

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Since 1959, when the first general elections were held in Nigeria, there has been the growing culture of political violence in the body politic of the country. The established factors which have been encouraging this ugly phenomenon include the British colonial policy of divide and rule which gave rise to ethnic politics in the country; the desperation of some politicians to win elections by all means, and the escalating incidences of political thuggery during general and even bye elections. Some other factors are lack of viable opposition in the democratic political process and absence of effective law for punishing electoral offenders. The implications of political violence in Nigeria include high rate of political assassinations, growing resentment among citizens over allegations of flawed elections and consequent threat to democracy in the country. The implications of political violence in Nigeria also include mindless destruction of lives and valuable properties by hired thugs and irate supporters of opposing political parties, and the possible break-down of law and order in the country. These implications are glaring evidence of the serious threat posed by political violence to the survival and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria, the most populous country in Black Africa has been facing daunting challenges since her independence in 1960. One of the greatest of these challenges has been the lack of democratic consolidation despite the country's exposure to democratic experiment as far back as the 1950s under the British colonial administration. Consequently, democracy in Nigeria has remained fragile, and in the past had been truncated by military intervention in politics for several times and for some reasons. For instance, from independence to date Nigeria has practiced democracy for barely twenty years while the military ruled for the greater part of the country's fifty years of independence period. Thus, the situation in Nigeria, as in some other countries of the world, amply justifies the assertion by Lewis and Nitze that, while democratization has been an encouraging trend in many regions, we know it is not inevitable. Countries that undertake political reform have no assurances that democratization will be long-lasting, or that a change of regime will produce desired improvements in the quality of governance. Democratization is a risky process, and democratic development is uncertain. (Lewis and Nitze, 2006).

It should be noted, however, that Nigeria has presently sustained an uninterrupted democratic government since the last ten years. Despite this seemingly enduring democratic system, nevertheless, the country appears to have been bedeviled with troubled polity. This is as a result of pervasive culture of political violence in the body politic of the country.

Meaning of Political Violence

Anifowose cited in Alanamu defined political violence as the use or threat of physical act carried out by an individual or group of individuals within a political system against another individual or individuals, and/or property with the intent to cause injury or death to persons and/or damage or destruction to property; and whose objective, choice of targets or victims, surrounding circumstances, implementation, and effects have political significance, that is, tend to modify the behaviour of others in the existing arrangement of a power structure that has some consequences for the political system. (Alanamu, 2005).

The typology of political violence reveals that there are different categories and scales of political violence (Alanamu, 2005). Each of these categories is specifically defined and possesses basic characteristics. For the purpose of this study, however, we are mainly concerned with electoral violence which is the commonest type of political violence in Nigeria.

The Concept of Electoral Violence

Generally speaking, all forms of violence that emanate, at any stage, from differences in views, opinions and practices during the process of elections, could be regarded as electoral violence. More specifically, electoral violence is “the employment of force by political parties or their supporters to intimidate opponents and threats to a democratic regime, and has often accounted for seizures of political power by the use of undemocratic means, such as force” (Balogun, n.d). In Nigeria electoral violence may be directed towards physical or psychological intimidation or even assassination of political opponents or their supporters. It ultimately serves as a reaction towards rigging elections. Political violence is also geared towards conferring an advantage to a particular political contestant or party with the intent of achieving electoral victory at all cost during election.

The established factors which have encouraged the development of culture of political violence in Nigerian society include the following:

1. The impact of British colonial administration

The British colonial administration in Nigeria encouraged political development in the country along regional and ethnic lines. The British colonial administration in the country also employed the policy of divide and rule in the administration of the country. This encouraged political antagonism and bitter rivalry among Nigerian political elite (Njoku, 2010). It also led to the development of the attitude of reactionary recourse to primordial cleavages for political survival and attainment of narrow or selfish political goals among the political class. This situation gave rise to ethnic politics and ethnic nationalism at the expense of national cohesion, integration and sustainable democracy.

The former President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo observed in 2007 that there were forces in the country that appeared incapable of appreciating the true value of democracy and there were those that had remained incapable of growing beyond their primordial prisms to see “a more integrated, united, fair, just, equitable, democratic and prosperous nation” (Avwode 2007). This poses a serious problem towards the effort to lay a solid foundation for democratic order in the country. Thus, as Professor Okwudiba Nnoli has rightly observed, tribalism or ethnicity in Nigeria is a creation of the colonial and post colonial order (Nnoli, 1980).

2. Attitude of desperation to win elections by all means by some Nigerian politicians

This is one of the predisposing factors that encourage political violence in Nigerian democratic process. Some Nigerian politicians often display attitude of desperation in their desire to win elections and occupy political offices. This predisposes them to violate the rules of the game, thus making politics ‘a do or die’ affair. Cardinal A.O. Okogie pungently stated that when we talk about politics in Nigeria, to us politics doesn’t mean what it really means to them in Britain or America. It is a pity that to us in Nigeria politics means lining up your pocket with the people’s money and that is why it is do or die affair... (see Dadzie, 2010).

It is in view of this attitude of desperation among some politicians over the acquisition of political power that often resulted in bloody general elections and even violent bye-elections in the country. Thus, as Zwingina has recently stated, “all the elections held from 1959 to date have been characterized by allegations of violent campaigns, political thuggery, prevention of opposition politicians from public radio and television stations and other government media” (Zwingina, 2010). Similarly; Musa lamented that the political landscape has been soiled by the progressive undermining of public organs and the systematic manipulation of representative institutions by a cabal of unconscionable individuals parading themselves as politicians whose interest in politics does not go beyond the private appropriation of public resources (Musa, 2008).

He further identified what he described as “inane policy of new breed politicians” which, according to him, the military imposed on Nigerian politics and which “unleashed on it the worst elements of amateurish intemperance and undisciplined adventurism”. This, according to him, has contributed to the failure to construct a solid and sustainable foundation for Nigerian politics” (Musa, 2008). This is perhaps one of the major reasons for the escalating incidences of political violence in some parts of the country.

3. Lack of viable opposition parties

It could be reasonably stated that since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 there has been an absence of viable and credible opposition parties capable of checkmating the ruling party. It should be noted that opposition is very vital in every functional and people-oriented democratic government. For, it provides constructive criticism of the policies and decisions of the government in power. It also helps to checkmate the excesses of government or its agencies by highlighting constitutional rules and appropriate principles and practice in democratic governance. In this way, opposition parties and politicians contribute immensely in developing and sustaining democratic culture and political stability.

However, since 1999 Nigeria’s political environment has been largely dominated by the ruling party – the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Although there are more than fifty political parties in the present dispensation, most of them are very weak to provide viable opposition to the ruling party. Moreover, the formation of Government of National Unity (GNU) after the General Elections of 2007 by President Umar Musa Yar’Adua’s administration in which the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) and Progressive People’s Alliance (PPA) accepted to participate further weakened the strength of the opposition in the polity. Modibo described the ANPP leadership which took the decision to participate in the GNU as “backyard heroes who seem to have lost relevance in the political equation of the country”. He specifically berated them for having allegedly betrayed their presidential candidate in the court of law and having joined the GNU (Modibo, 2010).

The Action Congress (AC) at its National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting on July 5, 2009 resolved to remain in the opposition and continue with its election petition. The party contended that the country needs “a viable opposition to the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)-controlled government if democracy is to survive in the country” (Aziken, 2007). Despite this seemingly resolute decision, the Action Congress has not provided viable opposition to the PDP-controlled government at both the national and state levels beyond vituperous criticisms from its national secretariat. The reasons are obvious: In the first place, many top notchers of the AC were formerly members of the PDP. They defected to the Action Congress in large number between 2006 and 2007 in protest over certain political events in the last years of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo’s regime, when party supremacy and discipline appeared to have been subordinated to the whims and caprices of the President and his loyalists. Many of such politicians have since returned to the PDP fold and are actively participating in party politics in favour of the PDP. Udom stated in 2009 that the on-going effort at reconciling aggrieved former and current members of the PDP by its leadership has... taken its toll on the party (the AC) that was largely seen as united entity and it appeared to have been bitten by the PDP reconciliation bug, hence the centre cannot hold (Udom, 2007).

He further stated that some prominent members of the AC who were foundation members of the PDP had indicated interest in going back to the party. Besides, as Udom has observed, there were some AC members who opted to negotiate with President Umar Musa Yar Adua on behalf of the AC, while other members were nominated to the membership of some state executive councils (Udom, 2007). This situation weakened the strength of the AC as an avowed opposition party.

Moreover, the former Vice President of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar, who was widely believed to have played a key role in the formation of the AC in 2006 recently resigned his membership of the party. He was reported to have stated that the AC, ANPP and APGA lacked internal democracy. He was also reported to have unequivocally stated that opposition parties need to enjoy broader national appeal and present superior democratic credentials such as internal democracy and intolerance of dissent. He was further reported to have lamented that the fissiparous nature of opposition parties in Nigeria and their inability to achieve broad-based natural structures make it impossible for them to assert themselves effectively, let alone win power at the centre. He was also said to have identified

factionalisation, intrigues and divided loyalties to particular individuals as factors that have made opposition parties incapable of rising to the challenges of national leadership in the country (see Oriola, 2010).

Thus, the absence of viable opposition in contemporary Nigerian democratic system left the ruling party to call the shots on most national affairs. This, however, appears to have led to widespread frustration and a growing sense of alienation and bitterness within the political class especially among those who lack the opportunities to play significant roles in the political process, and, as such, not part of the beneficiaries of the reward system. This seems to have aggravated the problem of political violence in the country due to stiff competition for political offices among politicians in the struggle to be on the saddle.

4. Incidences of political thuggery

The widespread incidences of political thuggery in the democratic era in Nigeria constitute a major factor that helps to perpetuate political violence in the body politic of the country. It is widely believed that thugs were usually hired, maintained and equipped by some influential politicians ostensibly to subvert the electoral process to their utmost political advantage. Besides, thugs by their character and operational behaviour are predisposed to intimidate, harass or even harm the opponents of their sponsors or god fathers.

In Oyo state during the days of Chief Lamidi Adedibu, he was reputed to have maintained an awesome political empire which was said to have contributed in creating fear in the minds of Ibadan residents. He was nicknamed 'Garrison Commander' and was said to have maintained a battalion of thugs and area boys who only needed to hear him snap his fingers to spur them into action (Iwere, 2007). Chief Adedibu's philosophy and style of politics ('*Amala*' politics) as well as his alleged state support and protection gave rise to his political excesses, arbitrariness and lawlessness in Ibadan and Oyo state in general. Politics in Ibadan and, indeed, Oyo State under his influence was "a theatre of absurd" which was a travesty of appropriate democratic order.

In Anambra state, the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mr Ogbonna Onovo was reported to have raised an alarm in January 2010 that the governorship election slated to take place on February 6, 2010 could be marred by political violence. He reportedly revealed that some of the political leaders and candidates had not only acquired fake mobile police uniforms, but had also procured arms, ammunition and other dangerous weapons with which they intended to rig the election. The IGP was said to have bemoaned the tendency of politicians to "resort to do or die in the contest of elections" in the country. He was, however, reported to have warned that political leaders identified to have resorted to such ugly act would be quizzed before the election (Ezendu and Akparandu, 2010).

Similarly, in Gombe State the Chairman of Gombe Local Government Council, Ibrahim Dasuki Julo Waziri was reported to have resolved to check political thuggery and other violent and criminal acts of the dreaded "Yan Kaleme" gang within the state capital. He was said to have described the activities of the thugs as 'barbaric' and vowed to take drastic measures against the reoccurrence of their criminal activities (Awofadeji, 2009).

Also, in Zamfara state the police was said to have waged war against political thuggery in the state by arresting 23 thugs who were said to have been terrorizing innocent citizens in Gusau metropolis (Sabiu, 2009). In many other states of the federation, political thuggery has been an ugly phenomenon in the emerging democratic culture of the country. The social insecurity posed by thugs and other social miscreants especially during general elections in the country was reported to have compelled many politicians, top government officials and other affluent Nigerians to engage in a rush for bullet-proof cars (Adesua, 2010).

Political thuggery, no doubt, is the major source of political violence in the country. Thugs carry dangerous weapons which could be employed to intimidate, harass, injure or even kill the political opponents of their sponsors. J.S. Zwingina observed that during general elections in Nigeria that criminals and hired thugs often engage in multiple voting, disruption of voting and counting process, and hijacking of ballot boxes and polling materials (Zwingina, 2010). With specific reference to 2007 General Elections, *The Human Rights Watch* report stated that "guns, machetes and looted public funds were used to win elections". The report further stated that in place of democratic competition, struggles for political office have been waged violently in the streets by gangs of armed thugs recruited by politicians. The report, therefore, described as 'a farce' the April 2007 polls which

ushered in the government of late President Umar Musa Yar' Adua (Obinor and Adeshina, 2007; Njoku, 2009).

5. Lack of enforcement of electoral law on electoral offenders

The growing culture of political violence in Nigeria's democratic political process is partly attributed to lack of enforcement of the electoral law which forbids people from engaging in electoral fraud or disruption of the electoral process through application of unlawful force or any other criminal act. D. Iriekpen observed that most of the Election Petition Tribunals set up to consider cases arising from 2007 General Elections were winding down their sittings, yet most of the tribunals did not exercise the power conferred on them to order for the prosecution of electoral offenders in the 2007 elections (Iriekpen, 2009). In view of lack of exercise of such power most electoral offenders, including thugs were not prosecuted. This may embolden such offenders and encourage them to engage in such acts more brazenly in future elections. The former President of Nigeria Bar Association (NBA), Chief Wole Olanipekun was reported to have suggested that the Electoral Act should be reformed to include provisions of adequate punishment for culprits of electoral offences. He was said to have stated that "unless the country begins to take the prosecution of electoral offenders seriously, we should forget anything called free and fair elections" (Iriekpen, 2009).

Implications of Political Violence to Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria.

Political violence undoubtedly has serious implications to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The implications include the following:

1. It dampens the zeal and enthusiasm of credible and visionary politicians to participate actively in the democratic political process. D. Fafowora predicted that with the enthronement of culture of 'do or die' elections in Nigeria "many people will be totally alienated from politics leaving the field entirely to charlatans and others who cannot offer the nation good and dedicated leadership" (Fafowora, 2007). Also, Amos Sawyer rightly stated that the preparation of citizens for democratic decision-making and the crafting of governance institutions that repose governance authority in a knowledgeable citizenry are the hallmarks of a democratic society (Sawyer, 2004).
2. Moreover, political violence discourages the electorate or voters from exercising their franchise and thereby creates the unacceptable situation for 'low turn out' during general elections. This encourages desperate politicians to engage in massive rigging of elections and consequently foisting of the wrong candidates on the system. The report of *The Human Rights Watch* on Nigeria's 2007 Elections stated that election was becoming increasingly meaningless in Nigeria, and that such situation contributes to corruption and lack of accountability in governance (Obinor and Adeshina, 2007).
3. Political violence generates an atmosphere of social insecurity. This may result in inter-group conflicts that are capable of destabilizing the society, and thereby truncating democracy.
4. It gives rise to maiming and killing of some citizens, some of whom may not be directly involved in electoral contest. Besides, the 'do or die' politics has given rise to series of unresolved murders and political assassinations in the country. *The Nigerian Tribune Editorial* observed that the rate of political assassinations since Nigeria returned to civil rule in 1999 has been quite alarming. The paper noted that "what has, however, become evident to all and sundry is that dogs have been eating dogs". The paper categorically stated that it was the politicians who have been recruiting and arming the idle hands in their various communities and turning them into "hooligans, hoodlums and career assassins (Adesua, 2010)." This scenario is capable of degenerating into a state of anarchy, thus posing a serious threat to the sustenance of democracy in the country.
5. Political violence creates morbid fear in the minds of the citizens and gives the impression that electoral contest is synonymous with warfare. This creates a very ugly image of politics and electoral contest in Nigeria. It also gives rise to the development of contemptuous attitude by the citizens for democratic governance emanating from alleged flawed elections. This may hinder the development of democratic culture among the citizens necessary for sustainable democracy.

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6. Political violence and its concomitant electoral fraud pose a serious threat to democratic consolidation and the survival of the nation itself. For example, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN)'s "land slide victory" in the 1983 General Elections and the widespread violence which characterized the elections were the major factors that led to the military coup d'état of 31st December, 1983. The coup led by Major General Muhammad Bilhari was organized partly to save the country from disintegration in the wake of mass disillusionment over the outcome of the 1983 elections.
7. It leads to mindless destruction of both public and private properties such as buildings, cars and offices by hired thugs of opposing groups and political parties. Such sordid occurrence alienates the citizens from active support and participation in the democratic process. This poses a serious obstacle towards the effort to consolidate democracy in the country.

Conclusion

The culture of political violence in Nigeria has been encouraged by certain factors. These include the British colonial policy of divide and rule which fostered the development of the ugly phenomenon of ethnic politics; the attitude of desperation among politicians to win elections by 'do or die' means, lack of viable opposition in the democratic process, the enthronement of thuggery in the body politic of the nation, and the absence of effective law for punishing electoral offenders.

The implications of political violence in Nigeria include the high rate of political assassinations, increasing apathy among credible citizens toward participation in democratic political process and vociferous allegations of electoral fraud. Another implication of political violence is the mindless destruction of lives and properties during elections by hired thugs and irate supporters of opposing political parties which may degenerate to social instability. This may pose a serious threat to the survival and consolidation of democracy in the country.

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