Electoral Violence and Its Implications on Sustainable Development in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

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Abstract: The emergence of electoral violence since the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 has reached an unprecedented scale and evolved in form, leading to instability, democratic consolidation, irreversible infrastructure damage, and social injustice. The study revealed the causes of electoral violence and its implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. The research identified the factors contributing to election violence and its effects on sustainable democracy in Nigeria. It also highlighted strategies to address electoral violence and proposed essential policy recommendations for its eradication to ensure sustained development in Nigeria. In the contemporary world, elections have become the most accepted means of changing government. The emergence of electoral violence since the inception of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999 has reached an unprecedented scale and evolved in form, leading to instability, democratic consolidation, irreversible infrastructure damage, and social injustice. The study revealed the causes of electoral violence and its implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. The research identified the factors contributing to election violence and its effects on sustainable democracy in Nigeria. This paper adopts secondary data from books, journals, magazines, and newspapers to assess the conduct of elections, especially those of the Fourth Republic. The findings reveal that the absence of free and fair elections led to violence, resulting in candidates who did not reflect the people's choice. The paper recommends basic reforms, devolution of power at the center, and other plausible measures to ensure a true and sustainable democratic system in Nigeria, which is essential for achieving sustainable development.

Keywords: Electoral Violence, Sustainable Development, Election, Free and Fair Election, Electoral Process

Introduction

Elections are widely regarded as the hallmark of democracy in all parts of the world. However, holding frequent elections has received a lot of attention since Africa began to democratically transition in the 1990s. Therefore, there is no question that political actions pertaining to regime change and leadership succession represent a significant part of political life in any community. Such an act is a significant indicator of political evolution or determination in political systems generally and in Nigerian politics specifically. In any case, free and fair elections are fundamental to democratic processes. Electoral farces are incompatible with the concept of democratic self-government. (Page 109 of Ojo, 2008). A free and fair election is therefore a prerequisite for a political system to be referred to as democratic, though not all elections meet these requirements.

Nevertheless, due to the intrinsic inability of these emerging democracies, which prevents adherence to electoral rules, Nigeria's elections are conducted without these essential components. One indicator of the degree of democratic consolidation is the quality of elections, which has seen a steady decline (Alemika, 2012, p. 155). Violence is the biggest opponent of democracy, according to Kean (2013, p. 16), and it has hampered Nigeria's democratic transition.

A comparative study of Nigeria with other African countries, such as South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana, highlights the complexities of electoral violence. For instance, Nigeria and South Africa share similar challenges with corruption, but Nigeria's oil-rich economy sets it apart. Similarly, Nigeria and Kenya have faced election-related violence and ethnic tensions, but Nigeria's federal system and religious diversity differ from Kenya's centralized government.

If electoral violence is pervasive, then no democratic election, democratic consolidation, sustainable development, democratic cultural expansion, or internalization of optimal democratic practices can occur in any nation. Since the fourth republic, one of Nigeria's biggest political issues has been electoral violence brought on by representational campaigns, balloting, ethnic and religious interest, and outcome conflicts. Given that even the 1959 independence election, which was called by the former colonial rulers, was marked by varying degrees of violence, election violence in Nigeria is actually not a recent issue. However, the incidence, consequences, and severity of electoral violence have changed throughout time, and these are the factors that need to be thoroughly examined, comprehended, and dealt with in order to increase Nigeria's election legitimacy.

Statement of the Problem

Elections by vote are acknowledged as the sole reliable indicator of the power equation in any objective political system worldwide. However, selecting leaders at all governmental levels through free and fair elections is one of Nigeria's current problems. The speech made by the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua upon receiving the Electoral Reform Committee's report eloquently encapsulates the depravity of electoral violence and the pressing need for electoral reform in Nigeria. "Our focus on electoral reform is based on the belief that elections are the very heart of democracy; therefore, they must not only be fair but also free from violence and seen as such by our people and

the rest of the world," he stated, and I quote him. This administration has regarded it as a sacred mandate to implement extensive and complex reforms that will restore the integrity of the electoral system in this nation because we firmly believe that failing to establish an acceptable procedure for choosing the representatives of the people will undoubtedly result in failure in the long run.

Because of the previous federal elections and, in particular, the 2007 general election, which was deemed below even Nigerian standards by both domestic and foreign observers, electoral matters are currently the most talked-about topic in Nigeria. Orji and Uzodi (2012, p.6) also mentioned the 2011 post-election violence, which they primarily ascribed to tensions stemming from the ruling People's Democratic Party's (PDP) unclear zoning rotation of president practice. How much weight we can give to a single component like that in understanding the violence is still up for debate, though. It is clear that the general election of 2015 was marked by the same level of violence in numerous places. If Nigerian democracy is to be maintained and strengthened, this issue must be resolved immediately.

Therefore, this study's challenge is to pinpoint the root causes of Nigerian electoral violence, its effects on a viable democracy, and how to reduce—if not completely eradicate it.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the consequences of electoral violence on sustainable development in Nigeria. The specific objectives the study will focus upon include:

1. To investigate the causes of electoral violence in Nigeria.
2. To ascertain the consequences of electoral violence on sustainable development in Nigeria.
3. To identify strategies to be taken to eliminate electoral violence for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Research Questions
The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are the causes of electoral violence in Nigeria?
2. What are the consequences of electoral violence on sustainable development in Nigeria?
3. What are strategies to be taken to eliminate electoral violence for sustainable development in Nigeria?

Theoretical Framework
The Anomie Theory of Violence and Conflict, made popular by French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his seminal work "Suicide" in 1897, serves as the foundation for the article on Electoral Violence and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria (Haralambos and Holborn, 2007, p.71).

The word "anomie," which translates to "without law," refers to a lack of social rules or normlessness. It explains how a person's social links to their community break broken, resulting in social identity fragmentation and a rejection of self-regulatory values. When the acceptable ways to achieve common societal goals are not aligned with the goals themselves, anomie results..

Furthermore, a person who suffers from anomie might work to achieve the shared objectives of a certain society yet be unable to do so legally due to societal structural constraints. The person would consequently behave in a deviant manner. Stated differently, anomie arises when there are no explicit norms to direct behaviour in a particular sphere of social life. People in these situations feel completely lost and anxious; a state of "formlessness" develops, and they start doing anything they want.

Thus, this scenario explained the Nigerian government's inability to hold free and fair elections or free elections with no violence, as well as policy failures (such as poverty alleviation programmes, scholarship packages for students, low pay of government officials such as the Nigeria policy civil servants and so on, tribalism, nepotism, etc. these and among others have triggers Nigerian youths to take up arms against the Federal Government of Nigeria.

These situations, among others, have led to the legalisation of corrupt practices in the nation and have fostered prostitution, arm robbery, thuggery, hooliganism, and kidnapping. However, gangs, often known as thugs, are the most regular perpetrators of election violence in Nigeria. Public officials openly recruit, fund, and occasionally equip their members. These gangs, which are mostly made up of young males without jobs, are organised to attack competitor sponsors, scare voters, rig elections, and defend their clients from similar assaults. Sponsors of electoral violence frequently use the same violent college "cults," criminal gangs, and other sources to recruit political violence agents. For the sole purpose of committing acts of violence and cruelty on behalf of their political sponsors, these recruited individuals are paid, frequently very little, and occasionally armed. (Kushre, 2011, p.6).

Anomie theory is relevant to this study because it highlights electoral violence as stemming from a lack of social norms or lawlessness. It suggests that inadequate electoral processes and laws, combined with the Nigerian government's failure to establish behavioral standards in critical social areas, have led to an ineffective police force. Officers are under-resourced and poorly compensated, which leaves them vulnerable to corruption and unable to deter offenders. The judicial system, often seen as a last resort for justice, is slow and costly, creating frustration among those seeking redress. This breakdown in social order drives communities to seek drastic measures like vigilante groups—the Bakassi Boys, Odua People's Congress, Egbesu Boys, Arewa People's Congress—or even military intervention, which may further destabilize the state by diverting attention from essential governance reforms, particularly within the police. Over time, some ethnic militias become threats themselves, engaging in armed robbery, pipeline sabotage, kidnapping, child trafficking, property destruction, and, notably, electoral violence. Furthermore, despite the rhetoric that has been used to condemn electoral violence, Nigeria's successive governments have not done much to hold government officials and security force personnel accountable for violations of civil and political rights, including violence related to elections. According to anomie theory, this leads to a collapse of social standards and lawlessness.

Literature Review
Electoral Violence
A logical starting point in understanding violence more broadly involves examining a foundational definition. For this discussion, the World Health Organization's (WHO) 2008 definition will be adopted, which describes violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, whether threatened

or actual, against oneself, another person, or a group or community, leading to injury, death, psychological harm, deprivation, or maldevelopment. This comprehensive definition encompasses not only physical actions but also threats and intimidation. It highlights the wide-ranging impacts of violence, including less visible consequences like psychological harm, deprivation, and developmental setbacks that undermine the welfare of individuals, families, and communities.

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems' (IFES) definition of electoral violence specifically addresses electoral violence, which is concisely stated as a component of political violence. Voter, candidate, party officer, election worker, election monitor, journalist, etc. are all directly involved in an electoral process, and electoral violence is defined by IFES as any act or threat of physical or psychological harm to a person or damage to property that may interfere with or attempt to interfere with any part of the electoral process (campaign, registration, voting, counting, etc.).

Electoral violence can thus be seen as any random or organized act that seeks to determine, delay or organized act that seeks to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, disinformation, physical assault, blackmail, destruction of property, or association. The victims of elected violence can be people, places, things or data. The acts associated with electoral violence include physical harm (examples: homicide, sexual violence, torture, assault); threat (examples; physical, verbal) intimidation, destruction of property (example: arson damage from stones or sharp objects) and forced displacement (Machika, 2009, p.3).

The objective of electoral violence is to influence the electoral process and its outcome by gaining an unfair political advantage by one individual or group of individual over another. It is geared towards wining political competition or power through intimidation and disempowerment of political opponents (Olawale, 2005, p.16). According to Machika (2009, p.6) here are the common grounds on which electoral violence occurs:

1. During registration, when both the ruling and opposing parties attempts to hijack the voter registration to enable falsification or double registration as pre-rigging mechanism.
2. During campaigns, electoral violence can occur as rivals seek to disrupt the appoints' campaigns, intimidate and threaten candidates, party officials and supporters. This has been the most common venue of electoral violence.
3. During balloting on Election Day, threats and violence sat the polling station might be use as tactics to influence participation in the voting or to steal ballot boxes.
4. Electoral outcomes, disputes over election results might trigger violence in protests.
5. Winner takes all syndromes in Nigeria elections. Loser might resort to violence to disrupt, delay or influence representation to avoid "zero sum" where "losers" are completely excluded in governance, despite their "huge investments".

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development (SD) has become a central term in development discussions, marked by diverse definitions and interpretations. At its core, SD can be understood as "development that can be sustained indefinitely or for a defined period" (Dernbach, 1998, 2003; Lele, 1991; Stoddart, 2011).

Structurally, the term combines "sustainable" and "development," each of which has various definitions, leading to numerous interpretations of SD itself. Despite this diversity, the most frequently referenced definition is from the Brundtland Commission, describing SD as meeting present needs without impairing future generations' ability to meet theirs (Schaefer & Crane, 2005).

Reflecting on the global relevance of the Brundtland definition, scholars like Cerin (2006) and Abubakar (2017) regard SD as central to development policies worldwide, providing a framework for sustainable environmental interactions without depleting future resources. SD thus embodies a model that raises living standards without harming ecosystems or creating environmental issues, such as deforestation and pollution, which can drive climate change and species extinction (Benaim & Raftis, 2008; Browning & Rigolon, 2019). Viewed as a method, SD promotes resource use that preserves availability for future needs (Mohieldin, 2017). Evers (2017) connects SD to a principle that balances human development goals with sustaining natural resources and ecosystem services essential to society and the economy. From this perspective, SD strives for social, environmental, and economic harmony (Gossling-Goidsmiths, 2018; Zhai & Chang, 2019).

Addressing the imperatives of SD, Ukaga et al. (2011) emphasize shifting away from environmentally harmful activities toward those with positive ecological, social, and economic impacts. SD's importance intensifies as population growth strains finite natural resources, prompting calls for responsible resource management to fulfill current needs without compromising future generations (Hák et al., 2016). In essence, SD seeks equilibrium among economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social well-being, underpinning intergenerational equity— recognizing both immediate and long-term sustainability goals (Dernbach, 1998; Stoddart, 2011). Kolk (2016) asserts that this can be achieved through integrating economic, environmental, and social considerations in decision-making. Nonetheless, sustainability and SD, often conflated, are distinct: sustainability denotes a state, while SD refers to the process to achieve it (Diesendorf, 2000; Gray, 2010).

The Causes of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Political violence in Nigeria, while frequent, is not usually spontaneous and lacks an inherent ethnoreligious or regional alignment (Machika, 2009, p.11). Electoral violence, however, often spans across parties, religions, and regions, although it can morph into ethnoreligious conflict. Several factors contribute to the persistent occurrence of electoral violence, driven by different incentives for key actors involved.

1. **Financial Inducement**: Electoral violence is often financially motivated, employed by influential Nigerians to secure or enhance their political and financial positions (Adewomi, 2012, p.4). Specific financial factors include:
   - The Lure of Political Office: The appeal of Nigerian political offices, which often come with privileges, entices those in power to retain office through any means, while outsiders use violence to gain access to these positions.

- Greed and Corruption: The potential for substantial personal gain makes politics appealing, leading to a system where instigators bribe electoral officials, security personnel, and others to manipulate outcomes (Bello, 2010, p.12).
- Illiteracy, Ignorance, and Poverty: Limited political knowledge, poverty, and lack of education among Nigerian youth make them susceptible to exploitation by politicians who lure them with financial promises (Hoglind, 2006, p.4).
- Monetization of Office and Godfatherism: Political positions are often treated as assets by aspirants and their "godfathers," who finance campaigns in exchange for influence, fostering an environment conducive to electoral violence.
- Sit-tight Syndrome: Incumbents use state resources and influence over electoral management bodies to retain power, manipulating elections through law enforcement agencies who are often bribed to intimidate or harm opponents (Umeh, 2013, p.2).

2. Election Management Bodies (EMBs) Breach of Trust: Electoral integrity in Nigeria is compromised when EMBs fail to impartially manage elections. Specific aspects include:

- Electoral Body's Impartiality: When electoral officials accept political influence, resulting in biased election outcomes, dissatisfaction and subsequent violence ensue (Umeh, 2013, p.4).
- Security Agency Bias: Security forces, instead of ensuring fair elections, often aid politicians in manipulating elections through harassment, intimidation, and direct violence (Azeez, 2011, p.13).
- Judicial and Tribunal Failures: The judiciary's failure to provide impartial decisions on electoral disputes can exacerbate electoral violence, as it undermines citizens' trust in the legal process.
- Media Influence: When media outlets act as biased tools for political agendas, they can escalate tensions by spreading defamatory or propagandist content, potentially triggering electoral violence.

3.   Religious and Ethnic Sentiments: Unethical politicians manipulate religious and ethnic loyalties to mobilize support, often using religious or ethnic affiliations to encourage violence, undermining national unity. Such tactics degrade merit-based leadership and contribute to recurring cycles of electoral violence as these leaders repeatedly exploit the same groups for support. While, contributing to the issue above, Machika (2009, p.2) stated that the aforementioned are some of the major causes of electoral violence in Nigeria, but indeed not the actual root causes. He maintained that the root cause of electoral violence include: sense of shame, sense of wroth, pride and ambition, productivity, lack of mentoring, he argued that lack of sense of shame is one of the root causes of electoral violence. According to him, collectively as a nation, Nigeria appears to have relinquished its moral compass

. Various acts committed in this country that brought disgrace and dishonor tour dear country were treated with laxity, without any feeling of remorse. He also stated that lack of confidence to face electorates without the support of godfathers and electoral violence is as a result of lacking a sense of worthiness by the candidate. Similarly, collaborators in whatever form or class feels without indulging in shameless acts of electoral violence, he or she may not attain certain position in life. People

involvement in electoral violence is as a result of lack of moral and social value, which is their sense of value-their goodness, usefulness or importance in the societal scheme should not be tied to monetary price. Human life to these youths has been rendered worthless. It is nothing but a commodity.

The question is we as individuals and as nation lost our sense of shame? The lack of feelings of dishonor, unworthiness and embarrassment of our actions and inactions is the root cause of our involvement in electoral violence, just many other bad things we do.

Electoral violence has far-reaching consequences for Nigeria's sustainable development, undermining governance, human rights, and social cohesion. This form of violence damages democratic legitimacy, destabilizes social services, and perpetuates a cycle of corruption, weakening the rule of law and contributing to a culture in which public office is primarily a means for financial gain (Machika, 2009, p.23).

- Governmental Capacity and Public Services: Due to electoral violence, state capacity to deliver essential services like infrastructure, healthcare, and education is weakened, sometimes even non-existent. Resources that should be directed toward public services are often diverted to fund and sustain political violence, eroding citizens' trust and faith in democratic processes and governance.
- Impact on Youth and Future Leadership: Electoral violence significantly impacts Nigerian youth, destroying lives and prospects in three main ways:
- Physical Harm: Many youths suffer injuries, some fatal, with each casualty potentially affecting dozens more in terms of medical needs and emotional trauma (Ojo, 2008, p.101).
- Economic and Social Future: Instead of engaging in productive, skill-building activities, youths become trapped in cycles of violence and instability, diminishing their opportunities to contribute positively to society.
- Leadership Legacy: By participating in electoral violence, youths undermine democratic institutions intended to cultivate future leaders, thus compromising Nigeria's potential for credible future governance.
- Degradation of Social Cohesion: Electoral violence undermines Nigeria's long-standing social bonds, replacing trust and cooperation with hostility and division among ethnic and religious groups. This shift breeds mistrust and exacerbates tensions across communities, replacing peaceful coexistence with suspicion and antagonism (Orji and Uzodi, 2012, p.11).

4. **Economic Disruption and Insecurity:** Electoral violence disrupts socio-economic activities, with businesses looted, homes destroyed, and livelihoods shattered, driving many into poverty and displacement. Increased fear and perceptions of insecurity among civilians further compound this effect, as seen in regions like Jos and areas in Kogi, Delta, and Nasarawa states (Kean, 2013, p.11).

5. Long-term Criminalization: Post-election violence often leaves former participants in crime, as disenfranchised youths turn to other forms of criminal activity, such as banditry and cultism, as a means of survival. This perpetuates a vicious cycle of violence, reinforcing insecurity, and impeding sustainable peace and development (Orji and Uzodi, 2012, p.12).

In essence, electoral violence not only damages the present democratic framework but also poses a substantial threat to Nigeria's future leadership, sustainable development, and aspirations for good governance, ultimately defeating the primary objectives of democracy and good governance (Kean, 2013, p.17).

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method research design, integrating both survey and documentary research approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of electoral violence and its impact on sustainable development in Nigeria. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to 100 respondents, using a Likert-scale format to quantify perceptions on the causes and consequences of electoral violence. Additionally, secondary data was sourced from books, journals, government reports, newspapers, and online publications. This secondary data allowed for the construction of a panel dataset, enabling a comparative analysis of trends in electoral violence over time. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and percentage analysis, were used to interpret the primary data, while the Discourse Analytical approach was applied to examine patterns, themes, and contextual factors in both primary and secondary sources. This methodological triangulation enhanced the study's validity and provided deeper insights into the structural drivers and implications of electoral violence in Nigeria.

Presentation of Data
Below is a structured frequency table showing responses from 100 respondents across the 10 questions, using a 5-point Likert scale:
• SD = Strongly Disagree (1)
• D = Disagree (2)
• N = Neutral (3)
• A = Agree (4)
• SA = Strongly Agree (5)

Table: Frequency Distribution of Responses (N = 100)
Below is the percentage distribution of responses for each question based on 100 respondents.
Table: Percentage Distribution of Responses (N = 100)

Questions	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Total
1. Political parties and candidates use violence to gain electoral advantage.	4%	8%	15%	40%	33%	100%
2. Electoral violence is caused by ethnic and religious tensions.	5%	10%	20%	35%	30%	100%
3. Poor governance and weak institutions encourage electoral violence.	3%	9%	18%	42%	28%	100%

4. Electoral fraud and vote rigging increase the likelihood of violence.	2%	7%	15%	45%	31%	100%
5. Youth unemployment and poverty contribute to electoral violence.	6%	12%	22%	35%	25%	100%
6. Electoral violence weakens democratic institutions and governance.	3%	6%	17%	41%	33%	100%
7. Violence during elections discourages economic investment.	4%	8%	20%	39%	29%	100%
8. Electoral violence leads to displacement and loss of human capital.	2%	5%	18%	43%	32%	100%
9. Electoral instability affects public service delivery (education, healthcare, infrastructure).	3%	7%	19%	42%	29%	100%
10. Electoral violence reduces public trust in the government and electoral process.	2%	6%	16%	44%	32%	100%

Discussion of Findings

Findings reveal that a majority (73%) of respondents believe political parties and candidates use violence to gain electoral advantage, while only 12% disagreed. Similarly, 65% agreed that ethnic and religious tensions fuel electoral violence, though 15% disagreed, showing some divergence in perception. Poor governance and weak institutions were also seen as major contributors, with 70% in agreement, reinforcing concerns about institutional failures. Electoral fraud and vote rigging were widely linked to violence, as 76% agreed that these malpractices escalate tensions, while only 9% disagreed. Lastly, 60% of respondents identified youth unemployment and poverty as key drivers of electoral violence, highlighting the economic dimension of the crisis, though 18% disagreed, suggesting alternative views.

Electoral violence in Nigeria remains a persistent challenge, undermining democratic processes and threatening sustainable development. The findings from this study reveal that political, economic, and socio-cultural factors collectively drive election-related violence. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that electoral violence is fueled by widespread political corruption, the monetization of public office, godfatherism, and ethno-religious divisions. These findings align with prior research, such as Omotola (2010), which highlights that political exclusion, vote rigging, and institutional weaknesses contribute significantly to electoral violence. The study further underscores the role of high youth unemployment and poverty in perpetuating electoral violence, as politicians exploit economic desperation to recruit young people for violent activities. This aligns with national statistics showing a youth unemployment rate of 53.4% (NBS, 2020), making political thuggery an attractive alternative for many disenfranchised young Nigerians.

Number of Deaths (Reported)
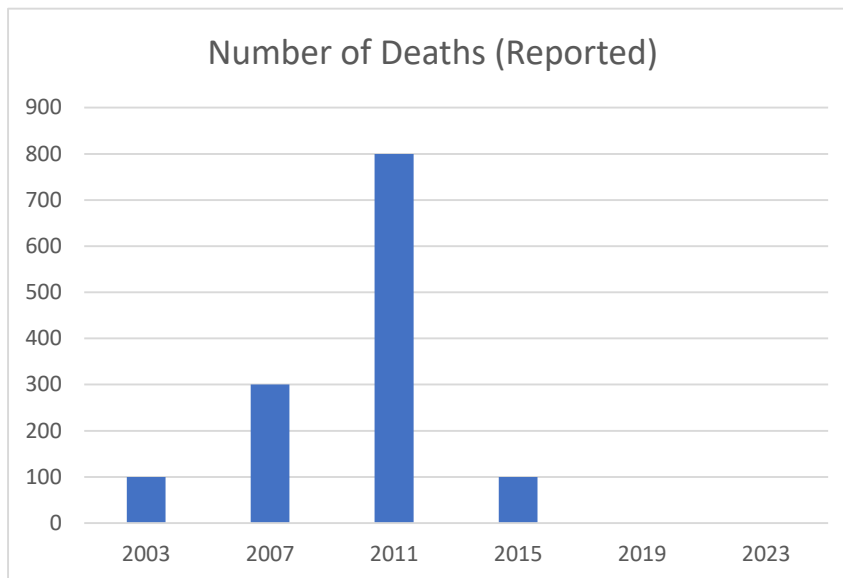
Source: Researchers compilation, 2025

A historical analysis of electoral violence in Nigeria reinforces these findings. The 2007 general elections were marred by large-scale fraud and violence, leading the European Union Election Observation Mission to describe them as one of the most flawed electoral processes in Nigeria's history. Similarly, the 2011 post-election crisis, which erupted over allegations of rigging in favor of Goodluck Jonathan, resulted in over 800 deaths and the destruction of numerous properties (HRW, 2011). These incidents mirror the concerns raised by respondents in this study, who widely acknowledged that electoral malpractice and ethnic favoritism intensify political tensions and lead to violent confrontations.

Findings indicate that 74% of respondents believe electoral violence weakens democratic institutions and governance, with only 9% disagreeing, highlighting its destabilizing effect. Similarly, 68% agreed that electoral violence discourages economic investment, though 12% disagreed, reflecting some differing opinions. Displacement and loss of human capital were widely recognized as consequences, with 75% in agreement, reinforcing concerns about long-term socio-economic impacts. Electoral violence was also seen as detrimental to public service delivery, as 71% linked it to disruptions in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, while only 10% disagreed. Lastly, 76% agreed that electoral violence erodes public trust in government and the electoral process, underscoring its threat to democratic legitimacy.

Beyond its immediate impact on political stability, electoral violence has far-reaching consequences for governance, economic growth, and public trust. A significant majority of respondents agreed that electoral violence weakens democracy, discourages foreign investment, and exacerbates public disillusionment with the political system. Nigeria's declining position in global democracy rankings reflects this reality. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2023), Nigeria fell from 108th place in 2015 to 118th in 2023, largely due to election-related crises and political instability. This

democratic backsliding is further evidenced by historically low voter turnout. In the 2023 general elections, voter turnout fell to just 26.7%, marking a record low in Nigeria's electoral history (INEC, 2023). This reinforces Bratton's (2013) argument that electoral violence discourages political participation, particularly among women and young voters.

The economic impact of electoral violence is another significant concern. Over the past decade, political instability has contributed to an estimated $50 billion loss in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (World Bank, 2023). Investors are wary of economies where elections are characterized by violence, legal uncertainties, and political instability. Countries with peaceful electoral processes, such as Ghana and South Africa, continue to attract more foreign investment, strengthening their economies and reinforcing democratic governance. This study's findings suggest that Nigeria's inability to conduct credible, violence-free elections is a major barrier to economic competitiveness and long-term development.

Perhaps the most devastating consequence of electoral violence is its toll on human security. The 2019 general elections alone recorded at least 626 election-related deaths (Nigeria Election Violence Tracker, 2019), illustrating the severity of the crisis. These deaths and widespread displacements mirror violent election disputes in Kenya (2007) and Ivory Coast (2010), where electoral conflicts escalated into national crises. The consistent cycle of electoral violence in Nigeria suggests a structural failure to address underlying causes, leaving citizens vulnerable to politically motivated unrest.

Despite these challenges, respondents identified key strategies to mitigate electoral violence and promote sustainable development. The most widely endorsed solutions include youth empowerment through job creation, strengthening judicial and law enforcement independence, promoting civic education, and addressing ethno-religious biases in politics. These recommendations align with successful electoral reforms in other African democracies. In Ghana, for instance, youth employment schemes have significantly reduced election-related violence (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019). Similarly, Uganda's 2016 electoral reforms, which improved election transparency, led to a notable decline in political violence (Olum, 2020). Respondents also emphasized the need to reduce the financial appeal of political office, a reform that has been effective in countries like Botswana and Rwanda, where politicians earn modest salaries compared to Nigeria's highly lucrative political positions.

The overarching conclusion drawn from this study is that electoral violence in Nigeria is a systemic issue that thrives on weak institutions, economic hardship, and identity-based politics. Its consequences extend beyond election periods, weakening democratic legitimacy, increasing voter apathy, discouraging investment, and exacerbating security challenges. Compared to other African democracies, Nigeria ranks poorly in electoral credibility and institutional effectiveness, highlighting the urgent need for reforms. Lessons from Ghana, South Africa, and Rwanda suggest that investing in electoral transparency, economic stability, and social cohesion is key to breaking the cycle of violence and fostering a sustainable democratic system. If Nigeria is to achieve electoral stability and long-term development, structural reforms must focus on dismantling political thuggery, enhancing the independence of electoral bodies, and fostering national unity.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Efforts to track and address electoral violence in Nigeria require significant advancements, especially in how security agencies perform their roles. Nigerian security services must ensure they conduct their duties impartially, balancing voter safety with avoiding excessive militarization of the election process. Baba and Ogundiya (2013, p.3) and Ajayi (2014, p.2) emphasize that to support democratic consolidation, youth should be constructively socialized and actively involved in the democratic structure, especially within the electoral system.

Recognizing the role of harsh socio-economic conditions in youth involvement in electoral violence, comprehensive empowerment programs are essential. Economic empowerment for youth through participatory skill acquisition and job creation initiatives can make a substantial impact, while social empowerment, through civil education, can help them understand their rights and responsibilities. Politically, meaningful socialization and constructive involvement in the democratic process can better prepare youths for future leadership roles. Formal and informal educational opportunities will also raise political consciousness and foster a deep understanding of fundamental human rights, emphasizing that no politician's ambition is worth their lives or future.

Youth as catalysts for peace must be exposed to peace education, which can address the prevalent culture of violence and instill non-violent values in young people and adults alike. By understanding the significance of peace, youths can protect themselves from being used to perpetuate violence.

Electoral reform is urgently needed to establish enforceable and effective electoral laws to combat the menace of electoral violence. Civil society organizations, non-governmental entities, and labor unions should exert pressure on the government to implement strict electoral laws that classify electoral fraud as a serious crime against citizens and the state. For democratic stability, politicians found guilty of electoral fraud or those benefiting from it must face severe and lasting legal consequences. Such penalties could deter future lawlessness and electoral violence.

An attitudinal shift is needed among all election stakeholders, including electoral bodies, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, electoral tribunals, and the media. These institutions should act as peace-building entities, prioritizing patriotism over any behaviors that exacerbate electoral violence. Furthermore, the influence of political godfathers in Nigerian politics must be curbed, as their control fosters a climate of electoral violence.

In conclusion, the pervasive nature of electoral violence in Nigeria threatens the nation's pursuit of democratic stability and hinders long-term goals for democratic consolidation (Alemika, 2012, p.157). Nelson Mandela (2008) echoed this sentiment, observing that cycles of violence perpetuate as each generation learns from previous ones, with victims adopting behaviors from oppressors. Mandela argued that although violence may seem intractable, it is preventable, and societies can transform from cultures of violence into communities of peace.

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