Interrogating the Role of Indigenous Interest Groups in Mitigating Electoral Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract

Since the country's return to a democratic system in May 1999, Nigeria's history is rich with instances of election violence and conflicts. There is evidence in Akwa Ibom State that elections pose a threat to the state's stability and security due to the possibility of election violence. Studies have demonstrated that free and fair elections reduce conflict and produce trustworthy leadership. Using the Etim-Ekpo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State as a case study, this paper examines the influence of indigenous interest groups in the reduction of electoral violence in Nigeria. The research design for this study was a case study. Dialectical Materialism: The J-Curve Hypothesis of Unfulfilled Hopes, a radical political-economic framework, and pluralist theories were investigated for the study's background. Seventy (n = 70) purposefully selected participants, including members of youth or interest groups, community leaders, and security professionals, provided data. Eighty percent of the responders were male, while twenty percent were female. The ages of respondents ranged between 18 and 48 years, and thematic analyses provided answers to five research questions. Political party/candidate competitiveness, arms proliferation, and unemployed youths as political thugs caused electoral violence. Election violence included gunshots, kidnappings, and vote box theft. Finally, indigenous interest groups could reduce electoral violence by working with state actors on peace-building strategies, mobilizing, educating, and involving youth in the electoral process and election security, supporting efforts to change the "Electoral Act" to favor online voting and mail-in ballots, and collaborating on water education. All governments should support alternative voting procedures, weapons control, and amnesty programs to map and check small arms. Nigeria's national, state, and local governments could prevent election violence via peace-building.

Keywords: Indigenous interest group, electoral violence, democracy, political thugs, arms proliferation.

Introduction

Nigeria’s democratic dreams became manifest after 33 years of military dictatorship. Though attempts at independence were made on October 1st, 1960, and later after independence to establish a civilian democratic government, these were met with unpredictable military coups and countercoups. It would be in May 1999 that this dream was finally realized. While it is important to celebrate the democratic milestone over military rule, it is also necessary and even

concerning to note that Nigeria's democracy has not progressed without serious and numerous challenges that are in fact antithetical to the very values and benefits of a democracy. One of these serious challenges has been the consistent and regular electoral violence since the return to democracy in 1999. Onvudiwe & Berwind-Dart (2010) contend that electoral violence at varying levels has been an unfortunate staple of Nigerian elections.

Electoral violence could be defined as any act of violence perpetuated in the course of political activities, including preparations for elections, the process of elections, and the post-election period. It takes different forms and may include acts such as: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings and voting at polling units, ballot box snatching, destruction of election materials, use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and election officials, or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person or persons connected with the electoral process, etc. Nigeria has held six general elections since 1999, yet none has so far been proven to have been violence-free by various election observers, including nongovernmental organizations. Human Rights Watch (2007) reported that in the lead up to the 2007 elections, Nigeria has not conducted a free and fair election since its return to democracy and that elections have been marred by widespread violence, intimidation, bribery, vote rigging, and corruption. Their report is still valid to date, as the same was experienced during the 2011 and 2015 general elections, respectively.

While it is reasonable to argue that the Nigerian transition project has succeeded in keeping the military in their barracks, the lingering question is whether this can be sustained for long in light of the current poor quality elections, which are frequently marred by violence, resulting in the loss of lives and property damage. Meanwhile, several accusing fingers have been pointed at power brokers and politicians as instigators and sponsors of electoral violence, especially where they perceive that the odds might be against them. Whether sponsored or spontaneous, election-related conflicts are distinctive, signifying discontent around tightly interwoven social and economic concerns. In fact, a former president of Nigeria has described elections in Nigeria as a "do or die" affair. There are several incidents of electoral violence that have been recorded, even at primary elections and campaign rallies.

For instance, during a PDP campaign tour led by former President Jonathan, their campaign train was policed with sachet water in Bauchi state. This was in addition to the burning of campaign vehicles and a case of a bomb blast near a campaign ground in Potiskum, in Yobe State. Sporadic gunshots at APC members were also reported in Rivers State, allegedly by PDP thugs (Akpand & Onya, 2019). In Rivers State, sixteen people were reportedly killed as a result of electoral law violations (Ndujihe & Kumolu, 2015). The INEC headquarters in Rivers State was reportedly burned down, and two people were killed during voting in the 2015 gubernatorial elections.

There have been numerous allegations of incidents that foster the conditions for violence before, during, and after elections. For example, candidates challenging the outcome of the 2019 polls or previous polls in various parts of the country have enumerated some of the various ways the elections were manipulated to buttress their point, and this built up tensions, resulting in some party or candidate supporters taking laws into their hands and going on a destruction spree to right their perceived wrong. Allegations have been made in some cases for non-conduct of polls in some polling units and blatant writing of election results, as alleged in Delta, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and Imo States; incorrect compilation and computation of results, as alleged in Delta, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and Imo States; snatching of ballot papers and boxes, as reported in

much of the South-South and South-East States; preventing people from voting (Oyosoro and Okene, 2021).

Allegations of underage voting were also reported in Jigawa, Kaduna, Gombe, Bauchi, and Kogi States. Under-age voters were allowed to vote in clear contravention of the Electoral Act, as voting allegedly took place late into the night (Ndujihe & Kumolu, 2015). These and other allegations trailed successive elections in Nigeria, laying the groundwork for electoral violence, as documented by various election observing missions and nongovernmental organizations over the years. According to IFES Reports (2007), there were 967 incidences of electoral violence in the 2007 elections. Incidents included cases of abduction and kidnapping, murder and killing, protecting, disruption, intimidation, and physical attacks, as well as poster defacing. Similarly, 300 people were killed in incidents related to the 2007 general elections. Similarly, deadly election-related and communal violence in Northern Nigeria following the April 2011 presidential election killed over 800 people, making it one of Nigeria's worst post-election violences (Human Rights Watch, 2011). With the benefit of hindsight, the CLEEN Foundation, after painstaking research in its "Third Security Threat Assessment," came up with the projection that electoral violence was most likely to occur in Nigeria's fifteen most volatile and high security risk states during the 2015 general elections (Frank-Collins, 2015).

In Akwa Ibom State, besides allegations of widespread rigging that trailed the outcome of the 2015 general elections, the main opposition party (APC) called attention to cases of ballot box snatching, organized violence, and withholding of sensitive electoral materials, among other anomalies, during the presidential and national assemblies as well as the governorship elections in the state, and this degenerated into pockets of violence leading to loss of lives and destruction of properties, of which many electoral wards in Etim Ekpo Local Government Area were "red flag zones," a trend that continued up to date. As a trend, one can correctly guess with hindsight that tensions might be building up again as Nigeria anticipates its forthcoming general elections in 2023. It is therefore imperative to investigate civil engagements and their role in mitigating electoral violence before, during, and after elections. Most issues that result in violence arise during local political interactions at the community level, which will later escalate. In light of this, the goal of this study is to find out what role local interest groups play in reducing violence during elections in Nigeria.

Conceptual Discourse

Concept of Democracy

Democracy has no universally accepted definition as various scholars have different interpretations of its conceptualization. The term "democracy" is very common in political discourse. Hence, the term has attracted several explanations from different scholars and researchers. According to Falade (2014), the term "democracy" is derived from two Greek words: "demos," which means "people," and "kratos," which means "rule." In his classical definition, Abraham Lincoln defines democracy as "the government of the people by the people and for the people." According to this view, people are central to any democratic process. Without giving people the power to decide who their leader becomes and hold their leaders responsible, democracy would be a mirage.

According to Diamond, Linz, and Lipset (1989), democracy as a system of government entails healthy competition between parties for all-inclusive positions of governance, devoid of

violence, and an all-encompassing level of political involvement in the selection of leaders through the conduct of periodic free and fair elections, fundamental human rights, and political participation. Ajayi (1998) posits that democracy offers participatory opportunities for residents to choose political aspirants through periodic elections of reliable representatives to govern and protect their interests. Furthermore, Ajayi (1998) claims that democracy ensures electorates happiness and the rule of law because elected leaders are accountable to the electorate. Any country that claims to be democratic but does not allow citizens' votes and voices to be heard is not practicing democracy. From all the submissions above, one can infer that democracy is essentially people-centered. It (democracy) is a government system that encourages citizens to participate in the entire electoral process.

The concept of Election

The concept of election is associated with several meanings. In political parlance, Ojo (2008:6) further defines election as "a formal expression of preferences by the governed, which are then aggregated and transformed into a collective decision about who will govern, who should stay in office, who should be thrown out, and who should replace those who have been thrown out." In support, Awopeji (2011) explains that "election is a procedure that allows members of a given society to choose representatives who will hold positions such as leaders of local, state, and national government."According to Dye (2011), elections are an important mechanism for the employment of administrative governance in democratic social order, a major involvement in a democracy, and a way of giving approval to a regime.

Consequently, Robert (2011) traces modern and democratic elections to the 17th century and the means through which modern democracies and newly independent colonies of formal colonial masters can choose those to represent them in matters of governance and effective management of the common wealth of the country to the benefit of all. The conduct of elections to governmental offices is always branded with various preparatory events and political schemes that contenders embrace to surface as their party's contestant, in advance of contesting against the other party's candidate in a general election. These strategies range from campaigning, political movements, lobbying promotions, and private connections (Olujide et al., 2010).

Elections have been mentioned as the peak indicator of a post-conflict state in regard to a nonviolent representative outlook. The capacity to choose one's ruler is believed to be vital in driving a government forward after losing internal or external battles. Sadly, though the process of vote-casting is usually not as easy as it may initially seem, several experts and researchers have classified it as a turning point for violent acts. Elections have become a climax for violence and uncertainty in many states in Nigeria (Ikyase & Egberi, 2015).

The Concept of Electoral Violence

The concept of electoral violence combines two distinct concepts into one: electoral and violence. In this section of the review, the two concepts are defined and then reviewed in the context of the subject matter of the current study. According to Bamgbose (2011), the term "electoral" refers to the process of holding elections at either the public or private levels. Bamgbose (2011) further stated that the electoral process at the public level is the process of planning and conducting elections to choose representatives of the people in public offices of governance such as the executive, legislative, and judicial arms of government at the state and national levels. Similarly, Robert (2011) posited that the electoral process at the private level

includes all the processes involved in the successful conduct of elections in other types of groups other than those of government, such as associations and clubs.

The concept of violence has been examined by scholars from diverse perspectives, all of which relate to either positive or negative views towards achieving a given goal or end. Bamgbose (2011) opined that violence is an act of aggression that leads to inflicting injury on persons, destroying properties, and causing pandemonium within a given social gathering community or society. Having understood the concept of electoral violence, this review of literature turns to the thoughts of authors on electoral violence. Robert (2011) stated that electoral violence depicts acts of aggression, thuggery, and other similar acts that are displayed in the course of the electoral process. Balogun (2003) explains electoral violence as any form of violence that arises at any stage (pre, during, and post-election) from differences in opinions, feelings, and engagements in electoral processes. Ladan-Baki (2018) also noted that electoral violence during general elections includes the snatching of ballot boxes to rig and manipulate election results, causing pandemonium in polling stations to hinder voters from voting, beating up electoral officers, and sometimes killing them in the process, when weapons such as guns and cutlasses are used during the elections.

Electoral violence is one major problem that has affected Nigeria's democratic sustainability and achievement of good governance (Gberevebiie, 2014). The absence of proper democratic institutions militates against the attainment of democracy in Nigeria. Democracy is a system of government that promotes citizen participation in the entire electoral process. At the heart of democracy lies the concept of elections. In this regard, Gberevbie (2014:134) states that "democratic institutions are mechanisms for facilitation of the democratic process for the election of public officeholders in any democratic society." He further argues that democratic institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should put in place structures and an election ethos with a view to conducting smooth and credible elections, built on the nation of "one man, one vote" (p. 134).

Theoretical Framework

Pluralist Theory (Political theory)

The Marxist theory of political economy explains the economic aspect of the causes of election violence in Nigeria but still leaves a lot unexplained, hence the pluralist theory. This theory posits that conflict is inevitable in a pluralist political society where various factions compete against one another for political power, which is further used to patronize members of the victorious groups (Davies, 1971:94). The pluralist theory provides a vital point in the explanation of election violence in Nigeria, where competition for political power often takes the form of ethnic rising as political parties are usually divided along ethnic lines (e.g., The Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) was thought to be the political party for south-west Yoruba; the Congress of Progressive Change (CPC) was thought to be the political party for north-west Hausa/Fulani; and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) was thought to be the political party for south-south ethnic groups. Conflicts and, as a result, violence are almost unavoidable in such circumstances. Violence during elections in Nigeria has also been kept going by differences in race and party.

In this struggle for power, political elites in Nigeria are making use of the pluralistic makeup of Nigerian society and the difficulties that come along with the country's diverse religious and ethnic populations. These are used to rally support for the various political

functions, and they are exploited (Ikpe 2000:189). As a result, it is plausible to assert that the pluralistic character of Nigerian society is a factor contributing to election-related violence, which is in turn caused by elite maneuvers in the pursuit of political power.

Incidences of Electoral Violence During General Election in the Fourth Republic

Since the revival of Nigeria's democracy in 1999, elections in Nigeria have been marred by violence of varied degrees (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010). Recent election cycles have been marked by political assassinations, voter intimidation, intraparty and interparty conflict, and communal upheaval. The days immediately preceding elections and the publication of results have been among the most violent in prior election cycles during political party primaries. The Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, which jointly observed the 1999 elections, reached the conclusion that "the transition from military to civilian rule was generally conducted without violence," reserving their harshest criticism for the electoral irregularities and outright fraud reported by other election observers. In general, election-related violence occurred during the 1999 elections, but not to the extent that some feared.

In 2003, violence during the election cycle was more blatant and widespread. Intraparty clashes, political assassinations, and community unrest in already volatile areas such as Nigeria's oil-producing Niger Delta characterized these elections (Onwudiwe & Bervind-Dart, 2010). This cycle also marked the unchecked proliferation of another worrisome development: the hiring and arming of militias to serve narrow political ends. A concerned nongovernmental organization (NGO) monitoring the elections characterized them as "a low-intensity armed struggle." (Human Rights Watch, 2003) Politicians and party bosses found a ready supply of unemployed men, frequently youths, willing to perpetrate violence in exchange for pay and firepower (USIP, 2009). As a result, these young men comprised a significant percentage of the lives lost leading up to the 2003 polls (Human Rights Watch, 2003). The 2007 general elections saw the same patterns of violence and intimidation as earlier elections. Merely declaring oneself a candidate was enough to put one's life at risk. In fact, by 2007, despite Nigeria's return to democracy, electoral violence had become such a real threat that it kept large groups of voters from going to the polls. This was seen in Rivers State, where absent ballot materials and violent threats led to a low voter turnout (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart, 2010).

Nevertheless, when statewide rallies boasted vote casting in the millions, violence surged in the postelection period. Weapons and fire arms still circulating from the 2003 election cycle not only increased the likelihood of violence but also afforded militias new leverage through which to influence the very powers that had armed them in the first place (Hazen & Horner, 2007). In light of the violence unleashed during the 2007 and other past elections. Action Aid Nigeria released a report in 2010 that classified Nigerian electoral violence squarely within the category of protracted social conflict, "characterized by civil strife, heightened social and political tension, and the sporadic use of violence, but in which armed conflict is not formally declared" (Olajuyighe, 2010).

Tension had brewed to a tipping point before the 2011 general elections, and as the elections are fast approaching, politically motivated violence seems to have already taken place

in several states. For instance, in Edo State, a political contender was gunned down in August after declaring his intention to run for a seat in the House of Representatives (Ibileke, 2010). A security assistant to the current Bauchi State governor was shot in what may have been an attempted attack on the governor himself, an incident that followed several other attacks involving Bauchi politicians or their affiliates (Next, 2010). In fact, Ekeinde (2010) reported that a well-known Niger Delta militant, Saboma George, accused of past election rigging, was killed in River State, while the supporters of two gubernational candidates recently clashed in Kano, leading to one reported death and numerous injuries. Meanwhile, in Anambra State and other eastern states, high-level political kidnappings are already on the rise. In October 2010, Nigerian security officials stopped 13 shipping containers full of illegal weapons at the Lagos port. Many analysts see this as a bad sign for the elections this year (Purefoy, 2010).

Consequently, incidents that preceded the 2011 general elections prepared the ground for unprecedented post-election violence, and killings and destruction of property were massively recorded across the country, especially in the northern states. In fact, some researchers have argued that no single study has been able to sufficiently document the magnitude of violence, including the loss of lives and properties that greeted the post-election violence in 2011. Post-election violence was also fueled by alleged irregularities during the 2011 general elections. These include the non-conduct of polls in some polling units and the blatant writing of election results, the wrong compilation and computation of results, the snatching of ballot papers and boxes, as reported in much of the South and South-East States, preventing people from voting, denying would-be voters their PVCs, underage voting, etc.

Electoral Violence in Southern Nigerian States

Electoral violence involving South Carolina in particular was documented during the 2015 general elections. Prior to the elections, sporadic gunshots at a political event involving party members were also reported in Rivers State, allegedly by thugs. Also, Governor Amacchi had earlier witnessed one of the scenes of electoral violence at the source of the electioneering campaigns, where he was campaigning for candidates from the All Progressives Congress (APC) in an area of Port Harcourt when gunmen opened fire on his convoy. Also, at least two people were injured in the attack in Obio Akpor, which is home to governorship candidate Nyesom Wike of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the 2015 governorship election.

Allegations that would later lead to the loss of lives and properties were made during the elections. For instance, Akpan & Onya (2019) reported that candidates challenging the outcome of the polls in various parts of the country have enumerated some of the various ways the elections were manipulated to buttress their point. These include the non-conduct of polls in some polling units and the blatant writing of election results, as alleged in Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Rivers States; the wrong compilation and computation of results, as alleged in Delta, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, and Imo States; Also, snatching of ballot papers and boxes, as reported in much of the South-South and South-East States; preventing people from voting, as alleged in Rivers State; denying would-be voters their PVCs, as reported in Ogun and Lagos States; under-age voting in Kano, Kastina, and much of the Northern States; and inflation of election results, as alleged in Akwa Ibom, Delta, and Rivers States, etc.

Allegations of underage voting were also reported in Jigawa, Kaduna, Gombe, Bauchi, and Kogi states. Under-age voters were allowed to vote in clear contravention of the Electoral Act, even as voting allegedly took place late into the night (Ndujihe & Kumolu, 2015).

Nwabughiogu (2013) contended that in the south and south-east, particularly the Delta, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom, no proper election took place. Result sheets allegedly were confiscated and results fabricated in favor of a specific political party in order to portray the other parties as non-existent in the two zones. There were allegations of widespread vote manipulation, violence, intimidation, and ballot box snatching.

Reports also revealed that the heavy and strategic deployment of security personnel during the 2015 polls could not remedy the situation. For instance, Daudu (2015) reported that officers of the force have been accused of being major actors in the manipulation of electoral outcomes and violence that characterized elections, especially in Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Sokoto, and Gombe States during the 2015 polls. Kumolu (2015) reported that the grievances in Taraba State included the allegation that soldiers deployed during the March 28 elections frightened and intimidated voters, allowing for malpractices. It was alleged that rather than ensure fraud-free elections, the army was used to rig the elections in favor of the ruling political party. The deployment of soldiers in Wukari, Takum, and other communities openly threatened voters. At the end of the supplementary election in the state, it was alleged that the electoral process was fraught with violence, massive rigging, ballot snatching, and abuse of the card readers in substantial parts of the state (Ndujihe & Kumolu, 2015).

Soni (2015) reported that most security men wanted to deliver victory at all costs for those who paid them and, by extension, protect their jobs. Hence, the penchant for the snag "obey the last order or comply with the order from above," a situation that manifested in security agents aiding and abetting electoral fraud and violence just to maintain the status quo. A handful insisted on discharging their responsibilities dispassionately and in the nation's overall interest, much to the displeasure of their respective bosses. These allegations would prepare the ground for a post-violence election.

According to a February report from the National Human Rights Commission, in 2015, at least 58 people died in 61 incidences of election violence across 22 states. As an acknowledgement of the widespread violence that engulfed the 2015 elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) promised to investigate cases of violence against polling units, the commission's officials, voters, and election materials during the elections. According to INCE, some states, including Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Ebonyi, and Ondo States, recorded a significant number of violent incidents. Records show that there were 66 reports of violent incidents targeted at polling units, the Commission's officials, voters, and election materials. These were in Rivers State (16 incidents), Ondo (8), Cross River and Ebonyi (6 each), Akwa Ibom (5), Bayelsa (4), Lagos and Kaduna (3 each), Jigawa, Enugu, Ekiti, and Osun (2 each), Katina, Plateau, Kogi, Abia, Imo, Kano, and Ogun (1 each) (Daka, 2015).

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are no doubt similar to some previous studies (Ladan-Baki, 2016; Ikyase & Egberi, 2015; and Awopeju, 2011) on electoral violence that have been undertaken. However, the ground-breaking points of departure for this study are as follows:First, electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State is precipitated by political party and candidate rivalry and the desire of a few individuals and groups to do everything necessary for a particular party candidate to win. Mr. S. stated in an interview with the researcher that "power brokers and godfathers usually support and sponsor a candidate against other candidates who are also sponsored by very powerful politicians. This prepares the ground for violence."Second, electoral violence in Akwa

Ibom State is precipitated by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The availability and ease of access to arms allows politicians to acquire and arm thugs who use these weapons to commit various acts of violence before, during, and after elections, even to settle political scores for their paymasters. This may have explained the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Akwa Ibom State as a result of smuggling and blacksmiths as major sources. Mrs. B., who was a participant in this study, noted during an in-depth interview that "she lost one of her cousins, who was hit by a stray bullet in the electoral violence in 2015.

Third, electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State has significantly contributed to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the increase in crime. Arms acquired by some powerful politicians during elections and given to thugs in preparation for violence are still left with the thugs after elections; hence, the availability of these arms encourages robbery attacks and cult rivalry. These arms are still in the hands of the civilian population in the state today.Fourth**,** the majority of the population is in support of a voting system that will allow them to use their mobile phones to vote during general elections at their various homes without being necessarily compelled to go to polling units where they stand the risk of being a victim of electoral violence.

Fifth, if indigenous interest groups collaborate with state actors on peacebuilding strategies before, during, and after elections, carry out effective youth mobilization, sensitization, and engagement in the electoral process and security during elections, support the advocacy for an "Electoral Act" amendment to favor electronic voting and the post office mailing system, and collaborate with state actors on voter education at community levels, they would do well in mitigating electoral violence significantly (Oyosoro, F.I.; Willie, C.E & Aigbe, R. 2022).Sixth, electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State is fuelled by the large population of unemployed youths that politicians take advantage of during elections with arms and meal tickets. The occupational status of participants in this study shows that 47.1% would not have been employed if they were not self-employed, while 31.4% of the participants indicated that they had no jobs at all. Less than 30% of the sample was gainfully employed.

In summary, electoral violence does not only undermine the basic principle of democracy for free and fair elections; it also entrenches a culture that produces incompetent and questionable leaders and sustains conflicts. Electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State, and indeed throughout Nigeria, has also contributed to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, a motivating factor for criminality. Arms given to political thugs to perpetrate violence during elections are not usually retrieved after the elections; this has engendered kidnapping, armed robbery, banditry, insurgency, conflicts over natural resources, and ethno-religious conflicts of different intensities. Many people have lost their lives to bullets at the slightest provocation, and properties worth billions have been destroyed as a result of electoral violence, and the trend continues unabated.

It appears that elections in Akwa Ibom State pose a threat to the state's peace and security due to the possibility of election-related violence. All prior elections in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria have been marked by violence on the path to achieving free, fair, credible, and transparent elections as a framework for reinforcing democracy and good governance. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to provide adequate remedies to the negative trends that appear to have negative consequences on the smooth conduct of elections and the democratic peace in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria without gaining a firm grasp on the root of this violence.

Using the Etim Ekpo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State as a case study, this study examined the influence of indigenous interest groups in reducing electoral violence in Nigeria. With five purposeful and well-structured research questions, the study investigated how many causes have not only contributed to the continuation of election violence, but also to the growth of small arms and light weapons and criminality throughout the state and Nigeria. It was discovered that political party candidate rivalry and armed political thugs were the primary causes of electoral violence. In addition, the study discovered that physical aggression, gunfire, confiscation of election materials, including ballot box snatching, and kidnapping of election officials and target individuals were common features of electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State, as reported elsewhere in Nigeria (Aniekwe & Agbiboa, 2015), with grave consequences including arms proliferation, persistent conflicts, loss of lives and property, and voter apathy.

This study found that if indigenous interest groups collaborated with state actors on peace-building strategies during and after elections, carried out effective youth mobilization, sensitization, and engagement in the electoral process and security during elections, supported the advocacy for "Electoral Act" amendment to favor electronic voting and post office mailing systems, and collaborated with state actors on voter education at the community level, they would be more successful. Different branches of government and authorities must approve alternate voting techniques, such as electronic/online voting and the post office mailing system, and ensure justice and fairness for offenders and sponsors of electoral violence. In addition, there is an urgent need for an effective arms control system that not only monitors the flow of arms but also recovers arms in the hands of criminals; hence, security officers must be appropriately motivated to ensure peaceful elections.

Conclusion

Since the country's return to a democratic system in May 1999, Nigeria's history is rich with instances of election violence and conflicts. Without tackling the persistent electoral violence and its predisposing factors, Nigeria's chances for a viable democracy will remain poor. Therefore, the transformation of electoral violence in Nigeria is crucial to the success of democracy there. Currently, institutional reorganization and new orientation are imperatives. One of the primary problems has been how to build unity amid diversity and strengthen the ethos of a violent-free political system by internalizing democratic ideas. There have been numerous constitutional conversations and reviews of the Electoral Act in this regard. Despite efforts to establish a democratic order with less violence, Nigeria continues to face complex electoral violence. To ensure the viability of democracy, deliberate and calculated efforts must be done to avoid electoral violence. This strategic endeavor must be bolstered by instituting systems of good governance in which the state is resolute against all odds to protect and safeguard the interests and well-being of its population in all respects. This study implies that people or groups tend to be aggressive and somewhat authoritarian only when the state has failed in this fundamental task.

Recommendations

Recommendations made her case based on the findings from this study and are hereby highlighted:

1. There is an urgent need for electoral reforms and amendments to the electoral act that will accommodate a robust voting system that will include options for electronic/online voting and post office mailing where people can stay at home and vote or visit the post office at

their convenience within the stipulated voting periods without being compelled to crowd the ballot system at pooling units where desperate politicians sponsor arm thugs to cause violence and discrimination.

2. Periodically review and arm the national policy on the control of small arms and light weapons with the view that the policy will address current challenges in line with global best practices. There is an urgent need for an effective arms control system that will not only check the movement of arms but also mop up arms that are in illegal hands; thus, security agents need to be adequately motivated to achieve peaceful elections.

3. The government should establish a grassroots electioneering process that integrates indigenous interest groups and enables them to collaborate with state actors on peace-building strategies before, during, and after elections. The effective mobilization, sensitization, engagement, and motivation of youths to fully participate in electioneering and election security is instructive. Also, the election management institution (INEC) and other concerned state actors should utilize indigenous interest groups for voter education at the community level in order to interact effectively, identify potential causes of electoral violence, and put adequate measures in place to address it.
4. The judicial system should be strengthened and allowed to freely ensure justice and fairness in line with the constitutional provision for perpetrators of electoral violence and their sponsors. No matter who is involved, the rule of law must be adhered to at all times.
5. There is an urgent need to adequately motivate all security agencies in terms of equipment and condition of service so that they are not easily enticed with bribes and connive with desperate politicians to rig elections by all means.

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