

# Democratization and Electoral Violence in Nigeria: A case of Sokoto State

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of the wave of democratization in parts of the world, sequel to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wind of political changes that swept through Eastern Europe, many countries have made attempts, even if feeble in some cases, to come to terms with the necessity of enthroning a project of democratization (Umar, 2009). In this respect, Nigeria has not been left out of the bandwagon of democratization. Evidently though, at independence in 1960, the country experimented with parliamentary democracy fashioned after the British model which was later bedeviled by electoral crises. Beginning from 1964/65 general elections, violence became a major feature of electoral politics in the country. Thus, it was after thirteen (13) years of military rule (1966-1979) that the Federal Military Government of Nigeria (FMGN) handed over to a new civilian government on October 1, 1979 and Nigeria's Second Republic was born amidst great expectations (Kurfi, 2005 cited in Omotosho, 2008:1).

The 1983 elections were held but, unfortunately, the transition to civilian rule did not result in democratically accountable government for Nigerians, thereby resulting in the collapse of the Second Republican government in December 1983 through a coup d'état. However, the outcome of the elections conducted in 1999, 2003 and 2007 was so fiercely contested, involving the loss of lives and wanton destruction of properties, that the survival of the democratic orders and values were compromised in many ways (International Crisis Group, 2007).

Consequently, the political contestation in Nigeria since the inception of civilian administration in 1999 has continued to be characterized by high degree of electoral violence. This trend of electoral violence has led to a situation whereby the citizens (Nigerians) view elections and democratic process with apprehension and anxiety, with popular confidence gradually being eroded in the electoral process. This is coupled with the potential capacity of electoral violence to impinge on the electoral process, undermine legitimacy and threaten democratic stability in Nigeria. Perhaps, this made Umar (2009) to argue that the country (Nigeria) had progressively lost all the known vestiges of democracy including the cherished democratic values of accountability, rule of law and the flourishing of fundamental civil and political liberties. He further argued that by banning all associations of political character including political parties and civil society groups, as all military governments have

done on coming to power in the country, the institutional prerogatives or foundations of democracy became jettisoned.

Elections and democracy are inextricably linked since elections have meaning for most people only in a democratic context, simply because elections lead to the choice of decision makers by the majority of the citizens. Thus, where electoral rigging and other fraudulent electoral practices obtains, they tend to frustrate the democratic aspirations of citizens who have voted or would have voted into office someone other than the eventual winner. The inability to conduct free and fair election has made the country the butt of bad jokes in the international community (Adekanye, 1990). Thus, with the polarization of Nigerian politics, electoral violence had increasingly become normal party strategy as politicians employed paid youths to coerce and intimidate electoral opponents during or immediately after election periods.

This rising tide of electoral fraud or election rigging has serious implications for Nigeria's democratic future. The result has, therefore, been subversion of the democratic process rather than its sustainability and consolidation. Expectedly, major political and electoral violence have emerged around contestation over elections in Nigeria. In spite of the ills that followed the 1999, 2003, and 2007 elections, Nigerians still showed their willingness to elect their leaders even in the 2011 elections with a Time Table which was set and adjusted later for convenience in order to prevent electoral violence before, during or after elections. Paradoxically, electoral violence could not be ruled out as it surfaced again with the onset of the 2011 post elections violence in Nigeria.

The above scenario became replicated in most states of the federation in Nigeria. In Sokoto state for instance, since the 1999 elections, the electoral and political landscape has moved from violence to greater violence. The level and magnitude of electoral violence in Sokoto state has risen and the political elites have converted poverty ridden unemployed youths in the state into readymade machinery for the perpetration of electoral violence. It is, therefore, against this background that this study examines democratization and electoral violence in Nigeria, with particular focus on Sokoto state between 1999 and 2009.

*Statement of the Research Problem*

After about a decade in which the process of political renewal began in Africa, the project of democratization appears to be in crisis in most African States, particularly in Nigeria. There seems to be a gradual, but dangerous re-institutionalization of autocratic and authoritarian regimes clad in democratic garb. In some cases, yesterday's despots and military tyrants have resurfaced as today's 'born-again' democrats to re-establish or perpetuate their rule, while others, a new genre at budding autocrats are emerging (Adejumobi, 1998; Decalo, 1994 cited in Adejumobi, 2000:59).

The precepts, structures and processes of elections are mostly characterized by reckless manipulations, the politics of brinkmanship and subversion. Thus, the role and essence of elections in a democracy are highly circumscribed in terms of expressing the popular will, engendering political changes and the legitimation of political regimes. The present tendency is to regard election not as a catalyst, but as a devalued element and a fading shadow of the democratic process in Africa.

In Nigeria, for instance, it is not military rule alone that breeds violence; there is also the factor of elites' manipulation for personal gains. Each time Nigerian elites are excluded or disfavoured in the power configuration, the next line of action is to foment trouble by appealing to sentiments (ethnic, religion, party) for their personal gains. Dudley (1973) alluded to this when he said that 'rather than the political elites in Nigeria acting as conflict managers, given their level of education, they became, in a strong sense, conflict generators'. The preponderance of political violence in Nigeria and its manifestations has remained one of the greatest threats to democratic stability. These threats or challenges had thrown up a myriad of social problems such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, marginalization and neglect, which have brought untold hardship to the citizens with vulnerable groups like women, children and youths, as the worst hit casualties.

Prior to the renewal of political processes in Sokoto state in 1999, the state has been relatively peaceful. But the varied forms of electoral malpractice and the high number of incidents of electoral violence in recent times have indicated that the basic institutional weaknesses associated with the electoral system could bring the democratic experiment to untimely grief. The phenomenon of electoral violence has become an increasing problem for the state. Central to this problem is the relationship between the political elites in the state and the intermittent occurrence of electoral violence which deserves careful exploration. This research is embarked upon to explore the reasons behind the continuous increase in electoral violence in the state. Based on the above, the study examined the challenges of electoral violence in Sokoto State between 1999 and 2009 in relation to democratization process.

*Research Questions*

In order to ensure that this study is well focused, certain specifically arguable questions which shall guide the research process were developed as follows;

1. What are the factors responsible for electoral violence in Sokoto State?
2. What are the strategies employed by the political elites in the perpetration of electoral violence in Sokoto State?
3. To what extent does electoral violence affect Nigeria's efforts at democracy/democratization in Sokoto State?
4. What are the strategies for curbing electoral violence in Sokoto State?

*Aim and Objectives*

The major aim of this study is to examine democratization and the challenges of electoral violence in Nigeria with a specific focus on Sokoto State between 1999 and 2009. However, the objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the factors responsible for electoral violence in Sokoto State.
2. To examine the strategies employed by the political elites in the perpetration of electoral violence in Sokoto State.
3. To examine the implications of electoral violence for Nigeria's democratization process.
4. To suggest strategies for curbing electoral violence in Sokoto State.

*Research Assumptions*

The following constitute the major assumptions of this study:

1. That electoral violence in Sokoto State is largely a function of the inordinate ambitions of the political elites to acquire and maintain power for their personal gains.
2. That the political elites tend to employ both physical and structural dimensions of violence in the perpetration of electoral violence in the state.
3. That electoral violence is likely to hinder citizens from exercising their freedom of choice in democratic processes in the state.
4. That citizens' political education and the strengthening of the institutional capabilities of the Electoral Management Bodies would curb electoral violence in Sokoto State.

*Scope and Limitation of the Study*

The issue of democratization and electoral violence in Nigeria is too broad and cannot be fully covered by a study of this nature. It is against this backdrop that the decade of electoral violence in Sokoto State between 1999 and 2009 was selected as a case study. In this regard, the study examines the challenges of electoral violence in relation to democratization

process in Nigeria. Indeed both pre and post election violence were covered by the work. This is because both types of violence were found to significantly occur and affect the electoral processes in Sokoto state.

However, there is no research/study that has not suffered from one constraint or the other. This study is not an exception. Obtaining sufficient data (such as names of political elites involved in the violence, number of lives and properties lost, etc) that may be classified as highly confidential among government circle is cumbersome as most public office holders are unwilling to make such disclosures. In fact, a great deal of data hoarding takes place in government departments, all in the name of maintaining confidentiality. But efforts were made by the researcher to over-come these limitations so as for the study not to be jeopardized in any form. For instance obtaining such data through trusted insider informants were found to be helpful.

#### *Justification of the Study*

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the wind of political changes that swept through Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century have made many African states to attempt, even if feeble in some cases, to come to terms with the necessity of enthroning a project of democratization. In this respect, the decade between 1999 and 2009 in Nigeria has seen a seemingly higher upsurge in electoral violence/conflict in many parts of the Nigerian State.

Meanwhile, electoral violence in the society has become a worrisome phenomenon that has continued to rear its ugly head since Nigeria returned to civil rule in 1999. The violence becomes more pronounced before, during and after the announcement of any elections result. This has, therefore, pushed the government to continue to seek for policy alternative on how best to tackle electoral violence which most often degenerate into wide spread political violence.

Again, most of the scholarly works on violence and democratization in Nigeria have largely concentrated around the broad issues of political violence, perhaps owing to the rampant resurgence of ethnic and religious violence in the country which is made possible by the heterogeneous character of Nigeria and the tendency of its political elites to employ such cleavages for their selfish interests. Consequently, not much scholarly work has been done on the issue of electoral violence in Nigeria. The dearth of literature on this sub category of political violence has obscured citizens understanding of electoral violence and its implication for the country's democratization project. The paradox of electoral violence is that it is usually a brief, time- and event-bound period of violence, with mostly low levels of tension but with enormous bearing on a county's democratization process and institutional reform priorities and its leaders' legitimacy.

The research, therefore, provides an opportunity to widen our understanding of the phenomenon which has become a serious

threat to political stability and democratic sustenance in Nigeria.

On this note, it is hoped that a research of this nature that seeks to understand why electoral violence has persisted in Sokoto state is likely to aid our understanding of the complex issues associated with electoral violence and how best to tackle them. The research would also contribute to the growing literature in the field of electoral violence and democratization in Nigeria and Africa at large.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Broadly, two major approaches/methods to data collection and analysis exist in the social sciences. These are: the quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative research is mainly concerned with investigating things which we can observe and measure through numerical and statistical methods. Such observations and measurements can be made objectively and repeatedly. The qualitative research, on the other hand, is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena (Hancock, 2002). That is to say, the qualitative approach aims to help the researcher(s) to understand the world in which we live and why things are the way they are. Therefore, this study employed the qualitative approach in the collection and analysis of data.

#### *Research Approach and Design*

For this study, that is, Electoral Violence and Democratization in Nigeria, which centers on views, experiences and opinions of various stakeholders in the country's democratization process, the use of qualitative approach is considered more suitable. The approach captured the views, opinions and experiences of people involved in the broad issues of electoral violence and democratization in Nigeria, thereby enhancing better understanding of the problem from insider perspectives.

Meanwhile, the case study approach is employed in the choice of research design for this work. There is a specific focus on electoral violence in Sokoto State. This is because it is considered that an in-depth study or focus of this nature will give insight into the problems of democratization in Nigeria. Furthermore, this case study will help to provide a framework for a detail and comprehensive analysis of research at hand within a limited scale.

#### *Instruments of Data Collection*

##### *In-depth Interviews*

The researcher made use of in-depth interview. In-depth interview is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, programme or situation. In-depth interviews are useful when detailed information about a person's thoughts and behaviours are required or when we want to explore new issues.

Accordingly, in this study, the choice of the in-depth interview technique for data gathering is influenced by the

fact that in-depth interview provides much more detailed information than other data collection methods, such as survey. An open-ended format was used in order to give maximum latitude for expression to respondents. All respondents granted permission for me to digitally record interviews and they were later transcribed prior to analysis. Interviews were conducted in English language with the exception of five interviews with political thugs popularly known as Area boys. The interviews proceeded based on the judgment about which issues needed further elaboration, and which interviewees were deemed best suited to give this information. The interviews were of a semi-structured nature. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions that gave them space to tell their version of the story. Such open-ended questions were suitable for obtaining rich descriptions, analysis, and explanation (Hancock, 2002) that the study required.

The interviews were conducted with much flexibility, although there was a list of questions that served as an interviews guide. In other words, in the course of the interview, respondents were probed to elaborate on more issues when it was considered necessary. Before the start of any interview, interviewees were given a brief description of the general purpose and aim of the study. However, the exact purpose and aim of the study were left out, so as not to bias the respondents. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face while few were conducted via mobile phone. All interviews were conducted only with one person at a time to avoid confusion and allow for good flow of conversation, even though the group interview is quiet possible.

Thus, respondents interviewed were chosen from the following categories of stakeholders in Sokoto State;

- i. Politicians from the active political parties in the State;
- ii. Staff of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Sokoto State;
- iii. Ad-hoc Electoral Officers in Sokoto;
- iv. Security Personnel;
- v. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs); and
- vi. Area Boys

The various groups of actors required different condition of approaching and conversation. The date, day and time of the interviews were always adjusted to wishes of my interview partners without taking into consideration my availability. Having access to mobile phone number of the interviewed experts proved to be the most efficient method of organizing interviews. The diversity of interview partners made it possible to gain different perspectives on the same issues and allow for comparison. Cross checking of perspectives within and between different categories of respondents enhanced data reliability (Rubin and Rubin, 1995 cited in Yin, 2009).

### *Documentary Sources*

Documentary materials constituted sources of information for this study. These data are collected from diverse sources such as historical records, political records, government documents, the mass media, research centres, and private records, such as autobiographies, diaries and letters. Such data were obtained from INEC office; Aminu Kano Centre for Democratic Research and Training (AKCDRAT); Sokoto State Police Headquarters, and Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) UDUS. Also, both print and electronic journals from internet websites were utilized. Expert interviews with the various stakeholders of the democratization process conducted within the state supplement the information gathered from relevant organizations, research centres and secondary literatures. This is done to provide for trustworthiness and credibility of the work. Also the use of multiple sources and cross checking of information minimized the effect of biased sources.

### *Sample and Sampling Procedures*

The purposive sampling method is adopted as the sampling technique for this study. This is because it will help in the identification of appropriate respondents as well as adequate sampling of information sources (that is people, places, events). Therefore our respondents were selected purposively based on their position during the critical election time, experiences, and knowledge on the research subject, as well as availability and willingness to share information. Consequently our respondents were categorized into major and minor groups. The major group includes politicians from major/active Political Parties in the state, INEC Ad-hoc electoral officers, security personnel, and Area boys in the state. At least five (5) staff/members from the above listed categories totaling twenty (20) interviewees were selected and interviewed on the basis of their unit of specialization. As for the minor group we have respondents from two principal sources which are INEC office in Sokoto and some Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In this group, three (3) respondents each were selected for the interview.

### *Data Analysis*

Data collected from both the interviews and documentary sources were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis method. The data collected from the field through interview were first transcribed and later grouped into categories. This helped to establish the regularity of patterns and identification of themes that emerge from data. Descriptive analysis as a method of qualitative data analysis is also employed in analyzing the data from documentary sources. It enabled us have a critical insight into various documents like textbooks, journals, magazines, newspapers etc to see what themes emerged. This also helped us to identify relevant information that supports analysis of the issues being investigated. Also, corroboration of the methods used in data analysis assisted in meeting up with the demands of rigour, trustworthiness and reliability of the analysis.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for the purpose of this work covered a wide range of issues relating to political elites, democracy, democratization, elections and electoral violence in Nigeria. Prominent works such as those of Fischer, (2002) and other studies such as Høglund (2009), Sisk (2008), Umar (2001), Ndegwa (2001), Ake (1993; 2000), Bekoe (2012) and so on were reviewed. The scope of review covered such issues relating to democratization and electoral violence, theories of electoral violence, factors responsible in explaining electoral violence, the role of the political class in the occurrence of electoral violence and implications of electoral violence for democratic sustenance.

The literature review identified some gaps, particularly the biased nature of most works in explaining electoral violence from the stand point of institutional weaknesses, like electoral rules and electoral institutions. Again while the political elites may actually influence electoral violence, they may not have direct involvement with violence that is more or less spontaneous outburst in response to triggering events.

### IV. FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

One of the assumptions of this study is that electoral violence in Sokoto State is largely a function of the inordinate ambitions of the political elites to acquire and maintain power for their personal gains. Indeed, the governorship tussle that ensued in the state was clearly a fight for influence between personalities rather than on serious ideological or political party bases. As the study has shown, the state has domineering power over the society in every facet of life. The centralization of power in the hands of the governor seriously heightens political stakes. And the result is the unhealthy competition for power that has characterized politics in the state.

The study also found that the financial gains obtainable from the lucrative nature of political offices are a ready incentive for occurrence of electoral violence in the state. Remuneration for political offices, being exceedingly attractive, constitutes a major reason most politicians contest elections. So even if they are not voted in, they steal such mandates through acts of fraud and violence. Other reasons for the prevalence of electoral violence in the state as established by the study include the high level of poverty amongst the citizenry. Just like other states in the federation, Sokoto State has a high poverty rate with 86.4% in 2012. It is very clear that situations like this tend to make people, especially the unemployed youth, easily susceptible to diverse forms of negative mobilization at the slightest inducement. Likewise corruption has also been found to be a reason behind the escalation of electoral violence in the state. Public revenues are not only stolen, but are often used to pay for the services and weapons used for violence.

On the other hand, the study also found that the glaring ideological barrenness of most political parties in the state and

the attendant decadence in these parties which manifest in serious absence of internal party democracy and the heavy reliance on negative mobilization to win elections are at the bottom of most election violence incidences that occur in the state. Even, the electoral management bodies have failed to play their roles of being impartial umpires. The study has revealed how they have been easily manipulated to serve the interests of the incumbents to the disadvantage of the opposition parties.

Secondly, the study also assumed that the perpetrators of electoral violence tend to employ both the physical and structural dimensions of violence as strategies for the perpetration of electoral violence in Sokoto State. While the physical dimension of violence in the state has been found to include acts like assaults, arson, looting, hijacking of electoral materials and killings, the structural dimension of violence is a product of structural imbalance which includes coercion of citizens, abuse of incumbency, politicization of security, and biased/compromised electoral officials. The study found that electoral violence in the state is most often carried out by gangs commonly called Area Boys whose members are recruited, financed and sometimes armed by public officials, politicians and party officials or their representatives. Those recruited are paid, often very little. And sometimes cars, trucks, motorcycles, cash as well as arms were offered to political thugs for the sole purpose of carrying out violent abuses on behalf of their political sponsors. The use of incumbency to exclude the opposition from the mainstream by the politicians as well as the ineffective handling of electoral violence incidence by the security forces have been found to embolden the perpetrators of electoral violence.

Thirdly, the study also assumed that electoral violence is likely to discourage citizens from exercising their freedom of choice in democratic processes. As revealed in this study, the division between the political elites in the state and the attendant conflict and violent upheavals seriously impact upon the blossoming of democracy in Sokoto state. A major dimension being that the citizenry began to develop apathy towards elections and democracy itself. There is a gradual erosion of public confidence in the democratic project and consequent decline in political participation among both electorate and even the political contestants. In this respect, it is clear that as violence increases, citizens abandon public channels of participation and take refuge in their private spheres.

Thus, violence has a negative impact on electoral participation by increasing the level of perceived insecurity during the electoral process. It also increases the number of disenchanting and apathetic citizens thereby decreasing the turnout of citizens for election. Violence beyond direct effects such as hindering people from casting their votes and preventing candidates from participating in the election can have long term effects of causing disillusionment and frustration with politics. Consequently, many prefer to stay in the safety and comfort of their homes rather than be exposed to risk of

violence. This trend has hampered effective political competition and participation. Electoral violence has further discouraged people who have good intentions from coming into politics to deliver service to the people.

## V. CONCLUSION

A major conclusion of this study is that although several factors accounted for the occurrence and subsequent rise in electoral violence, the selfish interest of the political class is very vital in understanding the unending nature of this violence in Sokoto state. Most of these factors whether institutional or procedural cannot exist independent of the inordinate ambitions for power and crass materialism among the political elites. This is further linked with the high value placed on politics in the country with devastating effects for the democratic project.

The office of the executive governor of sokoto state wields extremely important power, influence and control over allocation of state resources and values in the society. Further, this position is a source of wealth for incumbents whether through the exceedingly lucrative nature of such political office holding or through abuse of office in the form of embezzlements or diversion of public funds. Therefore the lure of incredible financial reward and illicit financial exploits have turned the political climate almost an exclusion of politicians who would do anything including fomenting violence to win electoral competition and be sworn in as governors.

The socio-economic crises in the state manifested in poor employment opportunities as well as relative poverty among the youthful population has contributed to the pool of willful political thugs with no serious party affiliation who are ready to be used in carrying out election related violence in the state. State resources have often been used in paying the thugs. Politicians also purchase small arms and light weapons, motorcycles and cars for the political stalwarts to unleash terror before, during and after elections in the state.

The deep patrimonialism of political parties in Sokoto state bolstered widespread political exclusion as a strategy in electoral violence. The ruling parties have mostly utilized the security forces to gain undue advantage in electoral contest. The election management bodies have also sometimes collided with the incumbents in electoral fraud. These serve to increase the level of political impunity as well as aggravate political tensions in the state.

Thus, as suggested by the causal drivers framework of electoral violence, the stakes, incentives and expectations of the political elites with respect to the democratization context, politics of state capture, and socio-structural characteristics of Sokoto state as well as the disposition and behavior of the election management bodies highly informs the occurrence of electoral violence in Sokoto state.

The resultant conflict during the electoral cycle has been disastrous as seen in the high number of deaths, injuries and damages to public and private properties across the 23 local governments of Sokoto state between 1999 and 2011. This has increased the level of political apathy among the voting populace as well as decreased the level of participation in politics by people who might have been able to render selfless service to the state. Electoral violence has therefore discouraged citizens from exercising their freedom of choice in the democratic processes of the state.

From the study thus far, cases for further research are established. In the first place there is a need for more comparative analysis of electoral violence across state boundaries in Nigeria. This can be done to establish the patterns and reasons for electoral violence in different states of the federation. Some states like Kaduna, Plateau, Kano, Lagos, Rivers and Kogi have always been placed on spotlight as hotspot for electoral violence compared to others like Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto and Cross River states. A serious comparative study would reveal the peculiar characteristics and reasons for the persistent or lack of electoral violence in any of these states. On a related note, a comparison across national boundaries would also improve our understanding of electoral violence. For instance how and why factors such as poverty/unemployment aid the proliferation of electoral violence in some countries while in others the situation is different. For example, Niger Republic is a poor country compared to Nigeria yet the levels of electoral violence in that country is very insignificant compared to resource rich countries like Nigeria and Ghana or even Cote d' Ivoire in the West African sub regions.

Again, most of the policy interventions to curb electoral violence in Nigeria such as what obtains in the form of electoral reform had, if anything, been palliative even when implemented. This is because these interventions do not speak directly to the heart of the problem. For instance, it is not clear how electoral reform will alter the prevailing culture of impunity among the political elites-with little or no regard for the rule of law. Their failure is exemplified by recurrent electoral and other forms of political violence in the country. Therefore more research could focus on the political economy of electoral violence, including its democratic- pay offs over and above compliance with the electoral laws. This may help to unravel the historical, political and economic undercurrents of electoral violence as it affects democratic stability in Nigeria.

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