

# **Electoral Violence and Arms Proliferation in Nigeria: Causes, Consequences and Way Forward**

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## **Abstract**

One of the greatest challenges facing governance and political systems in Africa is the violence that ensues whenever elections are conducted. The main objective of the study was to examine the relationship between electoral violence and arms proliferation in Nigeria. It also examines the causes and implications of electoral violence on the electorate, entire community and Nigeria's political system. The adopted research methodology is desktop research, where information was obtained from journals, textbooks, conference papers and others. The findings of the study revealed a link between small arms and electoral violence, and it was discovered that illicit proliferation of small arms is a major cause of electoral violence in Nigeria. The study established the lack of trust of the politicians on the electoral process which is a challenge to the nation's nascent democracy and sustainability of peace and security. The study therefore, recommended that security agencies that are involved in the electoral system should be trained on electoral security system, in order to improve the level of security in the country. The study also posits that the control of small arms is very essential in curtailing the high level of illicit flow of arms in the country before and during elections.

**Keywords:** Electoral Violence, Arms Proliferation and control, Politicians, Security.

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### **Introduction**

One of the major features of democracy is electing political aspirants into office. This could also be regarded as a tool for moulding democracy of a nation and the instrument for measuring the effectiveness of the elected leaders. Election gives the citizenry the sole right to decide and choose for themselves who will govern them and represent their interest (Karim, 2014). According to Frimpong (2012), the fundamental bedrock of democracy is the election of political leaders through the electoral box. Electoral violence takes place before, during and after an election and it remains a pervasive feature in Sub-Saharan Africa, even where multiparty elections have become the dominant mode of regulating access to political power. Elections, in most African nations, are characterised by uncertainties, due to the possibility of election-related violence. However, the return of democracy, in 1999, gave the Nigerian state another opportunity to conduct election every four year to elect new leaders. However, elections in Nigeria have been characterised by different kinds of violence, owing to the availability, accessibility and proliferation of small arms.

According to Haruna and Jumba (2011) hiring and equipping thugs with small arms throughout the election period has become a regular attitude for Nigerian politicians in order to achieve their political aims and targets. Elections trigger the widespread use of small arms as they exacerbate tension within various political parties and among individuals vying for political positions. Small arms aid electoral violence from various ranges, such as assault, arson, abduction, ballot box snatching and stuffing to assassination. These acts are perpetrated by individuals and groups with the intention of influencing the outcome of elections. The above trend not only poses a threat to peace and security of Nigeria, but also risks undermining of the nation's democratic processes. It is on this note that the paper examines the relationship between electoral violence and arms proliferation in Nigeria. It also examines the causes of electoral violence and its implication on the electorate, entire community and Nigeria political system.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

### ***Election***

Elections are at the very core of democracy. It could be regarded to as a process by means of which a democratic society is able to effect peaceful change of the personnel and/or the direction of political leadership. Davies and Kirkpatrick (2000) describes elections as the symbolic, competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive processes in which the chief decision-makers in a government are selected by citizens who enjoy broad freedom to criticise government, to publish their criticism and to present alternatives. In a similar direction, Yoroms (2015) believes that election is a basic principle of democracy and primary indicator for democratic governance. According to him, an election could be described as a competition on how leaders are selected by voting to govern a state or society. In a similar opinion, Omotola (2010), states that elections do not only allow for political competition, participation and legitimacy, but also permit peaceful change of power, thereby making it possible to assign accountability to those who govern. The above assertion emphasises the view of Høglud (2006) that elections facilitate communication between the government and the governed, and also have symbolic purposes by giving voice to the public.

### ***Violence***

Violence is a psychological and/or physical force exerted for the purpose of injuring, damaging or abusing people or property. Violence also consist of actions, attitudinal structure, or system that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damage and prevent people from reaching their full human potentials. Often, violence is instrumental, rather than expressive, for example, it is inflicted to achieve a purpose, either to eliminate, reduce, or incapacitate an opponent; and it occurs as an extreme in a conflict. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines violence as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, and which undermines development or leads to deprivation.

### **Types of Violence**

Categorising conflict, Isola (2010) discusses the various types of violence which may be done to an individual or a group, mainly for the purpose of incapacitating the victims and preventing such victims from achieving their human potentials. The types are: physical violence, psychological violence, structural violence, and electoral violence. Physical violence involves direct harm to someone's body. It is aimed at exerting coercive influence on individuals. Activities like beating; torture; rape; slap; gunshot etc. are varieties of physical violence. Physical violence often results from aggressive attitude or impulse. It is also the result of instrumental behaviour meant to injure or destroy another person in order to achieve an aim. Psychological violence, on its part, is an indirect act of negative influence aimed at effecting or arousing fear or at breaking mental resistance of another person or group. This could take place in form of misinformation; indoctrination or brainwashing; blackmail; terror activities; use of abusive language etc. Psychological violence is also instrumental in nature and it is often aimed at achieving a specific goal. It could also be as lethal as physical violence.

The notion of structural violence is a broad concept referring to concealed violence within unjust; unequal and impoverished social structures, which prevents human beings from reaching their utmost potential. Johan Galtung was the first scholar to propound or describe structural violence. Incidents such as poverty, corruption, greed, unemployment, bad socio-economic policies and other vices hinder democratic and non-democratic societies from reaching their potentials. Structural violence can also be a precursor to physical and psychological violence.

As for electoral violence, it can be defined as any form of violence that takes place during or after an election, resulting from the failure to meet the rising expectations of the electorates. Electoral violence has a critical impact on the electoral process, the outcome of the election, and their perceived legitimacy. It negatively affects a society's prospect for democratic consolidation and sustainable development. Høglund (2009) opines that electoral violence can be described in two different components. First, electoral violence is seen as a sub-set of activities in a larger political conflict. In particular, it has been studied as part of the trail of ethnic or communal violence in divided societies such as Nigeria, Kenya, Sri Lanka, and India.

In these cases, it has been noted that violence tends to cluster around election times. More recent studies have focused on security-related aspects in connection with elections in cases such as Afghanistan, Liberia, and Palestine. Secondly, electoral violence is seen as the ultimate kind of electoral fraud. Electoral fraud has been defined as covert efforts to shape election results and includes activities like ballot rigging, vote buying, and disruptions of the registration process (Chaturvedi 2005; Lehoucq 2003).

Electoral violence is any spontaneous or organised act by candidates, party supporters, election authorities, voters, or any other actor that occurs during an electoral process, starting from the pre-electoral period or context through voter registration to the date of inauguration of a new government, that uses physical harm, intimidation, blackmail, verbal abuse, violent demonstrations, psychological manipulation, or other coercive tactics aimed at exploiting, disrupting, determining, hastening, delaying, reversing, or otherwise influencing an electoral process and its outcome (Reif, 2006). Electoral violence is any random or organised act that seeks to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, physical assault, disinformation, blackmail, destruction of properties, and loss of lives or assassination (Karim, 2012). Karim (2014) further holds that an act of electoral violence before, during and after election periods include thuggery, use of force to disrupt opponents' political meeting or voting at polling stations, or the use of weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral processes, or cause bloody harms or injury to any person connected with electoral process.

### ***Arms Proliferation***

Proliferation is the sudden increase in the number or amount of an object, but when used in relation to arms, it describes the widespread availability of weapons, generally from one place to the other. Small arms and light weapons are any portable lethal weapon that expels or launches, or may be readily converted to expel or launch, or is designed to expel or launch a shot (Small Arms Survey, 2014). The proliferation of small arms is a serious threat to democracy in Nigeria today, especially during election period. Yoneda (2014) noted that small arms and light weapons (SALW) are becoming a serious threat to human security. Based on the fact that SALW are easily available and accessible, the proliferation and misuse of these weapons have

contributed to the aggravation of armed violence, not only in times of violent conflict situation but also in peacetime, causing a threat to a nation's security. Small arms proliferation in Nigeria is not only due to its strained economic and social situation, but also to the high rate of trafficking and smuggling of small arms into the country. The high rate of criminality, the development of secret cults, the emergence of private security, the electoral and political violence demonstrate but also feed the culture of violence (Agboton-Johnson et.al, 2004).

### **Electoral Violence and Arms Proliferation in Nigeria**

Electoral violence has remained one of the greatest threats to Nigeria's political landscape and democracy, just as in many nations of the African region. Electoral violence has become rooted in the Nigerian political system such that every election in the country comes with an anxiety across the six-geopolitical zone (Ikpe, 2015). Historically, violence has always featured prominently in all electoral processes in post-colonial Nigeria, but its frequency and magnitude of occurrence in the country since the return of the country to democratic rule in 1999 have assumed a tragic dimension (Edet, 2015). According to Omede and Mu'awiyya (2016), elections in Nigeria can be classified into two, the transitional elections and consolidation elections. The transitional elections are; 1954, 1959, 1979, 1993 and 1999 elections. While the consolidation elections include; 1964/65, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 elections. The transitional elections are the general elections organised by a departing political authority, which include those organised by the colonial authorities and military regimes. While, consolidation elections are the general elections organised by a civilian regime and are intended towards consolidating civil rule. Previous research and existing literature indicate that all the elections that have been conducted in Nigeria since 1954, experienced violence. But, the deadly cycle of electoral violence in Nigeria deteriorated since the 2003 general elections and has continued to undermine the free expression of the will of the people through the ballot box, delegitimise political system, weaken accountability mechanism, and frustrate citizen's participation in the political process (Ojoka & Acolb 2017; Fjelde & Hoglund 2016; Omede & Mu'awiyya 2016; Burchard 2015; Edet 2015; Ikpe 2015; Okafor 2015; Onimisi 2015; Yoroms 2015; Obakhedo 2011; Bekoe 2010; Campbell 2010; Omotola 2010).

The above signifies that electoral violence has been a serious issue in Nigeria. According to Yoroms (2015), electoral violence can only thrive and be sustained by the use of small arms. Therefore, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) has posed serious challenges to Nigeria's democracy and electoral process. The easy access to and misuse of SALW endanger the safety, security and development of a country. It was in line with this, that Hwang and Villarreal (2007) ascertain that the problem of small arms spread is not because of mass production, but one of illegal trafficking. According to Onuah (2011), the political nature of Nigeria is a key factor driving the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Nigerian politicians approach elections as a do or die affair because of the high desperation in the struggle to win an elective position. As a result of the high desperation to win an election, politicians recruit thugs and equipped them with arms and ammunitions. Aver *et.al.* (2014) also state that most politicians holding political offices in Nigeria were rigged to the position by their political parties through electoral violence, malpractices and intimidation of political opponents with the aid of small arms proliferation. They further posit that with the availability and accessibility of small arms, politicians and political office holders do not believe in gaining political power through submission to the electorate, which is a big challenge to the country's democracy and sustainability of peace and security.

Haruna and Jumba (2011) also opine that hiring and equipping thugs with small arms throughout the election period have become a regular attitude for politicians in order to achieve their political aims. Wunti (2012) buttressed this point by stating that this act by politicians has increased the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigeria, due to the fact that the recruited thugs are left with the arms after the election. This was in line with Bratton (2008) observation that youths were hired, armed and lavishly paid as "hugs" periods before and during elections to ensure that certain politicians were elected into power. The youths are, however, abandoned without retrieving the arms from them after elections. The resultant effects is the misuse of the weapons through robbery and kidnapping thereby facilitating the state of insecurity.

### **Causes of Electoral Violence**

Election is a means by which the electorate elect their representatives in government and a system that produces winners and losers. After an election, the losing parties should simply accept defeat and start preparations to participate in the upcoming electoral processes (Ojok & Acol, 2017). Unfortunately, politicians do not believe in the above assertion, as an election is approached as a do or die affair. This makes election-related violence to be an option in order to fulfil their aim of winning an election. However, previous research and existing literature seemed to have dwelt much on the various causes of electoral violence in Nigeria, such as greed; electoral abuses; rigging of elections; hate campaign; abuse of political power; alienation, marginalisation and exclusion; unemployment, political economy of oil, ineffectiveness of security forces and culture of impunity; weak penalties; weak governance and corruption; abuse of office by elected officials; lucrative nature of political office; poor handling of election petition, lack of confidence in the judiciary; lack of compliance with the extant electoral laws and enforcement of the enabling laws; partisan disposition of security agencies detailed to monitor elections and secure lives and properties; corrupt electoral officials and *ad-hoc* staffs who connive with the politicians; and conflict of interests between and among politicians ( Fjelde & Höglund 2016; Ngaah 2016; Omoede & Mu' awiyya 2016; Okafor 2015; Adesote & Abimbola 2014; Obakhedo 2011; Bekoe 2010).

Incumbent governments rely so much on electoral violence, such as harassment of opposition candidates or voters' intimidation, to prevent an unfavourable electoral outcome as they fear being defeated at the ballot box (Hafner-Burton et.al, 2014). Klopp and Zuern (2007), have drawn evidences from Kenya and South Africa to show how incumbents used the security apparatus, informal militias and orchestrated mass rallies to engage in violent electoral tactics to derail a threatening opposition by, for instance, depressing voter turnout in particular areas. Nevertheless, the prevalent forms of election-related violence in Nigeria exude in political assassinations, arsons, murder and killing, violence-pruned campaigns, thuggery, election-related ethno-religious crisis, snatching of ballot boxes and armed conflict between opposition groups and political parties (Atuobi 2008; Obakhedo 2011). All these could be carried out with the aid of illicit proliferation, easy



access and availability of small arms. Small arms are widely used in various election-related violence across Nigeria, owing to their perceived advantages, being unsophisticated, small, light, cheap and portable (Yoroms, 2015). Most electoral victories in Nigeria are not determined by the number of votes received by the political parties and their candidates, but by the ability of the political party to acquire and use arms and weapons to cause violence, intimidate opponents and electorate, and rig elections (Aver *et. al*, 2014). It was against this background that Klare (2014) noted that an uncontrolled and illegal transaction of small arms is the major cause of violent crises all over the world.

### **Implications of Election Violence**

Election-related violence threatens the development and consolidation of democracy. Electoral violence may cause a low voter turnout; it can interfere with the registration of voters and affect the validation of election results. In essence, it can influence both the electoral process and the outcome of elections. Election-related violence can also escalate into large scale, protracted conflicts that may lead to the destruction of lives and properties of electorates and civilians at large. Election may also be postponed as a result of violence during the election or in the pre-election phase. In a similar condition, the Independent National Electoral Commission claimed that the 2015 general election and Edo 2016 gubernatorial election were postponed due to security reasons. The outcome of an election might also prompt violence in cases where the losing parties do not accept the results. Riots have been a common feature in post-election periods in Africa. An example of this was the chaos and crisis that erupted in the northern part of Nigeria after Independent National Electoral Commission declared President Goodluck Jonathan of People's Democratic Party (PDP) as the winner of the presidential election in 2011. The negative impact of election-related violence on social relations could not be ignored, as election-related violence go beyond the societies where it occurs and affect neighbouring states by displacing large border populations, introducing a humanitarian crisis, and increasing the circulation of arms as well as armed violence, which may contribute to human and national security threat (Atuobi, 2008).

Regarding the impacts of SALW on human security, Organisation of African Unity's report (2000) stated that:

The proliferation and illicit trade in small arms have adverse effects on human security, especially women, children and other vulnerable groups, and on infrastructure. Furthermore, the misuse of arms promotes a culture of violence and destabilises societies by creating a propitious environment for criminal and contraband activities. Violence caused by small arms undermines good governance, jeopardises fundamental human rights, and hinders economic development. It exacerbates armed conflicts, the displacement of innocent populations and threatens international humanitarian law (OAU, 2000).

The above assertions, indicates that one of the greatest consequences of election violence is the illegal trade and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. As Biswas (2008) stated, the availability and accessibility of small arms enable criminals and non-combatants to perpetrate violence; and at the same time enable electoral violence (Gunaratna, 2002).

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The nature, extent and magnitude of election-related violence in Nigeria have posed serious threats to the security of, and the national quest for stable democratic process in the country. Therefore, the study has been concerned with the links between arms proliferation and election-related violence in Nigeria. The study reveals that illegal proliferation of small arms is the core cause of electoral violence in the country. This trend has led to the destruction of lives and properties, and has affected democratic development in Nigeria, to the extent that many civilians are always scared of their lives any time that an election is coming up.

The legal tools to check arms flow in Nigeria is very weak and civilians take advantage of the weakness to acquire illegal arms. Therefore, the Nigeria state authority should strengthen the national legislation and control for the possession of arms. The study thus recommends that security agencies that are involved in the electoral system should be well-trained on electoral security system, in order to improve the level of security in the

country. In addition to this, the establishment of an agency/institution to monitor, prevent, mitigate and manage election violence throughout the electoral cycle starting from the pre to post-election period is also necessary.

Finally, the study recommends that the Nigeria government should seek assistance and cooperate with foreign nations, relevant agencies and experts by improving the electronic voting system, in order to reduce the high rate of election-related violence.

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