

## THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA: REFLECTING ON THE MALFEASANCE CALLED ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

BY

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### Article History

Received: 24/05/2022

Accepted: 30/07/2022

Published: 05/08/2022

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### Abstract

Election is universally acknowledged as a process by which electorates choose their leaders. Credibility of an election lies on the freeness and fairness of the entire electoral process in the absence of infraction or violence. Regrettably, Nigeria's election is characterized by the history of insecurity arising from electoral violence. This study examined the phenomenon of electoral violence during Nigerian elections focusing on the 2019 presidential election. The postcolonial theory was adopted as framework of analysis. Data were collected through documentary method and were analyzed qualitatively. The study found among others that the 2019 presidential election was marred by incidents of electoral violence arising from desperate attempts by the political class to outdo their opponents and gain electoral advantage, and recommended inter alia a legislation that should disqualify any political party or its candidates found to incite violence or make speeches capable of inducing tension before, during and after elections.

**Keywords:** Presidential election, electoral violence, insecurity, political party, political class, documentary method, postcolonial state.

### Introduction

The 2019 general elections were the sixth since the transition of Nigeria in 1999 from military to civilian democratic rule marking the beginning of the Fourth Republic. The elections were expected to provide an opportunity to consolidate the gains of Nigeria's nascent democracy and build on sound electoral system. Available statistics show that Nigeria had significant improvements in the administration of the 2011 and 2015 elections which boosted the expectations of many Nigerians and the international community for the 2019 electoral exercise (National Democratic Institute [NDI] & International Republic Institute [IRI], 2018). The 2015 general election was remarkable in Nigeria's political and electoral history being the first time the country recorded a smooth and peaceful transfer of power between political parties, and from the political party in government to another in opposition.

Also, the 2019 general elections recorded the participation of numerous new political parties. Thus, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) pointed out that 91 political parties were registered for the poll while about 69 featured candidates for the presidential election (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2018). In spite of the fact that a number of new political parties presented candidates (some of whom were even more proficient) for the 2019 presidential election, these candidates were viewed by many Nigerians as shadow contestants as the presidential poll was largely contested between the incumbent All Progressives Congress (APC) which featured President Muhamadu Buhari and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) whose flag-bearer was Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, Nigeria's former Vice President. While the APC hoped to renew the mandate of President Buhari and consolidate on the achievements of his first term in office, the PDP sought to leverage on the infractions within the APC and many of its failed

promises to have another opportunity at the presidency since conceding political power to APC during the 2015 presidential election. Hence, the PDP went into the 2019 presidential election process for the first time as an opposition party, faulting the APC's record and achievement within her four-year period in office. The PDP premised her claims of APC's non-performance on the three cardinal promises of fighting corruption, improving security, and boosting the economy, made by the APC before assuming the presidency following its victory at the poll in 2015 presidential election.

However, in a bid to ensure early and effective preparation and execution of the 2019 general elections by the INEC, the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria approved over 189 billion naira for the Commission (Umoru, 2018). According to the Senate, the approval became very expedient to enable Nigeria prepare adequately for the general elections. Similarly, the INEC Chairman, Professor Mahmood Yakubu affirmed of the Commission's readiness to conduct the 2019 general elections. He gave this assurance when he received a delegation from the European Union (EU) led by the Union's Ambassador to Nigeria and ECOWAS, Mr. Ketil Karlsen (Vanguard, 16 January 2019). In a similar vein, the Nigeria Police Force through its Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Agboola Oshodi-Glover affirmed the Force' confidence over its security commitment for the 2019 general elections in Nigeria (Abiola, 2018). Furthermore, to ensure a hitch-free 2019 general election, particularly the presidential election, and to complement other efforts on the ground, all the presidential candidates signed the Peace Accord on 11 December 2018, which was organized by the National Peace Committee, Abuja (Tukur, 2018). A final of this Abuja Accord was signed between President Buhari and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar on 13 February 2019.

Notably, part of the political intrigues that played out in the 2019 general elections' buildup was the suspension of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Walter Onnoghen by President Buhari, over alleged failure to disclose his assets as required by law. This raised concerns among stakeholders and lovers of democracy about the timing and motive of the government for the action considering the overall role of the Supreme Court of Nigeria in the entire electioneering process. Onnoghen's removal was strongly criticized by the EU, the United Kingdom and the United States, among others, stressing that this move by President Buhari could cast some doubts over the electoral process (BBC News, 26 January 2019). The Supreme Court plays an important role in the resolution of electoral disputes, including convening election tribunals and serving as the final court of appeal for petitions challenging the presidential elections. There were thus, fears that the president wanted to subvert the electoral process, hence, the overhaul of the Supreme Court's leadership.

Moreover, the history of elections and political transitions in Africa is a history of violence and intrigues. Despite all the measures to minimize hostility and stereotypes during the 2019 presidential election, the election campaign was far from issues-based.

Nigerians and the international community witnessed the biggest season of campaign of calumny in the political history of Nigeria. There were many political machinations, shenanigan, and gambit, particularly between the two main political parties, APC and PDP, which were aimed at wooing gullible electorates into embracing them as their political martyr. Fake news, character assassination, hates speeches, and blackmails were the hallmarks of the buildup into the 2019 presidential election. There were several attempts by the ruling political party, APC, to use the security forces to clamp down on the chieftains of the major opposition political party, PDP. The last-minute postponement of the presidential and national assembly elections in the morning of 16 February 2019 and delays in opening some polling units and other administrative challenges on the new election date, 23 February 2019, seemed to undermine public confidence in INEC (EU, IRI & NDI, 2019). Many electoral officials and INEC staff who were already deployed to the field were left stranded while a number of sensitive materials were feared exposed. This left everybody in doubt in terms of INEC's readiness to conduct a credible election. Regrettably, on the election day, insecurity of lives and property had already exceeded its melting point as many lives and property were lost, with records of armed violence, burning of INEC offices and election materials, and truncating of voting process in some locations.

Interestingly, the post-election analyses and discourses from observing missions, both of domestic and international leaning have cast doubt on the ability of Nigeria to organize a violent free, and credible election while identifying serious irregularities and sinister conducts short of international best practices during elections. Owing to the strategic importance of 2019 general elections in Nigeria to future elections, the study examined the dynamics of the 2019 presidential election in order to lay bare areas of conflagration while suggesting measures to forestall future occurrences.

### **Theoretical framework: postcolonial theory**

For purposes of x-raying the dynamics of electoral violence and other unscrupulous conducts that characterized the 2019 presidential election, the study adopted the postcolonial theory as analytical framework. Interestingly, despite the declarations of equality of all peoples and races, and independence granted to former colonies thereafter, political oppression and economic exploitation still persist in the hitherto colonial states. This forms the basis for the formation of postcolonial theory to explain the character of postcolonial states in order to chart a new trajectory. A number of theorists contributed in the development and popularization of the postcolonial theory. Lazare & Andries (2009) for instance viewed postcolonial theory as a means of defiance by which any exploitative and discriminative practices, regardless of time and space, can be challenged. A very comprehensive summary of the postcolonial theory was given by Slemmon (1995). Accordingly, he argued that in spite of the end of colonialism in the exchange for flag independence that came without economic

independence nor reparation for the past damage, imperialism as a concept and colonialism as a practice are still prevalent in a new form and dimension which he aptly tagged neo-colonialism.

Postcolonial theory explains the realities of neo-colonialism as a new form of imperialism where the industrialized powers continue to interfere in the economic and political affairs of the post-independent societies through the entrenchment of indigenous proxies as political leaders whose primary goal is to govern in the interests of former colonizers. Altbach (1995) while trying to justify postcolonial theory noted that neo-colonialism as partly planned policy is a continuation of the old practices, that is, economic and political subjugation. Also, Young (2001) while corroborating the views of Altbach (1995) stated that neo-colonialism is the last stage of imperialism in which a postcolonial country is unable to deal with the economic domination that continues after the country gained independence. Also, Dunn & Shaw (2001) agreed with the assumptions of postcolonial theory and argued that the marginalization of Africa in the political field has a correlation with the corresponding marginalization by dominant western theories. Similarly, Elem (2012) observed that the achievement of political independence did not mean so much for former colonies since it did not solve the problems which were expected to be overcome by independent political governance but instead, new forms of domination and exploitation appeared. According to him, new elites in these independent countries emerged and sustained the colonial rule by oppressing the led. Hence, colonialism has reincarnated as neo-colonialism and postcolonial theory is apt to explain the dynamics.

However, the assumptions of postcolonial theory are premised on the underlying thesis deriving from the characteristics of postcolonial states such as ethnic and regional conflicts, bad governance, religious intolerance, electoral fraud and violence, corruption, economic sabotage, poverty and diseases, high level of unemployment and crime, and generally, poor development indices. Though pessimists are averse to the assumptions of postcolonial theory, arguing that it is problematic for researchers because of its lack of consensus and clarity (Slemon, 1995) and can be naive, inadequate, or utopian (Moore, 2001), the theory provides the analytical basis for the interrogation of electoral violence observed during the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria.

Generally, periodic election is one of the key ingredients of democracy and a vital element in the democratization of politics. Credible electoral process paves ways for institutionalization of democracy through which competent leaders who are accountable to the people are elected. In the contrary, when political leaders are produced by means of electoral malpractices, it is impossible to guarantee good governance. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the nation's electoral process has always manifested the features enumerated by postcolonial theorists as characters of postcolonial states which include electoral violence and fraud, ethnic and regional divides, subversion of justice, intimidation of opposition by the ruling political party, and disruption of electoral process by

the state and non-state actors, among others. These indices have continued to influence the election of political leaders in Nigeria.

Consequently, Nigerian elections have never been free from violence. During elections in Nigeria, the political space is usually tensed like a theatre of warfare and most members of the political class coerce the electoral system to rig themselves into political offices, to the detriment of the blood of vulnerable citizens. When they assume offices, their policies and projects hardly reflect the needs of the generality of Nigerians. This is why Obianagwa, Ifem, Eze, Nwannennaya & Ereforokuma (2021) likened the poor state of development in Nigeria to "a paradox of poverty in plenitude". The Nigerian political class not only loot the public treasury but launder their loots into foreign banks. This explains why there is a widening gap between the rich and poor and why Nigeria continues to retain its colonial outlook of political subjugation and economic exploitation even after the demise of colonial rule. It is for this reason that Memmi (2006) acknowledged that nothing has substantially changed in terms of development for the former colonial societies after decades of independence and national liberation struggle, yet the postcolonial independent states failed to solve the problems such as malnutrition, famine, political crisis, widespread corruption, and tyranny.

## Salient drivers of electoral violence in Nigeria

Electoral violence as a form of political violence often manifests in the form of politically motivated kidnapping, snatching and destruction of ballot boxes, armed attacks on perceived political rivals and electoral officers, hijack of election-sensitive materials and destruction of collation centers, voter intimidation, and manipulation of electoral outcomes in order to gain electoral advantage (Timothy & Omolegbe, 2019). Similarly, Fischer (2002), Omotola (2010), and Onapajo (2014) are of the view that electoral violence can occur in the form of arson, assassination, looting, and attacks on the key electoral stakeholders such as the voters, electoral umpires, media, and candidates contesting for an election, destruction of election materials and destabilizing of campaign rallies. Albert (2007) and Vicente (2008) stressed that electoral violence is aimed at shaping the electoral outcomes towards a certain direction while striving to gain some political party advantage by the political actors.

Several factors have continued to defy and inflame electoral processes in Nigeria. However, the monopolization of productive forces and economic system by the Nigerian state, politicization of security agencies, ethnic and religious divides, challenges of internal democracy, political impunity, inflammatory campaign speeches, negative perceptions, and ignorance on the general public are the actual drivers of electoral violence in Nigeria (Kwarkye, 2019; Timothy & Omolegbe, 2019). State offices are so attractive in the country because of enormity of powers over resource control. The state agents control all the facets of the nation's economy particularly the oil and gas sector and appropriate huge wealth to the detriment of the general populace

and the overall development of Nigeria. This ugly scenario has not only created the mindset among Nigerians that political offices provide an easy route for amassing wealth but has fueled desperation among politicians seeking and canvassing for public offices or to perpetuate their stay in offices. Elections in Nigeria, therefore, become a theatre of warfare and the quest for public offices retrogressing into the “Hobbesian state of nature”.

Importantly, during elections in Nigeria, the law enforcement agencies are expected to put measures in place to protect the lives of citizens as well as providing adequate security for election materials and stakeholders involved in the election. This is part of the measures to encourage popular participation in electoral process as well as ensuring credibility of the electoral outcomes. However, Afolabi (2019) pointed out that while security organizations are important and engaged in electoral process for security, the Police according to him are the only internal state agency saddled with the maintenance of law and order, thereby giving a fundamental role in a democratic system. The deployment of security agents is considered essential particularly in volatile developing societies to minimize tension and check violent related conducts. It is on this basis that Omotola (2010) stressed that deployment of security personnel in Nigeria to conduct of elections becomes necessary as a result of generalized violence. This sole objective is defeated in Nigeria as law enforcement agents are polarized along political parties and often serving the interest of their paymasters to harass opponents and scuttle the electoral process. Sharing this view, Afolabi (2013) argued that uncontrolled deployment of security personnel contributes to flawed and violent elections. The irony is that those who should serve as watchdogs and ensure decorum during elections become the prime suspects themselves. This has continued to question the political neutrality of Nigeria’s security agencies, especially the police. In fact, the association of the law enforcement agents with impunity in elections in Nigeria arises from the fact that their operational control and management is done by the executive heads who are surrounded by politicians, aids, and special advisers who are willing to win elections at all cost and perpetuate themselves in power (Ibeanu, 2007). For Yoroms (2019), threats against and harassment of political opponents by the security agencies of the ruling regime has continued to create political apathy in Nigeria. He further observed that “shoot on sights” orders to the security agents from their benefactors often breed fears in electorates and can suppress participation. Similarly, Alemika (2007) averred that widespread violence and intimidation of voters in elections in Nigeria where public office holders use their security orderlies to intimidate voters, scuttle electoral processes and make away with electoral voting materials.

Another evil which has hitherto generated a lot of violence during elections in Nigeria is ethno-religious divides. Nigeria’s polity historically has been a mix of politics, ethnicity, and religion as rallying points especially during the elections. For instance, during the First Republic, major political parties in the country were formed along ethnic cum religious lines. The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC), the Action Group (AG), and the

Northern People’s Congress (NPC) were overly regarded as Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa/Fulani parties respectively. These three political parties were the major contenders during the 1964/65 general election in Nigeria which ended up in gross irregularities, murder, kidnapping, and burning of properties. Accordingly, Council on Foreign Relations [CFR] (2010) portrayed Nigeria as a country with overlapping regional, ethnic and religious divisions. Tensions between the north and south regions, the ethnic and religious groups always translate to electoral violence. Elections, therefore, provide the stage for political supremacy and control over avalanche of economic resources which Nigeria is endowed with. As a campaign strategy, politicians have always resorted to ethnic and religious rhetoric to weep ethnic and religious sentiments alike thereby overheating the political system which always resulted in loss of lives and property. Regrettably, in 2011 alone, ethnic and religious-related tensions led to the death of over 800 Nigerians and many properties lost (Kwarkye, 2019). In the same vein, Afolabi (2019) argued that election mismanagement usually leads to confluence of tribal, ethnic, and religious tensions incurring loss of lives and property as well as causing avoidable violence and undermining legitimacy of the election winners.

Another important factor exacerbating electoral violence in Nigeria is political “godfatherism”. Political godfathers are the elite members of the society who have amassed enormous wealth and invest heavily in elections while expecting their returns on investments thereby escalating the political temperature during elections. Hence, since the emergence of Fourth Republic till date, there is the existence of this influential group in Nigeria’s politics known as the “godfathers or money bags” (Rose-Ackernam, 1999; Eke & Osaghae, 2016). As a result of this vicious stakes by godfathers, winning elections in Nigeria becomes “do-or-die affair”. However, the indignity of “money bags” in elections in Nigeria is aptly summarized by Eke & Osaghae (2016, p. 60) as follows:

“This group of persons is culprit in the promotion of electoral fraud and violence in Nigeria. They are always ready to pay any price just to subvert electoral processes and win elections for their godsons. Hence, politics in Nigeria is for the rich and those that have the backing of affluent godfathers. For candidates to win elections, they must seek for the blessings of these “money bags” who will subject them to all manner of occultism before been endorsed. The political parties’ candidates are also subjected to oath-taking in order ensure that agreements reached with their godfathers are not broken. Thereafter, they will resort to all sinister strategies to make sure that these candidates secure electoral victory at all cost. This is one of the reasons Nigeria still remains backward even five decades after her independence without significant impact her democratic evolution”.

## Electoral reforms in preparation for 2019 general election in Nigeria

It is noteworthy that many Nigerians and concerned stakeholders both domestic and international had expected a major improvement in the Electoral Act of 2010 in preparation for 2019 general election as well as future elections. Following the 2011 and 2015 polls, stakeholders identified flawed areas in the Act and recommended some sections of the electoral legal framework for amendment. Additional reforms were thus deemed necessary for credible 2019 general polls. In order to address some of these shortcomings, the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, Federal Republic of Nigeria approved four versions of a bill to amend the Electoral Act of 2010. The areas of spotlight include:

- Imposing of higher fines on media houses not providing equal air-time to competing political parties to discourse their manifestos,
- Making the voter register and election results electronically and publicly accessible,
- Capping the nomination fees that political parties charge their candidates, and
- Extending the application of the Electoral Act to local government elections.

Surprisingly, President Buhari withheld his assent to each version of the bill, ultimately citing the proximity to the elections, ECOWAS Protocol on Electoral Reforms as well as the short time INEC would have to implement reforms. The president's rejection of the bill in December 2018 was after a long delay of the bill at Presidency and this coincided with delayed release of INEC's 2019 election guidelines. The President in a memo forwarded to the National Assembly outlined some of the reasons for withdrawal of his assent to the 2010 Electoral Act Amendment Bill. First, the President pointed out that INEC had already scheduled for the 2019 general elections, arguing that the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, subsections 76, 116, 132, and 178, grants INEC the discretion to do so. He noted that changing the election schedules would amount to breach of the constitutional discretion of INEC to organize, undertake and supervise elections (Library of Congress, 2018).

Another area of concern on the proposed Amendment Bill to the President was the proposed changes to the grounds upon which elections may be challenged by candidates. Under the existing law (Electoral Act, 2010), the following grounds could be used to challenge an election:

- that a person whose election is questioned was, at the time of the election, not qualified to contest the election;
- that the election was invalid by reason of corrupt practices or non-compliance with the provisions of this Act;
- that the respondent was not duly elected by majority of lawful votes cast at the election; or
- that the petitioner or its candidate was validly nominated but was unlawfully excluded from the election (Library of Congress, 2018)

Interestingly, the proposed legislation sought to expand parts of the above provisions of the Act and stressed that in addition to the violations of the Electoral Act, 2010, that an election could be challenged for failure to comply with the published INEC guideline, regulations, procedures or directives. Notably, the President also took exception of this part. Other efforts at legal reforms to the electoral process recommended by Nigerian civil society were unrealized before the 2019 elections, including creating appropriate institutions to oversee political parties and prosecute electoral offenses and responsibilities that currently impede INEC's focus on administering free, fair, and credible elections.

## INEC and preparation for 2019 generation election in Nigeria

Preparing for the 2019 polls, INEC instituted several reforms, including 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 in a bid to ensure a transparent general election. These innovations were widely applauded by Nigerians as well as the international observers, giving hope for a stronger democratic institution and better future. However, Ekiti and Osun states' July and September 2018 gubernatorial elections respectively were used by the INEC to test-run its innovation, and lessons learned were expected to apply in the general elections. Building on its decision to institute a continuous voter registration process in 2017, INEC added 14.5 million voters to the registration roll, bringing the number of registered voters to 84,004,084.3 (INEC, 2018). The collection of permanent voter cards (PVCs) by eligible voters for the 2019 polls increased from 82 percent in 2015 to 86.6 percent (INEC, 2019), even though it did not translate into high voting turnout. In January 2018, more than a year before the polls, INEC released the elections timetable, but had trouble following it due to the delayed allocation of electoral funds, failed attempts to reform the electoral legal framework, and numerous pre-election disputes over political party primaries that delayed ballot production (NDI & IRI, 2019).

Consequently, the INEC Chairman, Prof. Mahmood Yakubu during the 5<sup>th</sup> Northern Traditional Rulers General Assembly and at the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2019 Council of State meeting held in Abuja, reiterated the Commission's readiness to conduct credible 2019 general election, stressing that all the money needed for logistics had been released to them and that every category of staff to participate in the election were already being trained and re-trained for the successful conduct of the election (Vanguard, 19 December 2018; 22 January 2019). Meanwhile, President Muhammadu Buhari while hosting members of the European Union Observer Mission (EUOM) expressed his satisfaction with the preparations made by the INEC for the 2019 general election (News Agency of Nigeria [NAN], 22 January 2019). He further stressed that the ruling APC had a good sense of identifying national interest to include security, peace, and stability, growing of economy, job creation, and execution of war against corruption. The President

concluded by boasting that Nigeria has grown its electoral system incrementally, getting better year after year.

### *Intrigues in the build-up to 2019 general elections in Nigeria*

In the buildup to 2019 general polls, there were fears that poor security situation in Nigeria, with particular attention to Boko Haram's resurgence in the North East, herders and crop farmers clashes in the Middle Belt, and widespread crime and banditry as well as militarization of volatile areas and restive youths, could hamper the safety of voters and candidates and scuttle the general election. Increased politically motivated violence and conflict in the pre-election period also posed a major concern making both domestic and international stakeholders to urge political parties, especially their presidential candidates to sign "Peace Accord" (The Punch, February 13, 2019) during which the ruling APC and the PDP obliged.

Despite these Accords, incidents of politically motivated violence rose and political actors increasingly resorted to hate speeches and unacceptable conducts, hence negating the global best practices and principles guiding the conduct of elections. There were also tensions arising from the aftermath of political party primaries with some alleged political assassinations in the weeks before the general polls. With various stakeholders expressing concerns about the neutrality of the security services before and during the election, the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Electoral Security, headed by both the National Security Adviser (NSA) and INEC national chairman, was established and charged to ensure improvement on coordination and information sharing on election security matters. Still, the presence of this joint security consultative outfit was hardly felt at the state and local government levels before and during the election. While voting was generally peaceful during the 23 February 2019 election in most parts of the country, at some polling units, party agents and other party supporters, for instance, thugs, disrupted voting, intimidated voters, and destroyed voting materials. Party agents also acted with impunity in assisting voters to mark their ballots, intimidating voters and buying votes as well as violating the secrecy of the ballot.

Regrettably, INEC witnessed some attacks in their offices which were aimed at sabotaging the 2019 general elections. Some of the attack incidents in 2019 pre-election period include:

- Burning of INEC office at Quaanpan L.G.A. of Plateau state with several voting materials destroyed,
- Burning of INEC office at Isiala Ngwa in Abia state in which many official materials and permanent voters' card (PVC) were destroyed,
- Burning of INEC's office at Awka, Anambra state with about 10,000 PVCs, 755 ballot boxes, power generating sets, and valuable materials destroyed in the fire (Center for Transparency Advocacy, 2019).

Consequently, INEC reported that 8,966 permanent voters' cards (PVC) and other official materials were among the things destroyed by the fire that engulfed its offices in Abia, Anambra and Plateau states just few days before the general polls (Festus Okoye, quoted in Dailypost, 11 February 2019).

### *Electoral violence during the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria*

Elections in Nigeria usually come with high stakes and "winners take all" syndrome, with politicians willing to exploit deep-rooted ethnic, religious, and regional divisions to gain electoral advantage and muzzle their opponents. The politicians incite community tension and even target their rivals and their rivals' supporters (CFR, 2019). Vulnerable Nigerians are usually the victims of such violence. The 2019 presidential election in Nigeria was characterized by a spike in politically motivated killings across the six geo-political zones of the country. There were several reports bordering on voter intimidation and widespread violence around the joint 2019 presidential and national assembly elections perpetrated by armed hoodlums who were allegedly equipped by candidates and political parties to obtain victory at the polls by all means and costs.

Reporting on the election violence in the 2019 general election, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) maintained that:

"The elections became increasingly marred by violence and intimidation. This harmed the integrity of the electoral process and may deter future participation. Party leaderships did not take sufficient steps to rein in their supporters. Based on information available, around 150 people died in election-related violence during the campaign period and over the election days. INEC reported attacks on its offices, and also fatalities, abductions, and sexual assault against its officials. During collation of the federal results, EU observers directly witnessed or received reports of intimidation of INEC officials in 20 states" (EUEOM, 2019, P. 3).

In the same vein, an estimated 626 people were killed during the election between the start of the election campaign in October 2018 and the final in March 2019 (Sanni, 2019). Table 1 below showed the reported death toll by geopolitical zones during the 2019 general elections.

**Table 1: Death Toll by Geopolitical Zones during 2019 General Elections**

Geopolitical Zones	Death Toll
North Central (NC)	111
North East (NE)	146

North West (NW)	172
South East (SE)	14
South-South (SS)	120
South West (SW)	63
Total	626

Source: Nigerian Civil Society Organization (NCSO), 2019; Sanni, 2019

From the data in Table 1, the number of people who lost their lives during the 2019 general elections raises doubts about the willingness of political class to democratize politics in Nigeria. For instance, the NW (the geopolitical zone of President Buhari who was seeking for re-election) recorded the highest number of deaths during the elections as 172 people lost their lives. This is followed by the NE (the geopolitical zone of major opposition presidential candidate) which recorded 146 fatalities while the SS and NC recorded 120 and 111 deaths respectively. The statistics of death in the SW and SE were relatively low as 63 and 14 people lost their lives in the respective zones in election-related violence. The NCSO report revealed that Benue (the hotspot of armed cattle herders and crop farmers clashes), Borno (the hotspot of Boko Haram), Kaduna (one of the hotspots of armed banditry), Rivers (the hotspot of militancy and sea piracy) and Zamfara (another hotspot for armed banditry) states were the locations with the highest number of deaths and fatalities before, during and after the 2019 general elections (Sanni, 2019).

It is imperative to note that high death profile in the NW, NE, and NC following the 2019 presidential/general election could be attributed to the region’s volatility arising from the activities of violent non-state actors such as Boko Haram terrorists, armed bandits, and nomadic cattle herders, among other militia and criminal groups who have held the region under siege in the past decade. Because the Nigerian political space was already tensed by the activities of desperate politicians, these criminal elements who were either serving the interests of political actors to destabilize the 2019 poll or their age-long interest of establishing a caliphate system, particularly in the northern region of Nigeria took advantage of the “over-stretched Nigerian security architecture” to attack the unsuspecting Nigerians.

Similarly, the militarization of Rivers state (the hotspot of SS) during the 2019 presidential/general election and fierce battle for the “soul” of the state by the ruling PDP government in the state and APC accounted for high incidents of political violence in the zone. In addition, the SS geopolitical zone is an oil-rich region with long history of militancy and gun violence; this, however, combined with gerrymandering that accompanied the 2019 general elections to cause wanton destruction of lives and property in the region. Meanwhile, low death profile recorded in the SE and SW could be as a result of little stake the geopolitical zones had in the 2019 presidential election. Nigeria is “highly ethnic-divided society” and with the candidates of two major political parties (APC and PDP) contesting the 2019 presidential election coming from the NW and NE respectively, there was little or nothing to lose by SE and SW. This understandably made the two geopolitical zones (SE and SW) less politically tensed during the presidential election compared to NW and NE that produced the two major presidential candidates. This also explains why SE recorded the least voters’ turnout during the 2019 presidential election (Vanguard, 21 December 2020). Death statistics in Table 1 clearly showed how hooliganism in Nigeria’s polity is employed by politicians to obtain political power. In civilized societies, no election or political ambition is worth the life of any citizen and lack of insensitivity to life and human dignity among the Nigerian political class is a recourse to insanity.

Another area of concern during the 2019 presidential election was disruption of polls and the destruction of voting materials by suspected political thugs in some voting areas and collation centers. There were cases of election violence in some areas either because of late or non-arrival of INEC officials and election materials as well as an inadequate or compromised security presence. Table 2 below showed the breakdown of some reported cases of election violence, ballot box snatching, and disruption of voting process which ultimately led to voters’ apathy in some areas while creating loopholes for over-voting and rigging in other locations.

Table 2 showcased how the criminal elements had their field day in some flashpoint areas especially Lagos and Rivers states. The armed political thugs operated ruthlessly to help their candidates and political parties who allegedly paid for their services to subvert the electoral process in order to gain advantage.

**Table 2: Disruption of election and destruction of ballot materials by hoodlums in some states during 2019 Presidential Election in Nigeria**

States	Location of Incidents	Nature of Incident
Lagos	Polling Unit 018 at Okota, Polling Unit 023 at Baba-Ewe Street/Ago Palace Way, Polling Unit 035 at Adeneken/Alhaji Oluese streets, Polling Unit 036 at Adeneken street/ Ago Palace Way, Isolo, Oshodi areas, etc.	Election was disrupted, voters were chased away and ballot boxes and papers destroyed and burnt by political thugs who were shooting sporadically. Also, a ballot box snatcher was reportedly stoned and burned by aggrieved voters at Okota in Oshodi-Isolo Local Government/Development Area.
Osun	INEC office at Oriade L.G.A.	Disruption/burning of ballot boxes and papers,

		generating sets, etc. by shooting hoodlums.
Rivers	Polling Units at Bonny, Kalabiam, Abonnema, Isiokpo and Okrika areas, etc.	Armed men chased voters away, intimidate voters and cart away with voting materials allegedly in the presence of security agents. Also, there was reported shooting by the military at Kalabiam leaving many people injured. A soldier was also allegedly killed during exchange of gunfire with political thugs at Abonnema.

Source: Compiled by the author from different media sources

Unhealthy political environment characterized by violence, maiming, assassinations, threats, blackmail, intimidation, and harassments have been identified by scholars to undermine political participation, especially in developing societies (Obianagwa, 2021). On this note, Ngara & Ayabam (2013) and Kolawale, Abubakar, Owonibi & Adebayo (2012) argued that the politics of use of thugs before, during, and after elections, and attendant insecurity make politics look like something “out of the way” for most electorates in Nigeria. The 2019 presidential election in Nigeria was largely under-policed. Under-policing of voting and collation areas as well as partisanship of some of the security personnel created floodgates for the armed non-state actors who were surreptitiously bankrolled by competing political class to coerce the electoral process either through disruption of voting and collation of votes or snatching of ballot materials for eventual rigging of the electoral exercise. All these unseemly events as shown in Table 2 were reported during the 2019 presidential election sometimes under the watchful presence of Nigerian security agents. For instance, there were reported cases of locations in Lagos, Osun, and Rivers states, among others where elections were disrupted, voters chased away and ballot boxes and materials destroyed or burnt by political thugs who were shooting sporadically to intimidate voters and scare them away. In situations where these hoodlums were resisted by the Nigerian security agents, the lives of voters and electoral officials came under threat as they scamper for safety.

The aim of this political rascality was to create “safe haven” for election rigging and suppression of votes in opponents’ strongholds. In an unfriendly political climate as obtainable during the 2019 presidential election, it is difficult for people’s choice to prevail or popular candidate emerge victorious. Norris (2014) for instance found that voter turnout could be high when elections were fair and votes fairly counted, with journalists providing fair coverage of elections. All these indices of credible elections as enumerated above are only attainable in a clement political environment. In the contrary, Norris (2014) further stressed that low voter turnout is inevitable when there were electoral malpractices characterized by vote buying, partisanship of journalists, intimidation of opposition candidates, and perceived fear or threat of political violence during elections. Meanwhile, despite the assurance of Nigeria security chiefs of their preparedness and provision of adequate security prior to 2019 general elections, several security breaches and shortfalls were

recorded with attendant consequences on the overall election security.

Regrettably, some of the incidents of violence recorded during the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria were incited by desperate attempts of politicians and their proxies to gain electoral advantage through vote buying and subversion of entire electoral process. Notably, Osigwe (2019) observed that political parties were inducing voters with money, food items, and various other items in order to secure their votes. Most political actors engaged in unscrupulous activities which were detrimental to international best practices as ways of inducing unsuspecting voters. *Incidentally, these acts of inducement that took place right before security agents within the voting premises had the tendency to destroy the citizens’ confidence and as well incite election violence. Specifically, the incidents of material inducement of voters were reported in all geopolitical zones in Nigeria during the 2019 general elections (Osigwe in Punch, 12 March 2019).* Also, the deployment of the Nigerian military for the joint 2019 presidential and national assembly elections further increased the tensed atmosphere that heralded the election. The military created its own Situation Room while urging Nigerians to obey the “marshal” order from President Buhari who had earlier urged them to deal ruthlessly with those found to snatch ballot boxes or disrupt electoral process (Channels Television, 18 February 2019). This statement was widely considered as controversial and implied that the security agents should carry out extrajudicial killing or manhandling of alleged electoral offenders, who should ordinarily be arrested and charged to competent court of law for proper sanction. All this set up the ground that eventually erupted into electoral violence during the 2019 presidential election.

*The militarization of the 2019 presidential election and the resultant violence was largely condemned by the domestic and international election observers such as the EU, IRI, NDI, Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), etc. In a preliminary report released in 12 March 2019, they affirmed that the election was marred by military involvement, declaring that the election was short of best practices. In a similar vein, the Coalition of United Political Parties (CUPP) decried deployment of the military to Nigeria’s 2019 presidential and national assembly elections as a clandestine attempt to return the country to military rule. Furthermore, former Archbishop of Abuja Catholic Diocese, Cardinal John Onaiyekan regretted that flawed 2019 presidential election may have negative impact on Nigeria’s economy. He argued that good governance is not possible with violent and*

*rigged elections as bad elections hardly bring peace and enabling environment for development.*

## Conclusion and recommendations

The study observed that the 2019 presidential election was marred by many irregularities with reports of armed violence, destruction of election facilities, and truncating of voting process by hoodlums, among others. Most of the voting areas and INEC facilities were not adequately policed creating loopholes for criminal elements to disrupt the electoral process in some areas. Some security agents became partisan and were used as stooges in the hands of politicians to scuttle the electoral process. Overall, high levels of INEC's incompetence, insecurity, and violence recorded during the 2019 presidential election have left many Nigerians and concerned democrats begin to cast doubts in the future of the Nigeria's democracy. Arising from the findings, the study made the following recommendations:

- There is need for legislation that should disqualify any political party or its candidates found to incite violence or make speeches capable of inducing tension before, during, and after elections.
- There is need for severe punishment of those found culpable of disrupting peaceful conduct of elections in Nigeria. In other words, electoral offenders should be prosecuted adequately to serve as deterrence to future occurrences. Nigeria has a poor record of prosecution of electoral offences. To change this narrative, the law-enforcement institutions should be strengthened for effective prosecution of election-related offences and those found guilty should be sanctioned irrespective of their social status, in order to save the future of Nigeria's democracy.
- There is need for a comprehensive review of 2019 general elections by key stakeholders (such as INEC, the lawmakers, and other pro-democracy organizations) as a way rooting out the observed areas of inadequacies and improving on the future elections in Nigeria.
- There is an urgent need for a legislation that should bar the Nigeria military from overt or covert involvement in elections and ensures absolute neutrality of security agencies especially the Police which may be required to provide security of lives and property during the electoral exercises.
- The president of Nigeria should be courageous enough to approve the Electoral Act of 2010 as amended in order to allow some improvement in the conduct of elections in the country.

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