

OBSERVERS REPORT AND THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A FOCUS ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND LESSONS FOR FUTURE ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT: *Election Monitoring Groups (EMGs) are key elements to conducting free, fair and transparent democratic elections, especially in countries with history of electoral fraud and violence. Apart from reinforcing the strengths of the electoral process in countries, EMGs also help to point out the challenges/weaknesses faced by a country's electoral process and based on that make recommendations on how to improve on future elections. Since democratic rebirth till date, all the six general elections conducted in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria were monitored by different EMGs. The reports and recommendations of some of these Observers Groups have since been submitted to appropriate authorities and the information therein are also known to the public. Recurring in virtually all these reports is the incidence of violence among other vices. More than earlier elections, electoral violence assumed greater height during the 2019 general elections, thereby creating the impression that little or nothing had been learnt from previous experiences. The paper against this background, examines the reports recently released by some of the EMGs, including the European Union (EU), NDI/IRI Common Wealth and Nigeria Civil Society on the 2019 general elections, with the view to analyzing the nature and dimensions of violence during the elections and suggest ways to ameliorate their reoccurrences.*

KEYWORDS: election, electoral violence, election monitoring group.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES AND PROBLEMATIC

The history of elections in Nigeria, both before and after independence, is largely characterized by violence arising from wide spread acts of hooliganism and vandalism which often than not resulted into large scale destruction of lives and property. Available evidence from the works of scholars, including those of Post (1963), Sklar (1963), Mackintosh (1966), Post and Vickers (1973), Dudley (1973) and Joseph (1991) all confirm incidence of violence during the 1964 general elections as well as the 1965 Western Regional election, which also aided the collapse of the First Republic in 1966. The Second and aborted Third Republics also witnessed election related violence especially during the 1979, 1983 and 1993 general elections. (Joseph, 1991; Osaghae, 2002).

All the six general elections conducted during the Fourth Republic in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 are known to have exhibited different levels of violent related cases (Nwolise, 2007; Ojo, 2007; Orji and Uzordi, 2012; Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014; Muheeb, 2015). While the 1999 and 2003 general elections were criticized by election observer groups on grounds of non-transparency, lack of accountability, intimidation of voters and conflict of different kinds; more violent related cases were recorded in the general elections that brought President Yar'Adua into office in 2007. More than previous elections during the Fourth Republic, the post electoral violence that followed the 2011 general elections was widely condemned for its widespread destruction of lives and property, especially in the Northern region. The 2015 general elections appear to be relatively more peaceful and credible, they were non-the-less totally devoid of violent related cases.

Needless to reiterate here, the effects of electoral violence on Nigeria's political image has been most damaging to the country's path to democratic consolidation (Adebisi and Loremikan, 2013). Consequently, there are serious doubts from several quarters including the international community, on the ability of the country to conduct a free and fair election devoid of electoral malpractices, security lapses, and sustained by independent electoral body and judiciary. The suspiciousness that usually accompany the administration of a free and fair election by the electoral body in Nigeria, coupled with an aged long history of bias and manipulation of elections outcome by successive governments necessitated the introduction of an interventionist measure in form of election observation groups.

Although, an aged long practice in old nations and among developed countries, election observation is a more recent activities in Africa. In Nigeria for instance, the 1993 general elections were the first to be observed by election monitoring groups from within and outside the country. Ever since, subsequent elections in Nigeria, including the recently conducted general elections of 2019, were all under the close watch of several internal and international election observer groups. Also, INEC has progressively increased the number of accredited observers since 1993 to a total of 144, comprising of 116 domestic groups and 28 foreign bodies, that monitored the 2019 general elections. The primary responsibilities of Observer groups in an election are simply to watch and report, as well as recommend to the appropriate quarters and stakeholders on how to improve on the shortcomings so observed. The intention is to strengthen democratic practice in a country.

In Nigeria for instance, the electoral body, INEC clarifies in its guidelines what it considers the tasks of observer groups. These include observing or watching:

- (a) The legal and institutional framework
- (b) The electoral/political environment
- (c) Arrangements affecting the safety and security of election officials, voters and other participants;
- (d) Management of electoral logistics and distribution of electoral materials;
- (e) The integrity of the electoral preparations; including voter registration and voter education;
- (f) The degree of political competitiveness

- (g) The inclusiveness of the electoral system, civic education and the extent of citizen participation.
 - (h) The extent of human right violations and election related violence
 - (i) Evidence of any violence, intimidation, interference with private exercise of the franchise.
 - (j) The professionalism of security agencies
 - (k) The extent to which security has affected the participation of the people in the electoral process;
 - (l) The conduct of the main institutions and agencies; do they act in a measured and responsible manner?
 - (m) The integrity of the conduct of the poll, including voting, the count collation and declaration of result;
 - (n) The resolution of electoral disputes (see Adebisi and Loremikan, 2013:142).
- The paper against the above background and lingering problems associated with monitoring elections and implementing observers' recommendations, analyses the 2019 general elections in Nigeria.

Political Environment and Background to the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria

The 2015 general elections in Nigeria witnessed for the first time, a democratic change of power from the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the opposition party, the All-Progressives Congress (APC). The incumbent President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, against all expectations conceded defeat and publicly congratulated his opponent, and the APC presidential flag bearer, General (Rtd) Muhammadu Buhari. This singular action of the PDP presidential flag bearer is not without its political implications for democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Firstly, a positive signal was sent to the entire globe that Africa has come of age in peaceful and democratic transition of power from one party to another. Secondly is the warning that 'sit-tight'-leaders will no longer be tolerated on the continent in whichever disguise, including electoral manipulation. Most importantly and very pertinent to this study, is an attempt to re-orientate the mindsets of politicians on electoral violence and cut-throat politics. Thus, having conceded defeat on volution, President Jonathan was quoted to have said that his political ambition does not worth the live of any Nigerian being lost at election. With this background and having recorded significant improvements in the administration of the 2011 and 2015 elections" (IRI/NDI Observation Misson Report, 2019:5), many Nigerians and political observers expected a paradigm shift in electoral process, at least from violence to a more relatively peaceful and non-violent election in 2019. Unfortunately, the 2019 general elections proved otherwise. Contrary to earlier elections in 2003.2007, 2011 and 2015, the 2019 general elections were conducted under the APC led government of President Muhammadu Buhari. Before the elections, the new government in October 2015 appointed Professor Mahmood Yakubu to replace Professor Attahiru Jega as the INEC Chairman.

The new INEC Chairman was expected to build on the gains already recorded in earlier elections, especially the 2015 general elections (Nigeria Civil Society Situationroom Report, 2019:1). For this reason and many more, political analysts were of the view that the INEC was under pressure to deliver. The INEC on its own made clear efforts at improving on existing electoral laws and practices via the introduction of “simultaneous accreditation and voting, the posting of results at polling units, improved voter-verification technologies, a more robust review and disciplinary process for INEC staff and enhancement of ballot secrecy and measures to reduce vote buying “(IRI/NDI Observation Mission Final Report, 2019:6).

The 2019 general elections were originally scheduled to hold on February 16 and March 2 for the Presidential/National Assembly and Gubernatorial/State Houses of Assembly respectively. However, just few hours to the commencement of the exercise, on the Election Day, INEC, without prior notice announced the postponement of the elections to February 23 and March 9 respectively, pointing at logistic problems as reason for the postponement. Many Observer Missions report pointed out to low voters turnout and apathy, confusion over the duration of candidate and party campaign, lost of public confidence in INEC sincerity of purpose, additional costs for the government, Observers and Nigerians, as some of the consequences of this action.

Before the election postponement, Buhari government took two major decisions that opposition parties and civil society groups believed were aimed at ensuring the ruling party electoral victory in February 2019. The first was the unceremonious suspension of the Chief justice of the Federation, Justice Walter Onnoghen barely three weeks before the general elections. Although, the government defended its action on allegation of false declaration of assets leveled against the Chief Justice, many political analysts, including foreign government officials, were quick to point out the illegality and lack of due process involved in his removal. Also, given the role the judiciary plays in adjudicating elections, the decision to remove Onnoghen was considered untimely, politically motivated and a cast of shade on the electoral process (NCS Situationroom Report, 2019:4). Second is the refusal of President Buhari to give assent to the bill which seeks to amend vital aspects of the 2010 Electoral Acts in December, 2018 on the grounds that the timeframe was very close to election period and too short for INEC to successfully implement them. Whereas, many stakeholders to the 2019 general elections share the view that the passing of the bill into law will enhance transparency and accountability in electoral process, the Buhari government remained adamant over conducting the election without the signing of the bill into law.

As the political landscape continue to generate tension over contending issues around the forthcoming elections, it became so expedient that stakeholders to the 2019 elections must be persuaded to comply with all the rules of the game if peace and orderliness must prevail during the elections. This probably informed the National Peace Committee under the leadership of the former Head of State, Abudulsalami Abubakar to convene two meetings where political parties and their candidates were encouraged to sign peace accord on December 12, 2018 and February 13, 2019. The first accord committed candidates to run issue-based campaign, while the other emphasized the need for candidates to eschew violence and respect the outcome of elections.

These were the prevailing political environment that harbors the 2019 general elections which were contested by 91 political parties and 73 presidential aspirants. On the whole, a total of 6,584 aspirants contested for 469 seats in the National Assembly. At the state level, several other candidates contested for the 29 out of the 36 state gubernatorial offices and State Houses of Assembly seats.

Electoral Violence in Politically Insecured Atmosphere: Observers' Perspectives

The European Union Election Observation final report alleged that the 2019 general elections in Nigeria were organized in an already tensed and turbulent atmosphere. According to the report; the (2019 general) elections took place in a complex security environment, with insurgencies in the Boko Haram and Islamic State Western African Province, agitation for independence by some in the South East Zone, and high level of violence due to farmer-herder conflict in the Middle Belt. In parts of the country, there are also problems with banditry and gang-related violence (EU Observers Mission Report, 2019:9).

In a related development, the IRI/NDI joint report on the 2019 general elections also refer to the atmospheric condition of insecurity and violence which pervaded the entire election period and before. Ahead of the 2019 polls, the poor security situation in Nigeria, mainly attributed to Boko Haram's resurgence in the North East, intercommunal violence in the Middle Belt and widespread crime and banditry, raised concerns about the safety of voters and candidates. Increased politically motivated violence and conflict in the pre-election period was also a concern especially around political party primaries in some areas and with some alleged political assassinations in the weeks before the polls (IRI/NDI Final Report, 2019: 8-9).

There were serious security challenges in many parts of the country. The North East geopolitical zone (comprising of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe states) was the worst heat, where activities of the Boko Haram insurgency had devastating effects on social life and general well being of the people. Many individuals were forcefully displaced from their homes, while several others lost their lives and property. All efforts by the Buhari Administration to curtail the over one decade reign of terror by the deadly religious sect since 2015 it came to power proved abortive. In 2017 alone "the group carried out 135 attacks" (IRN/NDI Final Report, 2019:17). The situation continues unabated throughout 2018 till 2019 with military checkpoints and barracks as major targets.

The political atmosphere in the core North i.e. the Northwest, especially in Kaduna, Kastina, Kano and Zamfara states was equally tension packed. Here, incidence of banditry, kidnapping and petty crime rose to disrupt free movement and association of people in late 2018 and towards election period in 2019. There were also skirmishes of conflict between the Hausa Farmers and Fulani Herdsmen in Kebbi, Jigawa and Sokoto states over land for farming and grazing respectively. Particularly, was the confrontation between the Nigerian Army and members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), who were protesting the arrest and continued detention of their leader, Sheikh Ibrahim El-zakzaky by the government and killing of over 40 of their members by the Nigerian military in Abuja (IRI/NDI Final Report, 2019:8).

The North Central (also Known as the Middle Belt) was seriously challenged by “incessant conflict between farmers and herdsmen which was somewhat limited to the North initially, but (later became) a nightmare in several communities in the Southeast and Southwest” (Awofeo, 2017: 36). This arguably, is an extension of resource scarcity over land and water in the core, which subsequently compelled the Fulani pastoralists in search of grazing lands and water for their livestock in the Middle Belt and Southern states. Unfortunately, this development continues to generate conflicts between farmers and herders in these regions leading to destruction of lives and property, while both groups continue to stockpile arms to attack and defend themselves.

The nature and character of conflict in the Southern Nigeria vary from one zone to another. In the South-South zone for instance, the oil producing communities of Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states had earlier formed several militants groups who constituted obstacles to the free exploration of crude oil by oil companies and the federal government in the region. The confrontation between these groups who were demanding for the control of their resources and instability arising from incessant attack on government establishments, pipelines and oil companies, kidnapping of oil workers and government officials in the region long before the 2019 general election.

In the Southeastern states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, the activities of the secessionist movement groups, especially the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) was a real threat to the success of the 2019 elections. The major aim of the group was to break away from Nigeria Republic. In the events that followed, the federal government had declared IPOB a terrorist organization with several members of the group killed by security officials and few others arrested. Meanwhile, the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu while in exile had issue a stay-at-home order to members and Igbo indigenes across the country to boycott the February 16 elections and subsequent ones. Although, a contrary order was later given by Nnamdi Kanu few days to the election, for Igbos to participate in the 2019 general elections, the order came too late as the stage was already set for confrontation between IPOB loyalists and the federal government and its agencies.

The Southwest geo-political zone was relatively peaceful but not totally devoid of insecurity as witnessed in rampant cases of robbery, kidnapping and hooliganism which were so prevalent during the 2019 general elections especially in Lagos state.

Geopolitical Zone and Insecurity in Nigeria

The map (diagram 1) and table 1 below illustrate the nature of insecurity in each of the six geopolitical zone in Nigeria prior to the 2019 general elections. It is instructive to note that this underlying state of insecurity help to exacerbate tension, fear, low voter turnout and violence during the election.

Diagram 1**Table 1**

S/N	Zone	State	Nature of Insecurity
1	North East	Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno Gombe, Taraba and Yobe	Boko Haram insurgency and Kidnapping
2	North Central	Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nassarawa, Niger and Plateau	Farmer-Herder Conflict, Kidnapping
3	North West	Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kastina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara	Banditry and Kidnapping
4	South East	Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo and Eboyin	IPOB call for Secession, abstinence from election, kidnapping
5	South South	Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Edo, Delta, Rivers and Cross-Rivers	Militancy, kidnapping and call for resource control
6	South West	Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo	Kidnapping, armed robbery

Nature and Dimensions of Electoral Violence during the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria: Observers' standpoint Theory

We need to first appreciate what constitutes electoral violence before clarifying on the nature and dimensions it assumed during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. Electoral violence according to Igbuzor (2009) refers to:

Any act of violence perpetuated in the course of political activities, including pre, during and post-election periods, and may include any of the following acts; thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral processes or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral process.

The above definitions of electoral violence is corroborated by Megan Reif (2010) in a much broader perspective as cited in Majekodunmi and Adejunwon (2012): According to him, electoral violence is:

any spontaneous or organized act by candidates,
party supporters, voters or any other actor that
occurs during an electoral process, from the date of voters registration to the date of inauguration of a new government, that uses physical harm, intimidations, blackmail, verbal abuse, violent demonstrations, psychological manipulation, or other coercive tactics aimed at exploiting, destructing, determining, hastening, delaying, reversing or otherwise influencing an electoral process and its outcome.

The two definitions of electoral violence above clearly unveil the nature and character of violence, and activities which could be described as such in an election. For instance, activities involving killing, marming, thuggery, assassination of political opponents, destruction of property including burning of building, cars, electoral materials etc., disruption of electoral process, stealing or destruction of ballot boxes and many more attacks whether physical or structural. It should be noted that these activities could occur at different points in time, either before, during and after elections. More importantly is the fact that violent-related activities during elections could assume physical, structural and psychological dimensions, which may be individually, group or state sponsored as rightly observed by Nwolise (2007). This for instance suggests that activities such as verbal threat, use of abusive languages, hate speeches among others are psychological form of violence during election periods.

Virtually all the general elections since 1993, when observers Missions were incorporated into Nigeria's electoral process till date, witnessed all the three forms of violent, although in different degrees as already demonstrated by scholars and authors alike (Nwolise, 2007).

It does remains for us in this study to demonstrate how electoral violence physically, structurally and psychologically play out during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria as witnessed and reported by different accredited election Observer Missions. For easy analysis, the intensity and dimensions violence assume during the 2019 general elections are discussed under the following headings and forms of violence which played out during the election.

1. Loss of life: Virtually all the election observer group acknowledges widespread violence before, during and after the 2019 general elections. Of serious concern were the high incidence of deaths recorded during this period which to many observers surpassed the number of death recorded in previous election. For example, the European Union Election Observation Final Report on the 2019 general election has the following to say

... approximately 145 people were killed in election related violence, 84 of which were in the South South zone...Approximately, 64 people were reportedly killed in the campaign up to the 23 February elections, 21 of these deaths in the week following the postponement. Approximately 35 people were reported killed on 23 February and 24 on 9 March (EU Election Observers Mission Final Report, 2019: 23).

Similar figure on the number of deaths during the 2019 general elections were reported by other election observers groups. The Situation Room on its parts documented more than 260 politically motivated deaths since the beginning of the campaign that led to the 2019 general elections.

Attack on INEC Offices and Officials: Apart from observed irregularities including vote buying, intimidation of voters and election officials which were reported by virtually all the Observers Groups, the 2019 general elections also witnessed several cases of physical attack on election officials and INEC offices across the country. There were report that “INEC premises and officials were subject to attack and harassment over all three election day periods”. It is on record that two weeks before the scheduled 16 February elections, “three INEC offices in Abia, Plateau and Anambra states were engulfed by fire leading to the destruction of hundreds of PVCs, electoral materials for over 100 polling units and over 4,600 smart card readers”. There were also reports of intimidation of INEC officials in 39 local governments areas in 20 states by EU election observers. Several other attacks reported by election groups included: threatening and compelling INEC officials to issue collated results under duress; assaults, abductions and sexual violence against officials; intimidation and unlawful arrest of election officials by soldiers who invaded collation centre, especially in Port Harcourt, etc.

Snatching of Ballot Boxes and Destruction of Electoral Materials: Both snatching of ballot boxes and destruction of electoral materials are well known atrocities committed during past elections in Nigeria. However, the dimension they assumed during the 2019 general elections was so alarming. The social media were littered with videos of unimaginable act of hooliganism and vandalism perpetrated by well known political thugs, while the security agents meant to protect the voters and ballot boxes watched in disbelief, especially in Lagos and many other states. The role played by soldiers and armed gangs in Rivers State collation centers during the 2019 general elections were equally amazing to many political observers.

Inflammatory Utterances and Hate Speech: Inflammatory utterances like verbal threat against political opponents, use of abusive languages and hate speeches especially during campaign and before elections are often ignored as part of electoral violence. However, these practices have shown to constitute major physiological assault against their victims and are known to be very potent for

building physical and structural violence during elections. Most of these acts played out during the period leading to the 2019 general elections. These helped to further heightened an already tensed atmosphere ready to explode in violence as witnessed during the elections.

Two major cases among others readily come to mind. First was the warning publicly given by the President few days to the elections that anyone caught disrupting the forthcoming elections or found stealing ballot boxes will pay with his life. Expectedly, the message was received with mixed reactions with the opposition interpreting it to mean a threat to them and their supporters, as well as a call for a more inclusive strategy for violence.

Second was the utterance credited to the Governor of Kaduna State, Mallam El-Rufai and purportedly threatening foreign election observers that they will be taken back in body bags after the elections. This was however interpreted as an open call for violence during the election by political observers, both local and international.

Observers Recommendations on Electoral Violence and Lessons for Future Elections in Nigeria

All the final reports on the 2019 general elections submitted by different election observers groups made wide range recommendations from the review of the electoral Act to institutional overhauling of INEC and security agencies practices, training and legal framework. There were equally recommendations bordering on women representation, media freedom, inclusive participation, transparency during voting and collation, data accessibility, enhance integrity and improve communication among stakeholders, and many more.

More importantly, and of particularly interest to this study are the recommendations on how to avert future violence during election in Nigeria. By a way of summary, we wish to itemize some of these recommendations here;

1. Government should ensure conflict-free environment by stemming down all crises generating matters arising from the activities of Boko Haram insurgency, Farmer-Herders conflict and banditry. This will calm down tension usually associated with pre-election period in Nigeria.
2. Government should intensify efforts on security arrangement such that inter-agency body responsible for electoral security works more transparently and inclusively with regular consultation with political parties and civil societies. The operational roles of the different security agency must be clearly delineated, with the military involvement only at the request of INEC.
3. All legal and electoral Act aimed at enhancing the performance of INEC, the judiciary and other institutions in electoral process should be completed without further delay.
4. Effort should be geared towards strengthening the mechanism for the prosecution of electoral offences with responsibility and investigation transferred to a separate institution. Regular notification of the public on information from investigation, prosecution and conviction of electoral law offenders is compulsory.
5. The cost of financing election by candidate and political parties should be streamlined and regulated by INEC, while provision should be made for independent candidates.

6. The rights of election observers to access all stages of the election process should be legalized, while any obstruction, intimidation or assault on observers be considered a punishable offence.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our discussion so far in this article reveals that elections and electoral process in Nigeria have always been problematic and often characterized by violence since independence. Also, attempts by successive governments to address these challenges over the years had only shown little or no success.

The 2019 general elections in Nigeria however provides us with another opportunity to reflect aback and project into the future with the view to proffering suggestions on how to combat this common problem, and with special focus on the recommendations proffered by various Observer Missions during the elections.

It must be noted however that these recommendations were not the first to be issued by many Observer Mission or Missions. As a matter of fact, virtually all the elections that were monitored since 1993 were accompanied by final reports suggesting recommendations on how to address these problems, but were either jettisoned or half-way implemented.

It therefore remains for government to demonstrate sincerity and show commitments to implement the recommendations proffered by Election Observer Missions. For as long as government continues to play politics with observers' recommendations and show little or no political will to live above politics, the vicious circle over electoral violence will continue to stare us in the faces, even in the future.

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