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Insecurity and Voter Turnout in Governorship Elections in Rivers State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Elections (especially Governorship elections) in Rivers State since 1999 have continued to experience declining curve of voter turnout. Therefore, this study interrogated the effect of insecurity on voter turnout in Rivers State gubernatorial elections from 1999 to 2023. The specific objectives of the study were to; examine the state of insecurity during elections and assess the impact of insecurity on the conduct of elections in Rivers State since 1999. The 'Structural Functionalism' theoretical framework was employed in analysing the variables (insecurity, voter turnout, and elections) contained in this work. The qualitative research design method was employed in this paper involving the use of secondary sources of data collection while graphs, charts, simple percentages and tables were used in analysing the generated data. The major research findings were that; elections in Rivers State since 1999 have been characterized by insecurity, declining level of voter turnout due to insecurity in Rivers State; and election-related insecurity is usually caused by desperate members of the political class in connivance with both the State and non-state security actors. In addressing this, the study proposed a number of recommendations including the following; establishment of election offences commission, scaling up of anti-electoral violence advocacy, de-registration of perpetuators of elections insecurity in the voters' register, and life ban on convicts from political participation, among others.

Introduction

The military in Nigeria handed over government to elected political office holders at the federal, State and local government levels on May 29, 1999, under a transition programme superintended by General Abubakar Abdulsalam. Since then, the country has enjoyed regime successions through elections witnessed in 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015. But one concern with Nigeria's democratisation process is the impact of insecurity on citizens' participation in elections and governance thereafter. The slow pace of the democratisation process is not peculiar to Nigeria. It is a problem common to many African States and democracies across the globe. Ake (1994, p.1)

has noted Africa is democratizing but the democratization occurring in Africa does not appear to be in the least emancipatory. On the contrary, it is legitimizing the disempowerment of ordinary people who seem to be worse off than they used to be because their political oppression is no longer perceived as a problem inviting solution, but a solution endowed with moral and political legitimacy. Provision of a secure environment for the citizenry by government especially during election seasons is crucial for free, fair, credible and transparent elections. In all democracies across the world, participation in electoral process is the inalienable right of all qualified citizens through which their electoral preferences are made for emergence of political leadership. This is hardly with political and electoral atmosphere of insecurity.

Similarly, Gueye and Hounkpe (2010, p.10) have argued that security is an important component of the electoral process. It enhances the credibility and overall success of an election; and if not well managed, can discredit the process. Elections, when they are not managed quite satisfactorily, can endanger the democratization process they are intended to serve. When the management of the electoral process itself is of dubious quality, this can lead to instability or even threaten the entire democratization process. There is no gainsaying the fact that most African States, including Nigeria are trapped in the crises of insecurity, low citizen participation in elections, electoral process and the resultant bad or poor governance. In such countries as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, the scale of violence, human right abuses and human casualties have been high depicting electoral politics as a source of insecurity (Akokpari, 2012, p.2).

Rising insecurity associated with elections in Nigeria and Rivers State in particular, seems to have continued to affect the level of citizen participation in electoral process. It is also imperative to note that insecurity is generally a global phenomenon though its intensity and dimension vary from place to place. While corroborating the above position and the Columbian experience, Gallego (2011:8) observed thus; "Guerrillas sabotage elections and suppress turnout". In the same vein, Carreras and Trelles (2012, p.89) posited that "evidence outside of Columbia also supports the negative relationship between violence and electoral participation". It is imperative for the State to perform its primary function of protecting lives and property of the citizens including at all times the electioneering periods so as to create the fertile ground for the citizens to actively and effectively participate in elections by freely and rationally choosing the calibre of leaders with the capacity to enthrone good governance and development for the general good of the society. Insecurity associated with the elections and the entire electoral process is usually aimed at shaping electoral preferences of the political deviants. The electorates in an insecure environment expose their lives to danger when they express electoral preferences that are in conflict with the preferences of the political deviants.

In Rivers State, and other places in Nigeria, elections are seen as the vehicle through which both political and economic powers can be acquired not necessarily for good governance and development but for the primitive accumulation of wealth to satisfy primordial interests. This self-centred quest has over the years led to heightened desperation to capture political power using State and non-State security apparatuses during electioneering, thereby creating a suffocating security atmosphere that alienates and deprives the citizens from actively participating in the electoral process. As narrated by Edozie (2016) in Wilson (2016, p.59); "The various elections in Rivers State were characterized by irregularities, wide-spread violence and killings, electoral malpractices resulting in the death of many people". As captured by Bello (2015, p.7), "between 2006 and 2014, Rivers State recorded a total of one hundred and eighty-one (181) cases of political and electoral fatalities". This scary figure shows an unfriendly and

unsafe environment for active citizen participation in electoral process. The atmosphere of insecurity is usually created by the political actors in connivance with both State and non-State Security apparatuses before, during and after elections has become the entrenched political culture in Rivers State in particular, and Nigeria in general.

As aptly captured by Ademowo and Ojo (2015, p.5), Nigeria's historical antecedent shows that political disagreements, especially those that are associated with electoral misconduct usually snowballed into national tragedy of unmitigated proportions. This is expressed in the increasing manifestation of physical, psychological and structural violence perpetuated against political opponents and the citizenry, which include intimidation, vandalism, abduction, character defamation, and political-related assassination. Invariably, this has constituted a sense of insecurity and electoral apathy in the polity. Flowing from the above, the negative impacts of insecurity on citizen participation in elections and electoral process are succinctly captured. The citizens cannot be actively involved in the electoral processes in an insecure and unsafe environment characterized by electoral violence, ballot box snatching, electoral thuggery, killings, maiming, arson and other allied vices. When the citizens cannot participate effectively in the electoral processes, they are denied the right to choose their political leaders at all levels of governance, thereby creating a 'legitimacy crisis' for the emergent government which in turn impacts negatively on governance, democratic consolidation and the overall development of the State. This position is corroborated by McGee, Pearce and Wheeler (2011, p.9); "where violence impedes citizen action, it also limits the development of democracy. Citizenship cannot be exercised in meaningful ways if people fear for their safety".

Interestingly, Rivers State is one of the oil/gas producing States in Nigeria, contributing significantly to the country's revenue and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Over the years, the struggle to capture political power has been equated with having access to economic power through which wealth can be primitively acquired by the political incumbents and their cronies. The unending struggle to control both political and economic powers in Rivers State since the reversal of governance matrix in Nigeria in 1999 has always brought about unhealthy political rivalry snowballing into widespread electoral violence, electoral fraud, kidnapping, killings, arson, maiming and other crude acts that collectively create an atmosphere of insecurity. The prevailing unfriendly political climate in Rivers State has over time dampened citizens' interest in actively participating in elections in their political constituencies which hitherto should have given them the opportunity of choosing the calibre of leaders capable of providing good governance and bringing development and change to their door-steps. The above position is further affirmed by ActionAid (2015, p.10) in the Post-2015 General Elections in Nigeria survey report which unveils that 'violence and militarization hindered citizen participation in the electoral processes in Rivers State, and thereby contributed to low citizens 'turnout'.

The spate of insecurity in Rivers State assumed an alarming dimension and further deteriorated in 2013 when the hitherto One-Party Rivers State was polarized following the defection of the then Governor, Rt. Hon. Chibuike Amaechi and his lieutenants from the People Democratic Party (PDP) to the newly amalgamated All Progressive Congress (APC).The power struggle in the State between the emerging political blocs from the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressive Congress (APC) became full blown and resulted in different forms of insecurity during the 2015 General elections and the re-run elections that followed afterwards. As captured in one of the post 2015 Rivers State Governorship Election Reports, the elections in Rivers State were almost certainly the most extremely disrupted in the country. Violent incidents were reported throughout the day……including several reported deaths and attacks on party

representatives, journalists, and election officials. Violence had a serious impact on voters, election officials, and party supporters. (Stakeholder Democracy Network, 2015, pp.1-2). Against this background, this paper examines the state of insecurity during elections in Rivers State, as well as assessing its impact on voting and voter turnout in the State from 1999 to 2023.

Statement of the Problem

An environment that is enveloped by an atmosphere of insecurity cannot allow citizens therein to actively participate in elections either to 'vote' or 'be voted for'. In other words, when citizens are denied the opportunity of participating in elections and electoral process, their right to choose the calibre of political leaders to govern them is also denied, and this unarguably impact negatively on governance and development in such an environment. High levels of violence intimidate citizens, who may then prefer to stay at home on the day of the election instead of going out to the polls. In fact, in communities where violence is widespread, individuals are likely to abandon public spaces where the risk of suffering a violent attack is higher. Elections are a critical pillar of democracy and good governance the world over. When they are free, fair and transparent, they confer legitimacy and acceptance. In Nigeria, elections have too often been a sour point of our democracy. Incidences of fraud, violence, rigging, vote buying, and blatant results manipulation have undermined the credibility of this important process, resulting in low public confidence in election outcomes. (Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation, 2015, p.4).

In Rivers State, the continued struggle by the elites to capture political power has been fierce since May 29, 1999 when democratic governance was restored in Nigeria, thereby leading to unhealthy competition among the various power blocks, which has culminated into an unprecedented level of insecurity witnessed across the State. As noted further by Musa (2015, p.4), of the many challenges to the electoral process, security has become one element on which organisers of elections, contenders for political offices and the electorate are in agreement to be the pre-condition for a successful electoral process; given that it is practically impossible to hold credible elections in an insecure state. As buttressed by Bello (2015, p.7), "between 2006 and 2014, Rivers State recorded a total of one hundred and eighty-one (181) cases of political and electoral fatalities". This scary figure shows an unfriendly and unsafe environment for active citizen participation in electoral process. The picture painted above does not a fertile ground for increased citizen participation in elections and the enthronement of democratic governance.

Insecurity has continued to be associated with elections, electoral and political systems in Nigeria since the first republic, and has become the prevailing political culture imbibed by most members of the political class in the country displaying the 'zero-sum' style of politics. Undoubtedly, insecurity during election cycles has contributed immensely to the downward slope of the curve of citizen participation in electoral process in Rivers State and Nigeria as a whole. For instance, INEC and FES (2015, p.5) stated that "Less than half of the registered voters (42.76%) officially voted as compared to the 54% in 2011, 57% in 2007, 69% in 2003, and 52% in 1999 elections. For example, in Rivers State, only 59.08% (1,228,614) of the registered voters (2,079,231) participated in the 2015 Governorship Elections (INEC, 2015, p.388).

In Rivers State, turnout was slashed from 64.7% (number of registered voters was 2,537,590 while number of accredited voters was 1,643,409) in 2015 to 37.07% (number of registered voters was 3,048,741, and number of accredited voters was 1,130,445) (Stakeholder Democracy Network, 2019, p.8). These statistics glaringly show the level of political apathy that has constantly been displayed by the Nigerian electorates during the various elections that have

been conducted since 1999 in the country. There is no gainsaying the fact that a number of factors, especially insecurity has contributed to this fluctuating degree of citizen participation in elections in Rivers State, and elsewhere. As noted by Lai (2018) in Aghedo, Nwokolo and Okigbo (2018, p.1), "the risk of violence is present in nearly every election in Nigeria. It can inhibit voter turnout, limit political campaign movements and push candidates to drop out-all of which call into question the credibility of an electoral process".

The gradual downward slope of the level of citizen participation in elections in Nigeria over the years has huge implications on the governance of the country and the people; and has also created the 'legitimacy and accountability gaps' at all levels of government in the country, including Rivers State. Whereas it is the right of citizens to participate in elections and other phases of the electoral process by voting candidates of their choices which invariably makes the elected political leaders accountable and enhance good governance, the persistence of insecurity during elections cycle hinders active citizen participation which adversely affects governance in Rivers State.

Theoretical Framework

The 'Structural Functionalism' theoretical framework is employed in analysing the variables (insecurity, voter turnout, and elections) contained in this work. The theory has been mostly used by political scientists and sociologists in analysing the functions that social and political structures are expected to perform for the attainment of stability and equilibrium in the society. Many authors have employed Structural Functionalism as an analytical tool for the understanding of instability, political violence and general insecurity in developing countries. For example, Samuel Huntington who in his *Political Order in Changing Societies* propounded an interesting thesis that in societies where political participation is high, yet the process of political institutionalization is low and weak, there is bound to be political instability or political decay (Matlosa, 2003, pp.85-86). Other prominent proponents of the 'Structural Functionalism' such as Parsons (1971, p.20) and Almond (1956, p.394) are of the view that each member of the social structure has a specific function assigned to it to perform. They further argue that for the continued existence and stability of the social structure, its respective members must perform their specific functions effectively while maintaining a functional relationship among themselves.

As argued by Almond and Verba (1963, pp.113-118), structural functionalism can only thrive in a participant cultured society or State where members therein have high cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientation to the political system, the input objects, the policy outputs, and recognize the self as an active participant in the polity. Here, citizens are expected to conform to the prevailing electoral laws, as well as taking part in the decision-making process of government either directly or indirectly. The application of 'Structural functionalism' to this work is very relevant in the analysis and understanding of insecurity, and its impacts on citizen participation in elections and electoral process in Rivers State since 1999. The position of this paper is that State institutions and structures (military and para-military) in Nigeria that are saddled with the constitutional function of protecting lives and property of citizens and non-citizens alike in the country, have been ineffective and inefficient in the discharge of their specific function of security. This is clearly a sharp departure from the position of the structural functionalists whose advocacy and proposition is hinged on the effective discharge of specific societal functions by specific structures and institutions.

The failure of the country's security structures over the years to effectively curb security

challenges associated with elections and electoral process is identified as a major factor that prevents most citizens from effectively participating in elections for fear of being injured, harmed or killed by perpetuators of electoral violence. It is also asserted that the ineffectiveness of the security institutions in the country is primarily caused by corruption, politicization of the security structures by political elites, and poor funding. On the other hand, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is constitutionally bestowed with the function of superintending over the country' electoral system and process, is also affected by the prevailing security lapses thereby making it difficult for it to effectively perform its specific function of conducting free, fair and credible elections. This is so because insecurity usually exposes officials and adhoc Staff of INEC to unprecedented danger in the course of discharging their duties, hence creating room for the manipulation of the electoral process by corrupt politicians and members of INEC Staff. From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that the two most relevant structures (INEC and security agencies) to this work have not been performing their primary functions effectively. According to the proponents of this theory, when the different structures in the social system are not in harmony in the discharge of their respective functions assigned to them, then there is bound to be 'systemic disequilibrium'. As corroborated by Easton (1965, p.22), "The absence of equilibrium or the existence of disequilibrium means instability of the political system and this instability will invite enemies of the political system to interfere".

Therefore, insecurity in Rivers State and Nigeria has created an unhealthy and dysfunctional relationship between the State security structures and INEC. As opined by Eminue (2001, p.89), "A relationship is said to be functional if it promotes the survival of the political system and other structures, if it enhances its functionality. Conversely, a relationship is considered to be dysfunctional if it limits or reduces the chances of the survival of the political system and related structures or if it impairs its functionality". Indeed, the above pictures the situation in Rivers State and Nigeria where the State Security institutions are not performing optimally, thereby creating an unconducive environment for the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to effectively manage the country's electoral system and process owing to insecurity which in turn prevents citizens from active participation in the various elections that have been conducted in Rivers State since 1999.

In a nutshell, functional security architecture would ensure a functional electoral system and process that will promote increased citizen participation in elections, improved political representation, and responsive governance in Rivers State, and Nigeria. As buttressed earlier, many have attributed this continued regression in voter turnout in elections in Rivers State and other parts in Nigeria to insecurity, and declining voters' confidence in the Elections Management Body (INEC) amongst other factors. Beyond the issue of insecurity, other factors can also impact negatively on voter turnout. As observed in the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room Report (2019), "The abrupt postponement of 2019 national elections six hours to the commencement of polls dampened the interest of potential voters considering the costs to be incurred in participating on the re-scheduled date".

Methods and Materials

This study employed the qualitative research design method. The choice of this research design was informed by the method and instrument of secondary data collection. This paper relied on secondary sources of data namely; academic journals, INEC website, scholarly books, NGO publications, newspapers, and magazines. The research setting of this study is Rivers State, Nigeria. Rivers State, with its capital in Port Harcourt, is one of the thirty-six (36) federating States in Nigeria. The State has a population of five million, one hundred and ninety-eight

thousand, seven hundred and sixteen (5,198,716) (National Population Commission, 2006; & National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Rivers State has twenty-three (23) local government areas, namely; Abua-Odual, Ahoada-East, Ahoada-West, Akuku-Toru, Andoni, Asari-Toru, Bonny, Degema, Eleme, Emohua, Etche, Gokana, Ikwerre, Khana, Obio-Akpor, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Ogu/Bolo, Okrika, Omuma, Opobo/Nkoro, Oyigbo, Port Harcourt, and Tai.

Figure 1 : Map of Rivers State, Nigeria



Source: www.riversstate.*gov.ng*.

The State was created from the old Eastern region of Nigeria in 1967 and it is bounded on the South by the Atlantic Ocean, to the North by Imo, Abia and Anambra States, to the East by AkwaIbom State and to the West by Bayelsa and Delta States. Rivers State is made up of a number of indigenous ethnic groups, including Abua, Andoni, Ekpeye, Engenni, Etche, lbani, lkwerre, Kalabari, Ogba, Egbema, Ndoni, Okrika, Ogoni among others. Rivers State is economically significant as the centre of Nigeria's oil and gas industry contributing enormously to the country's revenue profile.

Results and Discussion of Findings

The study focused on investigating the impacts of insecurity on citizen participation in elections in Rivers State, Nigeria. For instance, in Rivers State, there has been a gradual downward slope in voter turnout during governorship elections as shown in the following table:

Governorship Election Year	% Voter Turnout
2003	75.44
2011	57.7

2015	54
2019	21.1
2023	13.6

Source: Compiled from INEC, 2023

The above data have confirmed the positions advanced by most of the scholars and institutions cited in this work that insecurity (electoral or general) contributes to declining level of voter turnout in Rivers State, Nigeria and elsewhere.

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn in this paper are that elections in Rivers State have been characterized by the following: First, high frequency of incidents of election-related insecurity. That is, the intense competition for political power in the State often escalates into violence during election periods. Political actors, driven by a desire to gain or retain power, resort to desperate measures, including the use of armed groups and thugs to intimidate opponents and voters. Second, there has been increasing voter apathy, the disinterest or lack of motivation among citizens to participate in the electoral process during elections in the State. The prevalence of election-related violence and insecurity in some areas of River State has created an atmosphere of fear among voters. Incidents of political thuggery, intimidation, and violence during elections discourage citizens from exercising their right to vote. Moreover, a significant number of River State residents harbor skepticism and distrust towards the electoral process. Concerns about electoral fraud, vote rigging, and manipulation erode the confidence of voters, leading them to question the legitimacy of the outcomes. The State has experienced periods of political instability and allegations of corruption within the government. Such instances contribute to a general disillusionment with the political class, making voters feel disconnected from the decision-making processes.

Third, the interference of state security services in the electoral process has become a recurring issue in Rivers State, raising serious concerns about the integrity of democratic practices in the region. The involvement of security agencies in electoral matters has far-reaching consequences, impacting the fairness and credibility of elections. State security services have been implicated in several methods of interference, including intimidation and harassment of voters, especially in opposition strongholds, have been reported. This creates a climate of fear that discourages free and fair participation in the electoral process. Allegations of security agencies favouring a particular political party or candidate and suppressing opposition voices have been widespread. This skewed support undermines the level playing field necessary for democratic elections. Similarly, reports of state security services tampering with electoral materials, such as ballot boxes and result sheets, have raised serious concerns about the accuracy of election outcomes. Fourth, the electoral process in the State has witnessed a concerning trend marked by the collusion between desperate members of the political class and non-State security actors during elections. This collaboration, driven by political ambitions and the pursuit of power, poses a threat to the democratic principles of free and fair elections.

Recommendations

Based on the findings generated from this work, the following recommendations are proposed for the various stakeholders associated with the electoral process:

1. Security agents should be thoroughly trained to understand their constitutional role in the electoral process in consonance with the extant 2010 Electoral Act (as amended).

2. Security agents who collude with corrupt members of the political class in perpetuating electoral violence and other acts of election-related insecurity should be dismissed, prosecuted and sanctioned adequately.

3. The State ministry of education should re-calibrate the school curriculum at all levels to promote the teaching of civic education in order to imbibe in the students the ethos and political culture that places premium on violence-free, credible, fair, and transparent polls.

4. Civil Society Organisations should scale up voter education and engagements on the negative impacts of election-related insecurity on citizen participation, political representation, governance, and development.

5. Community leaders (youth, Chiefs, women, and Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) should collaborate and share intelligence on perceived and actual pre-election, election and post-election threats with the Police and other security agencies, especially those nearest to them.

6. INEC should carry out pre-election risks assessment surveys in order to identify areas that are prone to election-related insecurity, and the findings shared with security agencies for interventions and management.

7. INEC should develop and publish protocols of engagement for the security agencies during election cycle so as to guide their operational conduct.

8. The National Assembly (NASS) should amend the existing 2010 Electoral Act (as amended) to incorporate remote or electronic voting. This will enable qualified citizens to vote without being physically present at the polling units, especially those usually associated with electoral violence, fraud, and other acts of election-related insecurity.

9. The NASS should pass laws for the establishment of Election Offences Commission, and Election Offences Tribunal (Courts). The laws should empower these specialized courts to allocate stiffer sanctions to perpetuators and sponsors of election-related insecurity such as imprisonment without an option of fine, and perpetual disenfranchisement through voter de-registration.

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