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## **Electoral Violence in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: The 2011 Elections as an Example**

### **Abstract**

This study addresses the phenomenon of violence associated with electoral processes in Nigeria, aiming to explore the roots of this issue and its practical manifestations. It begins with an analysis of the theoretical concepts related to political violence in electoral contexts, identifying its characteristics and different forms. The study then examines the historical development of this phenomenon in Nigeria's modern experience, with a focus on the period following the return to democracy in 1999, particularly the 2011 elections. This is done by investigating the patterns of violence that emerged during this period and the mechanisms of its spread. Finally, the study reviews the consequences of this violence on national stability and the future of democracy in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *electoral violence, Federal Republic of Nigeria, democratic transition, national stability*

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## **Nigeriyanın Dördüncü Respublikasında seçki zorakılığı: 2011-ci il seçkiləri nümunə kimi**

### **Xülasə**

Bu araşdırma Nigeriyadakı seçki prosesləri ilə əlaqəli zorakılıq fenomeninə toxunaraq, bu məsələnin köklərini və onun praktiki təzahürlərini araşdırmaq məqsədi daşıyır. O, seçki kontekstində siyasi zorakılıqla bağlı nəzəri konsepsiyaların təhlili, onun xüsusiyyətlərinin və müxtəlif formalarının müəyyən edilməsi ilə başlayır. Tədqiqat daha sonra 1999-cu ildə demokratiyaya qayıdışından sonrakı dövrə, xüsusilə də 2011-ci il seçkilərinə diqqət yetirməklə Nigeriyanın müasir təcrübəsində bu fenomenin tarixi inkişafını araşdırır. Bu, bu dövrdə ortaya çıxan zorakılıq nümunələrinin və onun yayılma mexanizmlərinin araşdırılması ilə həyata keçirilir. Nəhayət, tədqiqat bu zorakılığın Nigeriyada milli sabitliyə və demokratiyanın gələcəyinə nəticələrini nəzərdən keçirir.

**Açar sözlər:** *seçki zorakılığı, Nigeriya Federal Respublikası, demokratik keçid, milli sabitlik*

### **Introduction**

In the context of breaking away from party and military dictatorships, African countries plunged into competitive electoral experiences in an attempt to overcome the legacy of indifference towards the fate of democracy on the continent. The last few decades have witnessed an apparent shift toward pluralistic systems, with many countries allowing for periodic elections. However, in reality, these elections have turned into mere formalities lacking democratic substance. Instead of being a tool for the peaceful transfer of power, these elections have become instruments to maintain the democratic façade, while power remains, in reality, concentrated in the hands of ruling or military elites. This raises profound questions about the seriousness of democratic transition in Africa, especially given the increasing signs of electoral fraud and manipulation. Despite the democratic changes observed in

the African political scene since the end of the Cold War, these transitions have not always been smooth or stable. Many countries that theoretically transitioned from one-party systems or military rule to multi-party systems faced numerous obstacles that hindered the consolidation of democracy. This was due to weak institutional structures, rampant corruption, and the dominance of old elites over the political scene under a new democratic guise. Moreover, external factors, such as the support of international powers for authoritarian regimes under various pretexts, contributed to hindering true democratic transformation.

One of the most prominent challenges facing emerging democracies in Africa is the lack of genuine legitimacy in their elections. Elections are often held under international pressure or to polish the image of the ruling regime, without any genuine intention of transferring power in the event of a loss. This makes them mere "electoral spectacles" aimed at giving false legitimacy to the rulers, while decision-making mechanisms remain under the control of the ruling elites. Additionally, the weakness and division of political parties, coupled with the absence of clear political programs, prevent the emergence of an opposition capable of effectively competing with the ruling system.

Electoral violence remains one of the most dangerous factors hindering democratic transition in Africa. In many countries, elections have become synonymous with acts of violence and ethnic or religious conflicts, where armed gangs and inflammatory rhetoric are used to intimidate voters or falsify results. This weakens citizens' trust in the democratic process and also leads to the fragmentation of social cohesion and the outbreak of long-term conflicts.

Nigeria stands out in this context as an interesting case. Despite being the largest democracy in Africa in terms of population, it has experienced repeated waves of electoral violence, particularly during the 2011 presidential elections. Although these elections were part of the democratic process that began after the end of military rule in 1999, they were marked by bloody incidents that sparked widespread debate about their integrity and stability. This has led us to pose the following question: What are the root causes behind the continued electoral violence in Nigeria despite successive democratic experiences?

## **Research**

### **1- Conceptual Foundation of Electoral Violence**

#### **1-1 Definition of Electoral Violence:**

Electoral violence is sometimes referred to as "electoral conflict." It is a subcategory of political violence and also a subcategory of electoral fraud. Electoral violence can be understood as any event in which the use of coercive force coincides with the electoral process (Osisioma, 2007, p. 159).

The United Nations Development Programme defines electoral conflict as: "Acts or threats of coercion, or physical harm committed to influence the electoral process, which occur within the context of electoral competition" (Adesola & John, 2014, p. 141). According to "Strauss and Taylor," electoral violence can be understood as physical violence and coercive intimidation directly linked to an upcoming electoral contest or a declared electoral outcome (Adesola & John, 2014, p. 141).

"Fischer" defines electoral violence as "any random or organized act aimed at determining, delaying, or influencing the electoral process in one way or another through threats, verbal intimidation, hate speech, misinformation, physical assault, coercive protection, extortion, property destruction, or assassination" (Osisioma, 2007, p. 159). "Sysk" provides the most detailed definition of what he calls "election-related violence," describing it as acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm committed to influence the electoral process, or that arise within the context of electoral competition when carried out, to affect the electoral process. Violence can be used to influence the election process, such as efforts to delay or disrupt polling and affect the results (Olayiwola, 2014).

#### **1-2 Disrupting the polling and influencing the results.**

There are two main components in all these definitions: the temporal relationship between violence and elections, and the causal link between the two. Electoral violence is traditionally understood as violence occurring during the election cycle, including the pre-election, election, and post-election periods. The causal relationship is often more specific, as it is limited to what is directly or indirectly related to the electoral process, rather than violence that occurs during the electoral process but has no direct impact on the elections. However, most forms of collective violence in society are somehow linked to the electoral process, given the significant political, social, and

economic implications of electoral outcomes. Most acts of collective violence that occur during the election campaign and on election day are politically motivated.

Violence is used in many less democratic countries as a coercive tool to punish external groups and reward clients. Violence always plays a role in the political institutions of these countries. Ethnic groups may rally around certain candidates, creating conditions favorable for the outbreak of ethnic conflict during election periods. Politicians, leaders, or candidates may attempt to incite conflict between different ethnic or religious groups to support their base during elections. Politicians may exploit ethnic and religious divisions during elections to mobilize support, or they may promise certain ethnic groups favorable redistribution policies, including the redistribution of pastoral lands, which can influence these actors to participate in the elections and conflict with other ethnic groups to gain a larger share of resources (Omotola, 2020).

Electoral violence is the coercive force directed at electoral actors or objects that occurs within the context of electoral competition. This definition can be justified on the basis that all political violence that occurs during the election period can be linked to the electoral process, either directly or indirectly.

### **1-3 Types of Electoral Violence:**

There are many different ways in which coercive force can intervene in the electoral process, which suggests the need to break down electoral violence into its constituent parts. This phenomenon can be classified as:

- The point in the electoral process or period when violence occurs.
- The involved actors (perpetrators and victims).
- The forms that violence takes (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017, pp. 220-221).

We can distinguish between violence that occurs before, during, and after elections, violence committed by the state, international and non-governmental actors, and violence that causes actual physical harm, or is instead used for coercion, restriction, or to influence electoral processes. For example, politicians may hire militias to stand outside polling stations in opposition-friendly areas to reduce voter turnout. Although this behavior is designed to intimidate voters, it is not entirely different from militias engaging in organized violence and physical assaults on voters at polling stations (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017, p. 221).

Each incident of electoral violence is understood as either: a perpetrator, a victim, or an act with varying degrees of severity. Based on this, electoral violence is classified into two main categories: threats, including threats, incitement, and coercion that do not amount to actual physical harm, and attacks, including violence in the form of assaults and violent physical confrontations (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017, p. 221).

This distinction is precise enough to capture different types of electoral violence, but not so detailed that it imposes insurmountable obstacles. According to studies on political violence, we classify the actors into three types: state actors (including political parties/politicians as well as official state institutions such as the police and military), non-state actors (including actors in opposition parties, ethnic and religious groups, and ordinary citizens), and international actors (including international and transnational governmental organizations) (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017, pp. 221-222).

**1-4 Elections and Violence in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria:** The emergence of the Fourth Republic gave Nigerians great hope and confidence in the belief that democracy had finally returned to the country. This confidence was further strengthened by the smooth conduct of the 1999 general elections. The subsequent characterization of the 1998/1999 elections can be attributed to several factors, including the general feeling or moral consensus among Nigerians not to do anything that could provide the military institution with an excuse not to vacate the political stage, as well as the fact that the presidential candidates were not only from the same geopolitical region—the South West—but also from the same ethnic group—the Yoruba (Adesola & John, 2014, pp. 143-144).

Despite the usual allegations and counter-allegations of fraud, none of them were serious enough to threaten or disrupt the series of elections that took place between December 1998 and February 1999 (Adesola & John, 2014, p. 144).

The 2003 general elections also witnessed a great deal of violence. Three people were killed in the local government area of Itchi during a clash between competing political parties in Okihi on

April 12, 2003. In Bayelsa State, Dr. George Fenti, the brother of the ruling People's Democratic Party candidate, was killed. While the United Nigerian People's Party was holding an outdoor meeting, a group opened fire on them. Additionally, six people were killed in Cross River State during the National Assembly elections on April 12. In Bayelsa, opponents of the People's Democratic Party set fire to the state government building and twelve vehicles. Violence marred the April 12 elections, with five people killed in Bayelsa during violent clashes between competing political parties in the state. Also, in Bayelsa, armed youth from the Ijaw ethnic group shot and killed four police officers while they were returning from official election duties on May 4, 2003. After the 2003 elections in Nigeria, specifically on July 10, 2003, Governor Chris Ngige was kidnapped from the Government House in Awka. In Anambra State, a team of police officers stormed the governor's office and abducted him, claiming he had resigned from his position as the state governor (Nkwachukwu & Nkuru, 2012, pp. 18-19).

In the 2007 elections, electoral violence was a major issue of concern throughout the electoral process. While peaceful campaign activities were observed in some states, incidents of violence increased as the elections approached. Reliable reports, including those from the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDSA) and international and local media, indicate that at least 200 people, including police officers, were killed in election-related violence. This figure is higher than what was reported for the 2003 elections and is unacceptable in terms of the fundamental right to life and the democratic process. Despite the welcome and repeated messages from security agencies demonstrating a policy of zero tolerance for electoral violence, it seems that the security agencies, the Independent National Electoral Commission, and political parties have not taken decisive steps to address the situation, electoral violence, and the security challenges in Nigeria (Osisioma, 2007, p. 166).

## **2-Manifestations of Electoral Violence in the 2011 Elections**

The shocking paradox of the 2011 general elections in Nigeria was that Human Rights Watch described them as among the most credible in Nigeria's history, yet they were also among the bloodiest. Generally, all elections in Nigeria since independence, especially those conducted by civilian governments, have been marred by widespread electoral violations, including electoral violence (Bamgbose & Adele, 2012, p. 212).

Nigerian elections have generally been flawed, with each successive election being worse than the previous one, such that the only elections in Nigeria with minimal manipulation and other malpractice were those held by the colonial authorities. The famous "June 12" 1993 presidential election is considered the most credible Nigerian election post-independence, in which Moshood Abiola was supposed to win, but the election was later annulled following a military coup by Ibrahim Babangida (Bamgbose & Adele, 2012, p. 212).

The 2011 general elections were widely recognized as a new beginning in Nigeria's electoral history. The 2011 presidential election reflected the long-standing divide between the Muslim-majority north and the Christian-majority south. President Goodluck Jonathan won the election with a majority of the votes (around 59%) and also met the constitutional requirements by securing 25% in at least one-third of the states, which he achieved in 31 states of the federation. His main opponent, Muhammadu Buhari, received only about 32% of the total votes and garnered 25% of the votes in only 16 states, most of which were in the north. However, Buhari won the majority of votes in the northern states of Nigeria (Bamgbose & Adele, 2012).

Accordingly, ethnic and religious affiliations played significant roles in the voting patterns of the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria. Thus, when the results of the 2011 presidential election were announced on April 17, supporters of Muhammadu Buhari spontaneously flooded the streets of 12 northern states in violent protests that lasted for three days. There were severe riots in northern states such as Kano, Kaduna, Bauchi, Adamawa, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Katsina, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara. Despite efforts by the police and military to suppress and control the riots, Human Rights Watch statistics estimated that over 800 people were killed in the unrest, and more than 65,500 people were displaced (Bamgbose & Adele, 2012, pp. 212-213).

The Independent National Electoral Commission for conducting the 2011 elections, and the Muslims and traditional rulers who are believed to have supported Jonathan (Matthew & Usman, 2015, pp. 9-10).

## Conclusion

Great efforts have been made to strengthen democracy in Nigeria, yet since the return to civilian rule in 1999, each electoral cycle has been marked by crises and electoral violence that continue to threaten the country's democratic experiment. In the Fourth Republic, electoral violence took on a more dangerous dimension, becoming closely tied to politicians who transformed the democratic process from a peaceful contest of ideas into a life-or-death struggle. As a result, elections, which should safeguard and consolidate stability, have instead become a major source of insecurity, as starkly illustrated by the events surrounding the 2011 elections. To address this deeply rooted problem, Nigeria must take urgent steps, including amending the constitution and electoral laws, and establishing a truly independent and neutral National Electoral Commission that functions outside presidential influence to restore trust among stakeholders. Timely preparation and transparency in the commission's operations are also essential. Moreover, the political elite must abandon the winner-takes-all mentality by fostering political education among both voters and candidates to support a culture of democratic tolerance. Civil society organizations should intensify efforts to raise public awareness about the dangers of electoral crises and their threat to democratic stability. Finally, the government must address the socioeconomic roots of violence by creating job opportunities and reducing poverty, which often fuels political unrest.

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