

THE IMPACT OF ELECTORAL CONFLICT ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: NIGERIA AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *Electoral conflict has destroyed every aspect of Nigeria's existence including social development and democratic stability. The resort to violence and conflict to pursue political goals has been a steady occurrence in Nigeria's political landscape since independence. Fraudulent practices and ethnic and religious tensions have continued to sabotage the will of the electorates and have far-reaching consequences, including loss of lives, destruction of properties and displacement of people. The election of Nigeria in the fourth republic has been plagued by electoral conflict and unfortunately, the youths have been at the forefront of this electoral conflict. This paper explores the impact of electoral conflict on Nigeria's key social indicators such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, and community cohesion. It examines the root causes of electoral violence, including political manipulation, weak democratic institutions and ethno-religious tensions while analyzing their ripple effects on social progress. This paper in adopting a doctrinal methodology data collection method and relying on relevant statutory provisions and case laws will highlight the significant impact electoral conflict has on Nigeria's socio-economic development including undermining infrastructural development, political stability, economic development, and increasing religious tension etc. This research enriches the broader discourse on the need for robust democratic practices in governance and social development, offering valuable insights for legal professionals, political leaders, lawmakers, law students and social commentators alike.*

Keywords: *Conflict, Election, Social Development, Politicians, Legal Practitioners.*

1. Introduction

The account of elections in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial period when the country was a British colony. The first election held in Nigeria was the 1951 general election, which was held under the Lyttleton Constitution (Chinwo, 2020). This election unveiled the beginning of a new era in Nigerian politics, as it was the first time that Nigerians were allowed to participate in the democratic process and elect indigenous leaders. The 1999

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general elections marked the beginning of the fourth republic in Nigerian politics, as it marked the end of military rule and the return to civilian democracy (Yagboyaju, 2003).

Since her embrace of civilian rule, Nigeria has held several general elections, including 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections. The conduct of elections in Nigeria has been marred by conflict and malpractices, undermining social development and democratic legitimacy. This is largely seen within the ambience of loss of democratic values and legitimacy, and potential social unrest hence this study focuses on electoral conflict and its impact on Nigerian's social development and extends to all electoral laws and regulations governing the conduct of elections in Nigeria. It examines the impact of electoral conflict on social development in Nigeria, focusing on the period between 1999 and 2023. By analyzing the historical context of Nigerian elections, this research aims to identify the root causes of electoral conflict and its effects on social development, ultimately providing recommendations for improving electoral integrity and promoting social cohesion. It also seeks to educate the electoral umpire and political gladiators on the areas of immediate concern to ensure credible and transparent subsequent elections that will impact positively on Nigeria's democratic practice.

1.2 Historical Overview of Nigeria's Electoral System and Conflict

Electoral politics and elections in Nigeria are often laced with fractious violence which often compromises the integrity of elections. The return to democracy in 1999 has multiplied rather than diminished the incidences of electoral violence in Nigeria (UNDP 2023). Conducting a free and fair Election seems like a delusion in Nigeria and there seems to be no hope for the electoral system of Nigeria. Political violence has become a stain on our democracy, and the political class has not relented in employing their thugs and loyalists to release mayhem during the election season in Nigeria.

Nigeria has always been ranked as one of the most violent Countries when it comes to elections and this speaks a lot about our values as a Nation. One recurring phenomenon in the unending saga of violence in the Nigerian democracy is electoral violence which began in the First Republic and continues till this present fourth Republic dispensation. Nigeria has witnessed about six elections, and all are characterized by violence before, during and after the election (UNDP 2023).

Nigeria's First Republic was plagued by conflicts, particularly during elections, due to the country's ethnically based federal regions (Nwalie, 2025). This led to an uneven distribution of power and resources, creating tensions among the Hausa-Fulani dominated Northern region, the Yoruba-dominated Western region, and the Igbo-dominated Eastern region. The political landscape was further complicated by ethnically based parties like the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Action Group (AG), and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), which exacerbated regional and ethnic tensions.

Several key conflicts marked the First Republic: The Census Crisis (1962-1964): Disputes over census results sparked allegations of manipulation and regional tensions; the General Strike (June 1-13, 1964): A nationwide strike protested the government's handling of the census crisis and other issues, the General Election (December 1964): Violence, intimidation, and allegations of rigging marred the election, the Western Regional Election

(October 1965): Controversy and violence surrounding this election contributed to the collapse of the First Republic (Haruna, Md Nor, Ismail, Murni, 2023).

There was also remarkable electoral conflict during elections in the second republic ranging from violent intimidation, and allegations of widespread rigging. These conflicts ultimately led to a military coup which overthrew the government, marking the beginning of military rule in Nigeria (Moh'd, 2025).

There was widespread violence following allegations of fraud regarding the 1999 election that ushered in the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo (Adebajo, 2022). It is estimated that more than 80 people died and similarly at least more than 100 people were killed during incidents of violence triggered by federal and state elections in 2003 and over 300 people lost their lives in connection to electoral violence four years later with pre-election violence alone claiming more than 70 lives (Adebajo 2022). Again in 2011, post-election violence led to the death of at least 800 people over three days of rioting in 12 states across northern Nigeria the worst case so far in the political history of Nigeria. The violence began with widespread protests by supporters of Muhammed Buhari following the reelection of President Goodluck Jonathan who is a Christian from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Orji and Uzodi, 2012).

Even the 1993 presidential election widely adjudged to be the freest in Nigeria and with no serious episodes of violence did not have a clean record as its annulment by Ibrahim Babangida-led military administration triggered public outcry and a wave of protest. Campaign for Democracy headed by then Beko Ransome Kuti estimated that over 100 peaceful demonstrators and passersby were gunned down by security agents who were supposedly trying to contain the violent offshoot of the July protest.

Ahead of the 2023 elections, candidates and leaders of 18 political parties agreed in September 2022 to sign a peace accord committing to a peaceful campaign but this did not stop the violence witnessed before, during and after the election (Election Watch, 2023). The 2023 election stands out as one of the most controversial in Nigerian political history considering the age-long track record of maladministration the outcome of which was expected (Ojiako, Umeasiegbu, Lawrence, and Okoye, 2023). The promises of Muhammed Buhari's administration to ensure free and credible elections turned out to be stage-managed as they were unable to correct the ills associated with the system. Attacks against voters, party faithful and INEC staff were prevalent during the 2023 election with Lagos State witnessing the worst incident as Mc Oluomo, a well-known thug in Lagos State and APC supporters were seen stopping people from voting and intimidating them just because they are Igbos or look like Igbos (Ayeni and Ayantoye, 2023).

Political violence in Nigeria during elections will never end because the politicians have mastered the act of using ethnicity and religion to divide the people.

1.3 Root Causes of Electoral Conflict in Nigeria

The orderly transfer of power from one government to another in accordance with democratic norms has been problematic in the Nigerian polity and electoral violence has become a clog in the wheel of democratic progress as violence always manifests during pre-election, the election and post-election period. Factors responsible for electoral conflict in Nigeria include but are not limited to the following.

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Electoral violence in Nigeria is primarily due to the perception of politics and political office as investment and as an avenue for the acquisition of extraordinary wealth through corruption which is otherwise not possible through any form of legitimate vocation and enterprise and because of these Nigerian politicians turn electioneering and elections into warfare in which violence, ethnic and other forms of primordial sentiments and prejudices are employed (Alemika, 2011).

Also, politics generally in Nigeria has been conducted with a certain amount of bitterness and it appears that a person belonging to a party becomes an enemy to the rival political party which is the opposition party. The attractiveness of public office engenders an investment mentality. Political investors and other major financiers of the political process for individuals seeking political office expend huge sums of money on the electoral process with expected returns therefore no amount is too much to use in instigating electoral violence even expending the lives of opponents and valueless youth (Anifowose, 1982).

Moreover, ineffective law enforcement encourages electoral conflict in Nigeria. None enforcement of law and non-adherence to same in the electoral process promotes violence during elections due to lack of political will by the political class. Political actors, players, party supporters and political thugs violate the laws that governs the rule of politicking with impunity due to the inability of the government and other law enforcement bodies to compel obedience and it is worthy to note that when the administrators of the political process are unwillingly to enforce the rules, a lot of opportunities are created for violence and if the law does not prevail then it is tantamount to the absence of rules governing the conduct of the elections (Olayiwola, 2014). The weak legal framework in Nigeria forms the fulcrum upon which the culture of violence is built and sustained resulting in violence, arson, and incessant killing. When the rule of law is weak, the judicial system becomes ineffective and there are ineffective penalties that make the probability of punishment of offenders low thus creating a fragile and corrupt system (Aiyede, 2007).

Furthermore, poverty is another factor that hastens the occurrence of electoral violence in Nigeria. The scourge of poverty in Nigeria is an incontrovertible fact that results in hunger, ignorance, malnutrition, disease, unemployment as well general human hopelessness. The massive poverty engulfs Nigerians and hence is a huge asset to Nigerian politicians. The alarming rate of unemployment gives the youth away as willing tools for the perpetration of violence with little financial inducement. The high spate of deprivation and human hopelessness of the Nigerian youth force them to take readily available job opportunities which perpetrate election violence and the endemic poverty situation easily plays the youths into the hands of the unscrupulous politicians who manipulate them by dangling irresistible baits for the youths to undertake electoral violence and more than often than not political violence is paid for and been used as a tool by prominent Nigerians to bolster their political and financial positions (Danjibo, and Oladeji, 2007). Rigging is also a predisposing factor that easily makes the entire process violent, and experiences of past elections reveal that subverting the electoral process through massive, organized fraud does engender violent upheaval, before, during and after an election. The use of political thugs by politicians to manoeuvre the electoral process in perceived unflavoured areas does cause violence if resisted by the opposition or the citizenry and when an unpopular candidate is

declared the winner of the election, violence always greets such announcement (Awojobi, 2022).

The media indulgence in a campaign of clumsy, mudslinging and defamation or slanderous attack on other political actors cannot be overlooked as well. The media's spread of sensational political and motivated opinions engenders violence by succumbing to the influence of selfish politicians to use their outfits as a propaganda launch pad (Awojobi, 2022). There is also the godfatherism father. The politics of godfatherism have been very popular in Nigeria since her independence. Politicians whom the constitution has ended their legitimate administration constitutes themselves a legion of kingmakers and deciders of who must be where politically (Agidi, 2022). These chosen political leaders become stooges in the hands of the past leaders as they reward them as agreed from the beginning. The politics of godfatherism make mediocrity rather than meritocracy become the parameters of recruiting leaders. Political thugs are recruited as agents by the leaders and their godfathers to carry out the bidding resulting in electoral violence. The godfathers have become a force to reckon with since the return of democracy in 1999 and they are the ones who finance, recruit and empower the political thugs who engage in electoral violence to satisfy the wishes of their sponsors (Aliyu, 2018).

2. Legal Framework Governing Elections in Nigeria

The major law that governs the electoral processes in Nigeria is the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 Constitution. Sections 65, 106 131, and 177 thereof provide for the qualifications for candidate to be elected to various political offices in Nigeria. Qualification is a condition precedent for participating in any election as a candidate (Ikenna, 2024). The right to aspire to an elective office and participate in any election in Nigeria as a candidate is a right that is attached to citizenship. Consequently, sections 25, 26 and 27 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 provides that citizenship status may be acquired either by birth, registration or naturalization. Thus, any citizen of Nigeria, regardless of how his citizenship is acquired is qualified to run for election as a member of the National Assembly and the House of Assembly of a State. Only persons who are citizens by birth are qualified for election to the Offices of the President and Vice-President; Governor and Deputy-Governor of a State respectively.

Again, the Constitution prescribes different age limit for various offices to be contested in any general elections in Nigeria. Only candidates who attain the requisite age at the time of the election are qualified to participate in such elections. There are different age prescriptions for different elective offices under the Constitution. They are:

- For the Office of the President and Vice-President, the prescribed age is forty (40) years.
- For the Office of the President and Vice-President, the prescribed age is forty (40) years.
- For the Office of the Governor and Deputy-Governor, the prescribed age is thirty-five (35) years, and this also applies to election to the Senate.
- For membership of the House of Representatives and the State House of Assembly, the minimum age is thirty (30) years. However, Not Too Young to Run Act reduced the constitutional age.

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- The Act reduced the age of running for elective positions in the House of Assembly and House of Representatives from 30 to 25 years old, the Senate and Governorship from 35 to 30 years old, and President from 40 to 35 years old. Also, any person seeking to contest election in Nigeria, regardless of the elective office in issue must have a minimum educational attainment of, up to, at least, school certificate level or its equivalent.

The first category under the meaning ascribed to “School Certificate or its equivalent” is a Secondary School Certificate or its equivalent or Grade II Teacher’s Certificate, the City and Guilds Certificate. The second broad category of educational qualification stated in section 318 of the Constitution is “education up to Secondary School Certificate or its equivalent” (Ikenna, 2025). This category is different from the first because what is relevant under this category is only educational attainment up to Secondary School Certificate or its equivalent, and not, the certificate itself. What the Constitution prescribes is that such a candidate shall be qualified if he has been educated up to at least School Certificate level. Endorsing the provision, the Court of Appeal in (*Imam & Ors v Sheriff & Ors* (2005) held that what is necessary to meet the requirement is not evidence that the person passed the examination but evidence that the person was educated up to, at least, School Certificate level or its equivalent. In addition, no one is eligible to contest an election without first being a member of a political party; and sponsored by the same political party for the election. It is a mandatory constitutional requirement that only members of a political party are qualified to contest elections as was held in (*Onejeme v Azodo & Ors* 2005)

The Electoral Act, 2022 mandates the Commission to issue notice of election. In the words of the provisions, the Commission shall, not later than 360 days before the day appointed for holding of an election under this Act, publish a notice in each State of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory- Stating the date of the election; and appointing the place at which nomination papers are to be delivered. The notice shall be published in each constituency in respect of which an election is to be held.

By the virtue of section 34(3) (a) of the Act, INEC is required to suspend elections for not more than 21 days in cases where a nominated candidate dies after commencement of an election but before the announcement of result and declaration of winner. The Act equally empowers INEC to review within 7 days declaration of election result and return where it determines it was not made voluntarily or contrary to the provisions of the law, regulations and guidelines, and manual for the election.

Furthermore, the Commission is mandated by the Act to maintain a National Electronic Register of Election Results which shall be a distinct database or repository of polling unit by polling unit result, including collated election results, of each election conducted by the Commission in the Federation, and the Register of Election Results shall be kept in electronic format by the Commission at its national headquarters, and which should be made available to any member of the public upon request and payment of prescribed fees

Unlike the Electoral Act, 2010, this Act expressly provides that to vote, the presiding officer shall use a smart card reader or any other technological device that may be prescribed by the Commission, for the accreditation of voters, to verify, confirm or authenticate the particulars of the intending voter in the manner prescribed by the Commission. In addition,

the Act clothes INEC with the discretion to prescribe method of transferring results including total number of accredited voters and results. Again, section 51 of the Act provides that the total number of accredited voters will become a factor in determining over-voting at election tribunals. Thus, where the number of votes cast at an election in any polling unit exceeds the number of accredited voters in that polling unit, the presiding officer shall cancel the result of the election in that polling unit.

Augmenting the constitutional provisions, section 84(12) provides that anyone holding a political office must vacate the position before he or she can be eligible to participate in a primary election, convention or congress of political parties either as a candidate or as a delegate. The authors argue that the import of this section is that political appointees are barred from participating actively during the convention of their respective political parties for the purpose of nominating candidates for elective positions nor be voted for, save that such appointee resigns prior to the convention or congress (Nwakoby, and Ihediuche, 2022)

INEC in exercising the powers conferred on it by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) and the Electoral Act 2022, issues guidelines for the conduct of elections into any elective office in Nigeria. The 2022 Regulations and Guidelines supersede all other regulations on the conduct of elections that have been issued by the Commission, and it shall remain in force until replaced by a new regulation or its amendment. In (*Air Commodore Yushau v INEC*, 2019) the court was emphatic that “the manual for the conduct of elections and their guidelines are meant to be obeyed.”

In the course of collation of results, an election result shall only be collated if the Collation Officer ascertains that the number of accredited voters agrees with the number recorded in the BVAS and votes scored by political parties on the result sheet is correct and agrees with the result electronically transmitted or transferred directly from the PU as prescribed in these Regulations and Guidelines.

However, where an election is postponed as a result of serious breach of the peace or natural disasters or other emergencies in line with section 24 of the Electoral Act, 2022, and it is ascertained that the total number of voters who collected their PVCs in the POs affected by the postponement is less than the margin by which the leading candidate is ahead of the second candidate in the election, indicating that the result of the election will not be affected by the outcome of polls in the PUs affected by the postponement, clause 59 provides that the Returning Officer shall make a return for the election in the constituency. Notwithstanding the INEC Regulations and Guidelines, in (*Obi & Anor v INEC & Ors*, 2023), *the* court held that by law, the INEC Regulations and Guidelines for the conduct of elections, 2022 is subordinate to the Electoral Act; where a provision of the Guidelines conflicts with the Act, the Act prevails. To make relevant the 2020 Police Act, section 126(3) creates offences on election day. Highlighting the gravitas of the acts, subsection (3) clearly provides that a person who contravenes any of the provisions of this section commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of ₦100, 000 or imprisonment for a term of six months for every such offence. These offences make room for the relevance of the Police Act, 2020 in electoral processes. Section 4 (a) to (e) of the said Police Act 2020 provides as the primary functions of the Police Force in the conduct of election as follows:

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Prevent and detect crimes and protect the rights and freedom of every person in Nigeria as provides in the Constitution, the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights and any other law, maintain public safety, law and order; protect the lives and property of all persons in Nigeria; enforce all laws and regulations without any prejudice to the enabling Acts of other security agencies; and discharge such duties within and outside Nigeria as may be required of it under this Act of any other law. Consequently, the Act empowers the Police to arrest, investigate and try a suspect or defendant alleged or charged with committing an offence, in this case, electoral offences, established by an Act of the National Assembly or under any other law. Police Act 2020 in its pro-activeness, the Act clothes the Police with the discretionary power to intervene for the purpose of preventing the commission of an offence.

2.2 Impact of Electoral Conflict on Social Development/Case Studies

Electoral violence has severe consequences on a country's development, as seen in Nigeria. The impacts of electoral conflict on social development include are multifaceted. Electoral violence leads to unstable security, disrupting public order, increasing internally displaced persons and refugees, and militarizing society. For instance, the 2007 elections in Nigeria saw a complete breakdown of law and order. This instability also leads to loss of lives, properties, and exposure to infectious diseases (Siibaway, Majialuwe, and Titigah, 2024). Electoral violence also breeds loss of lives and properties as was the case during the 2008 political violence in Jos Nigeria where over 500 people were killed, thousands displaced and properties worth billions of naira burnt down, looted and destroyed (Ugiagbe, 2010). In addition to the insecurity, there are attendant costs like increased security votes, and the resources spent on repairs of damaged infrastructure and resources could have been spent on human and social development and this adversely affects the social and economic well-being of the Country (Ugiagbe 2010).

Furthermore, human rights violations accompany electoral violence, with security agents harassing, abusing, and murdering citizens (Thompson Bobby Ugiagbe 2010). The 2023 presidential election saw violations of fundamental human rights, including threats and killings. This pervasive violence demoralizes the electorate, leading to disfranchisement and deprivation of citizens' rights. Elections are a significant financial burden, with costs associated with management, competition, and monitoring (Alihodzic, 2012). Electoral violence squanders resources, destroys communities, and has negative economic consequences. Many Nigerians lose jobs due to electoral violence, affecting the confidence of investors and relief organizations who provide aid to the refugees. They also face logistics and security challenges due to electoral violence and in the long run the crisis also affects the confidence of investors. Also, this it leads to lack of confidence in the electoral process and election management bodies contributes to voter apathy (Mataka and Nkandu, 2020). Nigerians have lost faith in INEC and politicians, leading to decreased participation in elections. Registration requirements also discourage voters, adding to the stress of everyday life. Nigerians have also lost confidence in the politicians who fail to work for the masses once they are elected hence the citizens will prefer to stay at home than stress themselves coming out to vote.

3. Legal Responses and Reforms

Effective electoral conflict resolution requires a multifaceted approach, incorporating existing legal mechanisms, recommendations for legal responses, and legal reforms. Existing Legal Mechanisms for Conflict Resolution. Electoral Laws and Regulations: Strengthening electoral laws is crucial in preventing and resolving electoral conflicts. This can be achieved by clarifying ambiguities, addressing loopholes, and ensuring that laws are up-to-date and relevant. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC): Enhancing the capacity of INEC is vital in ensuring the integrity of the electoral process. This can be achieved through training, capacity building, and providing necessary resources.

Judicial Mechanisms: Establishing effective judicial mechanisms for resolving electoral disputes is essential. This can be achieved through the establishment of specialized electoral courts or tribunals (Adefemi, and Oyekunle, 2018).

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The judiciary plays a vital role in ensuring the integrity of the electoral process, particularly in resolving conflicts that arise from elections. For the judiciary to effectively discharge this responsibility, its independence is paramount. This independence is guaranteed by the Nigerian Constitution, which provides that the judiciary should be free from external pressures and influences. However, the reality is that the judiciary's independence is often compromised by external interference, particularly from the executive and legislative arms of government. This interference can take many forms, including the manipulation of the appointment and removal processes of judges, as well as the non-compliance with court orders. Despite these challenges, it is essential that the judiciary asserts its independence and plays its role in resolving electoral conflicts. The laws governing electoral processes in Nigeria are sufficient, but the problem lies in their enforcement. The judiciary must ensure that the laws are applied impartially and that those who violate them are held accountable. By doing so, the judiciary can restore hope in the electoral process and promote democratic governance in Nigeria. As the third arm of government, the judiciary has a critical role to play in ensuring that the rule of law is upheld and that the rights of citizens are protected.

Based on the findings above, the following recommendations are hereby made: Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Mechanisms: Promoting ADR mechanisms, such as mediation and arbitration, can provide a speedy and cost-effective means of resolving electoral disputes. Also, there should be creation of an Electoral Offences Commission: Establishing an Electoral Offences Commission can help to investigate and prosecute electoral offences, thereby deterring future occurrences.

There is need for the government to ensure rigorous Continuous Voter Education and Awareness: Educating voters on their rights and responsibilities can help to prevent electoral conflicts and promote peaceful elections. Moreover, there is need for reorientation: Implement a nationwide reorientation program to promote a culture of peace, tolerance, and democratic values among citizens, particularly youths. This reorientation program can include Civic education and voter awareness programs, Peace building and conflict resolution training, promoting interfaith and interethnic dialogue, Encouraging youth participation in democratic processes.

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