- a. An honest competent, non-partisan administration to run elections.
- b. Enabling rules and regulations-Electoral laws.
- c. A developed system of political parties.
- d. An independent judiciary to interpret electoral laws.

Beyond the political bureau, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has been an institutional apparatus charged with the responsibility of conducting elections in Nigeria. However there are a number of trends which suggest poor institutional capacity and non-transformation of Nigeria's electoral system. This is part of the key problem of this study as it seeks to provide evidence of electoral violence in the Niger Delta region.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have discussed various aspects of

electoral violence in Nigeria and the Niger Delta in particular (Ogundiya, 2003; Eya, 2003; Kemedi, 2006). Such growing body of research is devoted to the study and review of key trends and strategies of electoral manipulation in which political elites seek to influence the outcome of elections by circumventing democratic procedures (Birch, 2007; Lehoucq, 2003).

Electoral violence seems to have not been satisfactorily put in proper scholarly perspective in most developing societies (Alapiki, 2001). Elections are central to the existence, stability and advancement of a democracy. Given the persistent controversies surrounding the conduct of credible elections in most developing democracies, a fair understanding of the term election becomes necessary. Although it might be difficult to arrive at a consensus on the meaning of the concept of election. A few attempts to advance some conceptual knowledge of election is apt.

Darty (2008) defined election as a form of procedure, recognized by the rules of an organization where by all or some of the members of the organization choose a smaller number of persons or one person to hold office of authority in the organization.

The relevance of "choosing" by the electorates themselves forms a distinct feature of election. Election goes beyond marking or thumb printing a ballot paper and dropping it in a ballot box. It is "election" when the actor "chooses" in some socially significant sense. Equally, a choice is not a "vote in an election" unless the chosen conforms to specified legal procedure (Pomper, 1998).

This perspective reinforces the importance of "rules and regulations" which form integral component of credible elections where such rules are strictly adhered to. It constitutes the legitimacy of the electoral process which marks adherence to democratic ideals.

A number of literature suggest that election is the means of determining political choice by periodic voting (Barkan, 1995; Alapiki, 2000; Bekoe, 2012). The basis of election is premised on the fact that voters are presented with "alternatives" that they can choose among a number of available options designed to settle a political question or public concern. The central concern remains the provision of necessary conditions that can make for elections to be free and fair.

Lipset (1999), Apter (1997) and Bratton (2008) consent to the fact that election entails choosing by voting for specific delegates or representatives. This shows that election is one of the major determinants of a democratic government. Beyond this, it confers on the citizens the right to vote and be voted for through a procedural and well-coordinated system. Although election remains a necessary condition for a democratic government, what has been largely contestable is the credibility of elections.

Dudley (1973) perhaps offers a better explanation of election by distinguishing between the technical and

social significance of election when he argued that in a technical sense, election is the process by which an office is assigned to a person by an act of voting needing the simultaneous expression of opinion by many people. He emphasized that socially election is the process by which a person is linked to an office with due provision for the participation of the people meant to come under the officer's authority. Akin (1960) in a related account argued that this social aspect of election gives the idea of ruling a society with the consent of the ruled, which is tantamount to democracy and differentiates election from appointment.

This conception is linked to debates which seek to identify the basic role elections plays in governance. Janowitz and Marwick (1981) argued that elections serve two broad purposes or functions. First, there is the competitive function whereby elites compete for office and secondly, there is the function which simply means that the electorates are made to ratify or endorse a single list of party candidates without competition. They argued that the defunct Soviet Union used the ratificatory model (Janowitz & Marwick, 1981).

Similarly, Mackinze (2008) posits that there are four conditions that must be met for the successful functioning of the electoral system. These include; independent judiciary, an honest, competent and non-partisan administration to conduct elections, thirdly, a developed system of political parties well organized to put their policies, traditions and team of candidates before the electorates, alternative between which to choose, fourthly, a general acceptance throughout the political community of certain rules of the game which limits the struggle for power because of some unspoken sentiments that if the rules are broken or less faithful, the game itself will disappear amid the wreckage of the whole system.

Thus, the contention is that credible election depends on credible institution which serves as apparatus for the conduct of the election and the informed citizenry who are the electorates. The challenges of "participant or participatory" electorates have been at issue in the enthronement of popular, free and fair electoral system. Almond and Verber (1963) provided three classification of political culture approach which are often linked to the patterns of poor electoral participation of the developing democracies namely; subject, participant and parochial political culture. They classified the developing democracies of Africa, Asia and Latin America as parochial. They argued that African political behavior is built on less revolutionary attitudes to political issues. This largely accounts for persistent electoral irregularities where the electorates are unable to actively exercise their political rights nor effectively engage with state policy reform agenda.

Thus, elections work where adequate procedures are laid down and followed. And where the electorates resist violation of such laid down rules. However the rules

accepted as Kurfi(1980)observed might be broken by either voters or political office seekers ,political parties, electoral officials, law enforcement agencies or the government. Where such rules are violated irregularities ensue such as bribes, violence, killings, abduction, carting away of ballot boxes, banditry, arson and similar vices that may run counter to credible elections. Such processes as Kurfi(1980)observed may begin with the bribing of the electoral officers who prepare the electoral roll: ie names of eligible voters which may not appear in the roll and names of those who are ineligible including ghost names may be included in the voter register. The resultant effect is electoral violence which could take various dimensions such as bloody attacks and killings, physical assault and destruction of property and related valuables. There are a number of studies on electoral violence from different perspectives (Barkan, 1995; Hyden, 2006). Debates on ethnic voting reinforces the role of ethnic identity in electoral violence (Horowitz, 1985; Huber, 2012).

The concept of electoral violence provides a controversial discourse as there is absence of consensus among scholars on what electoral violence means. Thus, studies in electoral violence largely depend on a less clear conceptualization of the term (Gandhi & Lust-Oskar, 2009; Dunning, 2011;Daxecker, 2012). This creates analytical tension and contradictions which have been problematic in discourses on elections. The treatment of election in Nigeria as a “do” or “die” affair has resulted in increasing need to conceptualize it from the perspective of violence. This is particularly important as violent threats have created tension and distortions in the conduct of elections in Nigeria (Asuni,2009;Ogundiya, 2003) .

Debates in the literature on recent surge in electoral violence, attempt to remedy deficiencies associated with the conduct of elections particularly on three fronts namely; the protection of electoral materials, electoral officers and the electorates much of these are linked to aspects of electoral fraud (Lehoucq, 2003; Bawa, 2013). As electoral violence studies aim at providing new scholarly arena to understand the dynamics of election and violence, it fails to fully resolve the difficulties associated with the conceptual challenges of both terms. This has resulted in series of attempts to examine studies in the literature linking election to violence and to possibly create conceptual edge on the term electoral violence and reaffirm the importance of such concepts in the electoral system and electoral processes of Nigeria. Thus, electoral violence forms part of a general term that people could deploy to understand the processes, practices and social relations which shape the electoral system. It has particular linkages with electoral outcome as the primary basis of electoral violence is to influence the electoral process. Yet, it has also been contentious as many political, economic and social factors that affect

elections in the contexts of violence have not been adequately examined in the Niger Delta. This opens this study to a number of future research agenda as well as important conceptual debates which have often affected the common basis of conceptual consensus on the term.

Despite this, there is a widespread assumption that electoral violence is integral to the understanding of the credibility of elections. There is need for some clarity of concepts. The aim is for a broader elucidation of the term and in particular, to distinguish between “ election” and “violence”, and to provide understanding of the linkages between the concepts and how they could redirect the political behavior of the electorates.

The mitigation of violence is of great concern to all human beings (Imobighe, 2001:39) .The realist school conceive violence in military terms suggesting various forms of military response to violent threats. At the end of the Cold War, the focus on the military in terms of violence including deploying arms had a shift from a number of perspectives. For instance, Norris (1995) had argued that rather than blaming electoral violence on the conduct of election, the emphasis should be on “electoral rules” which she argued are rarely neutral. The critical dynamics of the commitment of the electoral system towards an effective and credible electoral outcome is at issue.

In a related account, Eya(2003) identified the critical role adequate electoral process could play in dousing electoral violence and argues that electoral process is a method adopted in the selection of persons for political offices. Eya (2003) classifies fair and unfair electoral process and argues that electoral fraud or malpractices are improper, illegal, deceitful or immoral behaviors and conducts which vitiate free and fair electoral processes. While a fair electoral process as Eya(2003) puts it must have some basic structures which includes : statutory provisions establishing the electoral bodies, delineation of wards/constituencies, registration of political parties, registration of votes, recruitment and training of ad-hoc staff, procurement of electoral material, logistics, screening of candidates, provision of polling agents monitoring agents ,actual voting, accreditation of voters, counting votes and providing avenues for settlement of disputed results .

Within the dialectics of election and violence, there are studies which create distinction between political violence and electoral violence. While the former is broad, the latter is narrow as it focuses only on elections (Ogundiya & Baba, 2007).

The violence dynamics associated with elections have made politics generally a game for hoodlums (Joseph, 1991).There are divergent conceptual issues on electoral violence. These have made the subject a significant field of inquiry. Fjelde & Höglund (2014) argued that a key factor responsible for electoral violence in Africa is the prevalence of informal structures which often run counter

to the workings of the formal rules of election as the political elites hijack such informal institutions to propagate their interests. There are debates which point out the shift from transparent and inclusive elections to the management of electoral violence and conflicts (Sisk & Reynolds, 1998). This perspective represents the basis for a violent free election and emphasizes the need for transformation of informal institutions and structures that run counter to formal institutions (Bratton, 2007). Essentially, Fjelde & Höglund (2014) laid particular emphasis on how informal institutions contribute to shaping the incentive structure that guides political behavior within these formal institutions. They argue that such informal institutions provide mechanisms for linking electoral systems to the risk of political violence in Sub-Saharan Africa.

A number of studies on election in Nigeria point out the prevalence of violence which has implications for the advancement of democracy (Anifowose, 1981; Jinadu, 1995). The emphasis on electoral violence entails a number of complex interplay and interactions among several actors in which contrary strategies and actions are taken against laid down rules and norms for the conduct of elections. Perpetrators of electoral violence engage in activities that are both violent and extraneous to the rules of the electoral system. Collier and Vicente (2012) had provided important connections between violence, bribery and fraud linked to elections in Sub-Saharan Africa. The concern has been on getting the system right which has remained a challenge and persistent problem. Cho (2010) has asserted the importance of citizens' perception of government responsiveness in Africa. The aim is to understand why the need for government response matters in the conduct of elections across Africa particularly among ethnically divided societies. Tambiah (1996) shows that election violence increases the probability of incumbent victory, but can generate risky post-election dynamics. The contention is that the electorates might revolt against imposition of candidates resulting in chaos and electoral crisis. Ugandan (2010:90) argues that politics in Nigeria is particularly plagued with historically rooted ills that five decades of sovereign statehood have failed to eradicate.

The complex factors at play in the Niger Delta elections account for the difficulties in evolving a violent free election. For instance, the HRW (2008) argued that former governor of Rivers State, Peter Odilli was directly involved in the recruitment of youths as thugs. Thus, forces involved in the Niger Delta electoral transformation are institutional and also require institutional response.

While available literature suggest that the 2003 and 2007 elections were riddled with violence (Adetula, 2007), the incident persisted in the subsequent years and became even worse in 2016. For instance, in the 2016 election re-run in Rivers State, Human Rights

Watch (2016) reported the killing of persons which included two police officers and a youth corp member on adhoc assignment in Omoku ONELGA, Rivers State. This could be described as perverse because of the way the violence had taken more disruptive dimension.

Against the background of the reviewed literature, the increasing scholarship on election points to the relevance of election in a democracy and the various terms associated with election such as a process of conscious decision, a genuine choice in which a large variety of mixed motives contribute etc. It is important to provide broader illumination of aspects of electoral violence with salient evidence from the Niger Delta.

Electoral Violence: Evidence from the Niger Delta

Since independence in 1960, violence and similar electoral irregularities have persistently marred the process of electing the country's leaders (Onwudiwe & Berwin-Dart, 2010). There are a number of interesting insights in exporing electoral violence in the Niger Delta region.

Beyond the widely held believe that the Niger Delta is an oil rich region, there are a number of factors which account for electoral violence. This includes long existing ethnic rivalry as in the Uhrobo and Itsekiri in Delta State, the Ikwerre and Okrika in Rivers State, the rise in local cultism, poor voter education, militancy and youth restiveness. For instance, the Niger Delta has a number of local cult groups which at various times struggle for supremacy. These cult groups are also deployed during elections as political thugs as explicated.

The return to democracy in Nigeria in 1999 has had a complex mix of contradictory electoral processes. Some salient scenarios from the Niger Delta will help provide further illumination of the on-going trend.

The Niger Delta region had a total population of 31.2 million by 2006 Census. It has more than 40 ethnic groups including the Ikwerre, Efik, Ibibio, Anang, Oron, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Kalabari, and Igbo (Uyigue & Agho, 2007). The area is the 3rd largest wetland in the world and has a coastline spread of over 540km. All the oil and gas activities in Nigeria takes place in the Niger Delta. The area contributes over 80% of Nigeria's revenue (Uyigue & Agho, 2007).

The region has been largely noted for political crisis which ultimately has been instrumental in understanding the dynamics of election and thus remains a key factor in conceptualizing the political development and underdevelopment of the Niger Delta.

The understanding of the patterns and conduct of elections have been fussy and less clear. Onwudiwe and Berwin-Dart (2010) report that past election cycles have featured political assassinations, voter intimidation, intra- and interparty clashes, and communal unrest. Party

primary season, the days immediately surrounding elections, and the announcement of results have been among the most violent periods in previous cycles.

The epidemic of violence that has plagued much of the Niger Delta in recent years has its roots in the corrupt, violent, and unaccountable nature of politics in the region (HRW, 2007). Election has been illusory, with election results stolen openly and voters systematically intimidated into acquiescence (HRW, 2008). The central theme in scholarly debates on electoral violence has been its classificatory analysis within pre, during and after election violence. Beyond the classifications, Adetula (2007) argued that, at the base of these violence are protests and agitations over socio-economic issues.

Between 1999, when democracy returned to Nigeria and 2015 when Nigeria had three uninterrupted transitions from one democratic government to the other, electoral transformation remains contestable. At various ends of the Niger Delta, there were incidents of electoral violence.

Electoral violence began in the late 1990s and early 2000s, during the lead up to state and federal elections held in April and May, 1999. Much of the violence was not pronounced during the 1999 era as the military handed over to the civilians. In Rivers State after the 1999 general elections, there was emergence of gang violence linked to several local cult groups. The gangs fought periodically in the streets and use sophisticated weapons such as automatic rifles, explosives, machetes, and broken bottles. During the course of the 2000s, intractable electoral violence was discernible in Akwa Ibom State extending from Uyo to Abak and Ikot Abasi to Calabar the Cross River State capital. In more than seven of the nine Niger Delta States there were recorded incidences of electoral violence. Both INEC and the security operatives could not contend with the disruptive violence.

During elections in parts of Rivers State such as Buguma, the gang groups opened fire at random on crowds, gunning down scores of terrified civilians in the streets (HRW, 2008).

However as a build up to the April and May 2003 elections, the polity had already been tensed. The 2003 elections experienced a cycle of violence including inter party clashes, political assassinations, and community unrest in already volatile areas such as Nigeria's oil-producing Niger Delta. This also gave rise to the resurgence of the hiring and arming of militias to serve narrow political ends (HRW, 2008). In 2003 this took worrisome dimensions in Rivers State as there was rising tension among two dominant cult groups in the state the Icelander/Niger Delta Vigilante led by Ateke Tom and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) led by Asari Dokubo. The worse perhaps was the repeated violent clashes in parts of Yenagoa, Ekeremor and Southern Ijaw in Bayelsa State which resulted in the killing of several

persons.

In Delta State during the 2003 elections, there was the killing of hundreds of people, the displacement of thousands, and the destruction of hundreds of properties (HRW, 2003). The argument has been that electoral violence in the region has both ethnic and political dimensions. For instance HRW (2003) argued the wholly fraudulent nature of the 2003 state and federal elections in Delta State, as in 1999, means that there is little hope of changing political structures by democratic means, and elections become a focus for violence.

The 2007 elections took same violent turn. There were several instances of intimidation which was experienced in the previous elections. Onwudiwe and Berwin-Dart (2010) observed that merely declaring oneself a candidate was enough to put one's life at risk. They argued that by 2007, electoral violence had become such a credible risk despite Nigeria's return to democracy that the mere threat of it was enough to keep large swaths of voters away from the polls. Human Rights Watch (2008) reported the particular case in Rivers state, where absent ballot materials and violent threats contributed to low voter turnout. Never the less there was a state-wide broadcast on millions of voter turn-out.

Freedom House declared the 2007 elections the worst in Nigeria since the end of military rule in 1999 (Freedom House, 2008). In parts of the Niger Delta such as Warri axis in Delta State the long healed Urobo/Itsekiri crisis re-emerged and took more critical dimension, most notably was along ethnic lines in which three ethnic groups in Delta State involved in electoral violence include the Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo. Several innocent citizens have been victims of electoral violence and continue to suffer the consequences of the violence.

HRW (2008) underscored this scenario in the 2007 general elections, the bloodshed was a widely predicted aftershock of Nigeria's rigged and violent April 2007 nationwide elections. Prior to the 2003 elections, then-Governor Peter Odili and his political associates lavishly funded criminal gangs that helped rig the election into a landslide victory for the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Those gangs used the money at their disposal to procure sophisticated weapons; some of them are now better armed than the police (HRW, 2008). Electoral violence in Rivers was so widespread in 2003 that one local observer group compared the campaign period to a "low-intensity armed struggle" (Environmental Rights Action, 2003; HRW, 2008).

The violent scenario persisted in the 2007, 2011 and 2015 elections. Ahead of the 2015 general elections, data on pre-election violence from the six geo political zones of the country presented by the National Human Rights Commission suggested the rise on incidence of electoral violence. The report stated that in the past 50 days, 61 incidences of election violence occurred in 22 states with 58 people killed (NHRC, 2015). At the instance of the

report it was stated that the violent incident had terrible toll on three states namely Lagos, with 11 incidences and 22 persons killed; Kaduna with three incidences and nine people killed; and Rivers with one incidence and at least six deaths(NHRC,2015).

In the 2016 election re-run in Rivers State, there was massive shooting and killing resulting in the death of a corps member on adhoc electoral assistance and a Policeman beheaded in Omoku.

Thus, issues of free, fair and credible elections and peaceful political order which are integral to the conduct of election in a democracy have been rare in the Niger Delta since the return to democracy in 1999. This representation of the Niger Delta spiralling into uncontrollable political violence became pervasive at various states of the region particularly in Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa and Akwa Ibom .for instance in Rivers State through the on-going local cult clash and struggle for supremacy various incidence of electoral violence take place .

Drawing close attention to the problem of electoral violence in the Niger Delta, Human Rights Watch(2016) reported the serious threat electoral violence pose to human lives and property . The report showed that across the region both in the urban and rural areas there have been incidence of electoral violence.This suggests the need for a new and reformed electoral system to adequately address the region's electoral needs. In spite of the promises of credible elections following the return to democracy the region remains volatile with repeated incidence of various dimensions of violence which have detrimental outcomes.Human Rights Watch(2016) argued that electoral violence has derailed the advancement of democracy in the Niger Delta.This includes outright use of arms during elections,physical assaults and assault on opponents.

The Niger Delta electoral violence represents complex societal tension in which the political office seekers deploy every means possible to secure political power. The experience suggests that the conduct of elections since the return to democracy has been riddled with violence. The concept of electoral violence suggests the existence of threats to the conduct of elections (Alapiki, 2000). In their views, Onwudiwe and Berwin-Dart, (2010) provided some patterns of electoral violence which include intraparty feuding, interparty clashes, electoral events violence and communal unrest. The central consequence has been massive political apathy as the electorates are intimidated with chaotic electoral environments such as shootings and carting of ballot boxes .

Indeed, the magnitude of politically motivated killings and attacks within the region challenges the basis of democratic politics and elections. And instead suggest the need for competitive party politics devoid of violence. This remains central to the processes and conduct of

elections in the region. The potential for escalated violent conflicts is discernible along ethnic and local cult lines. This manifestation points to the debilitated institutional capacities of the Nigerian State to effectively and strategically strengthen and reform the electoral system. This unmask the challenges of the benefits promised of a credible electoral system one which the votes of the people could count.

Thus, such claims that election has been a warfare(Ake, 2001),remains very common in the Niger Delta as in most parts of Nigeria with the consequence that election results are often contested by political opponents or settled in the court of law. The implications of these violence form part of the increasing need for an overview of the evidence of electoral violence in the region.

Beyond this, a political environment which guarantees the security of both the electorates and the candidates has been less clear. This suggests the need for a more competent and credible electoral system in which the terms and timings of democratic politics could be institutionalized. This should be rooted in responsive, accountable, transparent, and moralized political order as components of functional institutional system. Thus, the need for credible elections reinforces the plausibility of participatory democratic politics which has been less evident in the Niger Delta.

CONCLUSION

The concern is that election and democratic ideals remained more of an abstract construct without direct practical and perceptible bearing on the people for whom it is meant to serve. This makes it very hard to place limits on what should be included or excluded in the electoral system and practices in the Niger Delta. Indeed, it is hard to see how election since the return to democracy has been both non violent and transparent in the region . On the contrary, what has largely remained visible includes the incidence of armed struggle and youth restiveness,voter intimidation,seizure of electoral materials and outright disenfranchisement of opponents.This suggests the urgency of modalities to improve the electoral system in the region .This in particular puts electoral violence mitigation at the centre of credible elections.

Despite various studies on election and democracy in Nigeria, the conduct of free, fair and violent free elections have remained a major problem. It appears that much efforts have not been made to relate democratization to electoral reforms in Nigeria. Joseph (1997) argued that the African experience, when carefully disaggregated, should contribute significantly to our understanding of why, when, and how liberalized and democratic systems have been imposed, facilitated, blocked ,or treated with

“benign neglect” by external actors and what factors explain their choices. The widely held belief that election is a do or die affair breeds violence and results in electoral apathy as several lives and property are lost during elections

The political transition which resulted in multi-party elections have not extended beyond mere procedural change of power within tenure limits. Yet the content of such change of tenure within electoral contexts have been riddled with violence. Thus, the core issues of transformation of electoral violent and conduct of credible elections remain a persistent problem.

This study has attempted to provide evidence of some the electoral violence in the Niger Delta since the return to democracy in 1999. The most recent wave of democratization, has demonstrated little commitment to such overhaul. It has paid superficial attention to efficient institutional apparatus that could enthrone popular government through a violent free election. Across Nigeria not only in the region under review, the rise in electoral violence calls for urgent collaborative effort among relevant stakeholders. This include the civil society groups, NGOs, political leaders and policy makers, such synergy could redirect the erroneous notion of elections and enthrone a more violent free electoral system.

The images and contours of electoral violence contradicts the procedural, free, equitable and accountable governance promised by democracy. The surge in electoral violence as several authentic literature suggests results in increasing vulnerability of women, the girl child and the youths as the latter are often used by the political class in pursuit of their political interest. There is need for reversal of trends to usher in a more credible democratic politics

Several core elements of democracy as Joseph (1997) argued can be presented as a series of paradoxes in the Nigerian and particular the Niger Delta experience. This in his view includes the notion that formal rules are made by citizen, but in actuality the making of key decisions, especially in the area of economic reform policies, is insulated from popular involvement. Joseph (1997) also demonstrated that, hegemonic economic forces in society, as well as those in control of the state apparatus, must be secure in the protection of their interests and able to minimize threats to them by formerly excluded or dominant groups for a smooth transition from authoritarian rule. This notion has been a dominant way of action by the political elite who make core decisions to protect their interests. Another central notion of the virtual democracy argument according to Joseph (1997) is the creation of opportunities for further development of a capitalist or market economy. This profits the capitalists against the masses who are the majority.

RECOMMENDATION

There are essentially no alternatives to radical overhaul of the Nigerian political system. This includes institutional overhaul including the electoral bodies and similar institutions that can make for free, air and credible elections. What these imply is that more radical institutional overhaul is needed at all levels of government in Nigeria both at the federal, state, local and ward levels. The aim among others is to effect a transformation of violent electoral system which appears to have been elusive. In the Niger Delta, ethnic differentiations have featured prominently in the competition among political elites for elective offices. This has been one of the core triggers of electoral violence. There is need for political renewal, mitigation of corruption, attention to the voice of various agitated groups, and the efficient and fair overhaul of the electoral system. Due to the institutional weakness of Nigeria the conduct of elections appears less emancipatory as the votes rarely count.

Civil society groups should increase their efforts in the context of protecting human lives and property, protection of human rights, guarantee for civil liberties, and inclusive and participatory democracy. The central thesis of this work points out that there have been relatively minimal institutional reform in Nigeria. Within the electoral context electoral reforms have not been effectively directed to the core electoral needs of the polity. There have been little impact in checking the excesses of political office seekers who engage in unwholesome acts that could destabilize peaceful co-existence within the polity.

There is need to recognize and strictly adhere to the norms of certain institutions such as Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), there is need to check institutional and systemic corruption which have been primarily responsible for electoral violence in Nigeria. This could be achieved through more inclusive and collaborative efforts involving all stakeholders at the grassroots. The practices linked to contemporary electoral system is at variance with free, air and credible electoral practices. This perhaps breeds violence as one political party and their supporters try to hijack the instrumentalities of government

Substantial policy measures should be taken one that could guarantee credible elections and in particular assure a hitch free and inclusive participation. Policy choices that support credible elections should be put in place and broadened across all levels of government. Much effort should be made to align election to the overall development objectives of the nation. The aim is to link democratization to economic development

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