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POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: EXAMINATION OF THE 2015 AND 2019 ELECTIONS IN BAYELSA STATE

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Abstract

Political parties have become essential components of the electoral process and democracy in particular. This position is informed by the role it plays in driving the democratic system through sustained party ideology. Within the context of Nigeria democracy, political parties have become instrument or vehicle that drives violence in an attempt to secure political power and subsequently use it for the projection of personal interest. It is within this context that this work examines political parties and electoral violence in Nigeria with a particular interest to the 2015 and 2019 elections in Bayelsa State. We adopted the descriptive research design as a roadmap or blue print in carrying out this work. This method enhanced in describing the views of stakeholders such as electorates, political party gladiators and observers. The relative deprivation theory, an offshoot of frustration – aggression theory serves as our theoretical model of explanation. In its findings, the study shows that electoral violence in the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Bayelsa State were mainly driven by the struggle for political power by ethnic groups and political elites alike. Other factors identified are internal party wrangling, as well as hijacking and kidnapping of election materials and officials. As part of its recommendations, the study contends that political parties in Nigeria should institutionalize internal democracy in their affairs. This if upheld, will breed unity of purpose. We equally recommend that government should enact laws that discourage the application of ethnic jingoism and primordial interest by political party gladiators in their quest for political power.

Keywords: political parties, election, electoral violence, democracy, political gladiators.

Introduction

Political parties and elections have been long recognized as essential components of modern day representative democracy. A wide spread believe is held that, political parties and elections are closely linked to the growth and development of a democratic political order. It is pretty difficult to imagine how the administration of modern states could be accomplished without meaningful political parties and election that will serve as the basic platforms of enthroning elected leaders or representatives.

Alapiki (2010:134) supports this view when he opined that election is the single most important indicator of the presence or absence of democratic governance. In Nigeria, the

electoral process leaves much to be desired, especially given the dysfunctionality of party politics. A critical look at the history of elections in Nigeria from the first republic to the present, one phenomenon that stands out is violence. The recurrence of violence or conflict across the country in a multi-party democracy calls for a critical analysis of the role of political parties outside the organization of voters, aggregating and articulating voters interest, crafting policy alternative and thus serving as spring board for the coordination of electoral and power acquisition activities.

Falola (1998), is of the view that since independence, Nigeria has been a battle ground for political party conflicts and electoral violence. The abysmal performance and abrupt end of the first, second and third republics in Nigeria is in most quarters believed to be associated with the single phenomenon of political parties' conflict and electoral violence. It is on record that the North-South power struggle, personality politics and the inter-and-intra party tussles have historically contributed to the wide spread of electoral violence in Nigeria. It is equally important to note specifically that, the incentives for (job placement, political appointments, contracts, oil rent and the control of state power) have not diminished the conflict that have existed among political parties in Nigeria, especially in the electoral process. It is interesting to note that political parties with violent outlook or tendencies have the potentials to stall or even destroy out rightly the democratic process. Rather than building strong democratic foundation, political parties in Nigeria are often accused of engaging in large scale undemocratic practices such as vote buying, election rigging, inducement of electoral officials, mobilization of thugs and the outright application of violence. The implication of the above is that, it undermines public trust and often times leads to voter cynicism and disillusionment. It is from the above expressed concern that this paper is out to examine the nexus between political parties and electoral violence in Nigeria, with specific references to the 2015 and 2019 elections in Bayelsa State.

Statement of the Problem

The continued existence of democracy in Nigeria is directly tied to what political parties do or fail to do. The quest for power, domination and control by politicians, especially during elections have most times thrown the state into a battle ground, influenced mainly by activities of political parties and their gladiators. To this end, this paper is out to investigate the militarization that has most times characterized the electoral process in Nigeria and Bayelsa State in particular. The process of election in Bayelsa state, especially those of 2015 and 2019 were associated with ballot snatching, outright intimidation and attacks by armed thugs and cultist believed to be loyal to political parties and their pay masters. Worrisome among all is the overt display of violence that results to killings in Nembe, Brass, Southern-Ijaw and Ekeremor Local Government Areas of Bayelsa state.

Research Objectives

The main concern of this paper is to examine the place of political parties in electoral violence in Nigeria. Be that as it may, our specific objectives for this endeavour are as follows:

To find out if intra party crises can cause electoral violence in Bayelsa State.

To find out if ethnic politics is a causative factor of electoral violence in Bayelsa State.

To find out if personality politics can cause electoral violence in Bayelsa State.

Methodology

Methodology in this study refers to our overall strategy of integrating the different components of this research study in a more coherent and logical manner, thereby ensuring that, we effectively address the research problem. Hence, our methodology constitutes the blue print for our collection, measurement and analysis of data. The descriptive research design was used in this study to describe the opinions of electorates on the role of political parties in electoral violence, especially in the 2015 and 2019 elections in Bayelsa State. Our population in this study is the set representing all measurements of interest to our study. The population defines the limits within which we make our findings and generalize them in regards to the research problem. The population of the study is made up of both the target population and the accessible population. The target population includes the entire population of Bayelsa State, while the accessible population includes eligible voters in Nembe, Brass, Southern-Ijaw and Ekeremor Local Government Areas whom were randomly selected. Our choice for these Local Government Areas was particularly informed by the reported incidence of electoral violence in both 2015 and 2019 elections. However, data for the study were generated through primary and secondary methods; oral interview, participant observation methods, focus group discussion were conducted through the primary method whereas journals, newspapers and textbooks enhanced our secondary source of data gathering. The data gotten from all the identified sources were analyzed using the descriptive analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Relative deprivation theory serves as the theoretical framework to explain the relationship between political parties and electoral violence in Nigeria. The theory is an offshoot of frustration-aggression theory which was originally postulated by John Dollard in 1938. The theory starts from a hypothetical assumption, that the occurrence of aggressive behavior always presupposes the existence of frustration and that the existence of frustration leads to some form of aggression. It is obvious that this aggression attribute to the frustration that stem from the inability to fulfill a desired need. Violence behaviors are exhibited when desired goals are not met by humans. Gurr in his relative deprivation theory as cited in Tukuru, Ibrahaim and Tukura (2019:4) demonstrates that the potential for collective violence is a function of the extent and intensity of shared dissatisfaction among members of any society, hence the incentive for political or electoral violence is a function of the degree to which such shared dissatisfaction is blamed on the political system and its agents.

This theory captures vividly our concern on political parties and electoral violence and at such has become useful for our analysis. Its usefulness manifest overtly as some relevant political gladiators and their parties are skimmed out of political power in Bayelsa State. Excluding them from the oil rent-sharing arrangement and access to state structure (award of contracts, civil service and political appointments) drives their desire for violent mobilization towards the electoral process. The mobilization of violence is predicated on their need (excluded elite) to be in government. This further shows that frustration and aggression is what drives the political elites in Bayelsa State to mobilize violence against the electoral process. This is fundamentally so because the struggle for power is regarded as a means of primitive accumulation of wealth for those who control the state apparatus.

Conceptual Clarification

Political Parties

Before conceptualzing political parties, it is important we define the concept of politics. According to Ekekwe (2015:27), "Politics is the process by which individuals as members of a collective, directly or through their agents, act in concert with others to arrive at decisions and take actions concerning what best serves the interest of all parties in the collective" and not just the interest of some. He goes further to state that "Politics has come to be aligned to parochial interest that parades as universal one". It is on this premise that, it has become fitting to define political parties.

Scholars of politics, overtime have a common believe on the importance of political parties with no disagreement on a precise definition. For some, political parties are collectivity of gladiators that compete against one another for the control of political power in a state. For the Marxists, political parties are a manifestation of conflict and struggle between different classes. Alapiki (2010), notes that political parties are not simply appendages of representative government; but they are central to its effectiveness and play a positive role in the democratic process. In a clearer term, Alapiki (2010) argued that political party is a group of men acting together for political purposes, with objectives defined in terms of the relations between different sections of society and the appropriate role of governance. What the above means is that, characteristically, political parties aim to control or influence governmental machinery in accordance with the idea and interest of the party. Nwaorgu (1998), conceptualized political party as a creation, or the vehicle for the capturing of state power by a distinctive group of individuals within a polity. The distinctiveness he emphasized is basically in the ideology and political strategy of the group. Fundamentally, political parties functions typically to present the electorates with choice of candidates and programmes from which to choose and thereby help periodically in the determination of which party or coalition of parties will govern (Independent National Electoral Commission 2012 103). In a nutshell, political parties are central elements in multiparty democracies as it has become fashionable and the best way of conducting politics.

Election

Defining election Okoye cited in Iyayi (2005) rightly noted that, …elections are a complex set of activities with different variables that act and feed the other …it involves the participation of the people in the act of selecting their leaders and their own participation in governance. Election is an important element of modern representative government and not necessarily about Election Day activities, although it forms an important component. Election is a symbol of democracy. This is demonstrated in the participation of the people in choosing those in government. This is what informs, Alapiki (2010), to say that, election is the manner of choice agreed upon by a group of people which enables them to select one or a few people out of many to occupy one or a number of positions of authority. Speaking further, he contends that, this manner of choice, usually involves rules and regulations designed to ensure a certain degree of fairness and justice to all concerned. The critical role election play in laying a strong foundation for a viable democratic culture cannot be overemphasized. In an attempt to close the scholarly debate, Eremie (2015), opined that election provides the citizen's with an opportunity to decide who should govern them by choosing from a number of competing candidates. A critical look at the various definitions reveals a common theme, which is the

centrality of election in the process of enthroning leadership in modern democratic society. No wonder Alapiki (2010) advanced that:

> *Election is closely tied to the growth and development of democratic political order that is now generally held to be the single most important indicator of the presence or absence of democratic government. It is the barometer to measure the political maturity, health, legitimacy and stability of a democratic government (p: 134).*

It is important to note that how a country organizes, conducts and carries out its election process reveals a lot about the level of political maturity or development of that particular state.

Electoral Violence

The phrase electoral violence has become so popular and is a common phenomenon in describing the electoral process in Nigeria. Attempts at conducting multi-party elections in Nigeria, have always resulted in one crises or another. This is why Amos (2022) noted that, the fall of the First and Second Republics as well as the annulment of the Third Republic were made at the altar of electoral contest and issues surrounding it. A witness of these symptoms in the present democratic dispensation is what prompted Okoye (2012), to opine that:

> *"the Nigerian electoral and political landscape as manifested in the 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 (and even 2015 and 2019) general elections have fallen below par (of democratic elections) and have moved from violence to greater violence" (p.36).*

Literature on conflict / violence points to various factors that makes violence prone. Bates (2000), Horowitz (1985) and Huntington (1996) all theorized that ethnic fragmentation and the dominance of ethnic minority over a majority can cause conflict. Horowitz, holds that competitive elections and the ethnicisation of the electorate in a multi-ethnic society create conflicts. Lindeman (2008) points to exclusionary elite politics and elite competition over valuable resource rents, and the relative deprivation and grievance it produces, fuels violent conflicts. Violence as a tool for politics depends on factors such as cleavages and the legitimacy and efficiency of the electoral process.

However, the international crisis group in its report of (2014), links violent conflicts in Nigeria to politics, political violence, bad governance and poverty. The history of electoral violence in Nigeria since the First Republic has been on the ascendency. This is partly why there is a ceaseless clamour for each zone to produce the president of the country when there is no constitutional provision for a zonal presidency. No wonder why in Bayelsa State, the people have continued to demand that the position of the Governor be rotated among the three senatorial districts. The people cry aloud of their systematic exclusion in the distribution of public goods and services. To be specific, this scenario was partly what fueled the intensity of the 2015 and 2019 election environment in Bayelsa State. The political environment of the State was a hot spot for both the People Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC). Interparty squabbles, clashes during campaigns, the use of cult groups and thugs by political parties in their bid to wrestle power shows that the winner of the electoral contest was not to be determined by the electorate, rather the barrels of the gun were to determine the winner.

Besides, Eme (1964), maintained that the 1959 election which was held as a basis for instituting the independence government of 1960 was characterized with norms contrary to the rules of the game. According to Eme (1964), the 1959 election was characterized by arson, thuggery, bribery, corruption, intimidation, harassment, killings and outright victimization of opponents. This is perhaps what informed Collins (2018) to observe that the change from the simple process of selecting representatives or the basis of fair play to "political warfare" waged to determine "who gets what, when and how? Were weapons are freely used against the electoral process is what constitutes electoral violence. In a nutshell, electoral violence is the physical application of non conventional methods that may result to victimization, harassment, thuggery and killings in the struggle and competition by political gladiators and interest groups in their quest to win or retain State power.

Area / Location of Study

Osundu cited in Onuegbu (2019) said that area of study refers to the geographical location covered by the study which is usually stated in terms of the country, state, education, political or administrative zone, local government area etc. for the purpose of this work, the research made use of Nigeria but with particular reference to Bayelsa State as the suitable location for the study.

Political Parties and Electoral Violence in Bayelsa State

The crux of this paper is that, political parties in Nigeria functions more in defects than in any thing theoretical. The transition to civil rule in 1999 actually began with three registered political parties namely; People Democratic Party (PDP), Alliance for Democracy (AD) and All Peoples Party (APP). According to the Independent National Electorate Commission (INEC 2018) the number of registered political parties in Nigeria rose to 91 in 2019. Suffice it to say that, the main political parties in Nigeria today are the All Progressives Congress (APC), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Labour Party (LP), All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) and New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP). This is so because, these parties share control in the administration/governance of the 36 States in Nigeria.

To begin with, political parties in Nigeria more often than not, functions like "electoral machines owned and funded by a few powerful individuals who behave like businessmen or "political entrepreneurs" whose main aim is to make profits and reap bonanzas in the form of contracts and political office appointments (Adejumobi, 2007: Ojo, 2002). This is why political power acquisition has become the "high stake" and desperation among the political class and their associates (Wapmuk, 2016). The role played by violence according to Goodluck (2018), is massive in the determination of who comes out victorious and who loses in an election in Nigeria. What the above suggests is that, election in Nigeria comes with violence.

Since the beginning of the current democratic experiment, the wave of violence seems insurmountable in Nigeria. However, the political climate in Bayelsa State could be aptly sub-summed within the preview of ethnic politics. This is why inter-ethnic struggle for political power in Bayelsa State, particularly the office of the governor has always been clothed with violence. To show this claim, a local newspaper in the State Izonlink, reports on the 20th of February 2016, that no fewer than 20 lives were lost in the 2015 gubernatorial election alone in Bayelsa State. In this single piece, it was reported that activities of tribal politics were inversely proportional to the number of deaths recorded in the period under study. The result

as announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) shows that the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) represented by Seriake Dickson won the guber election of 2015. It is important to state that Dickson personified the outcome of the election as a "trophy of war" in his victory speech as quoted by Punch news paper of 11th January 2016. This goes further to show the intensity of the application of violence during elections in our area of study. Lending his views to this narrative, Mr. Claopass Moses, the then State Chairman of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in a face-to-face interview argued that prominent politicians who threatened to make the State ungovernable for Seriake Dickson, were behind the violence that characterized the State during the electoral process.

It is imperative to note that unspecified number of lives were lost in that single election. For instance, in Southern-Ijaw Local Government Area alone, no fewer than 10 persons lost their lives. This scenario was made possible as a result of gun battle by armed supporters of the leading political parties, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC). Asinim Botswat, the Public Relations Officer of the Bayelsa State Command, Nigeria Police, in a telephone interview could not ascertain the number of casualties, but confirmed the shooting of Chief Progress Neverdie, the paramount ruler of Peremabiri Town who was left in a critical condition. He was repeatedly shot in the head. To further demonstrate how violence has characterized democratic elections and its processes in Bayelsa State, this article recounts the threats of "soaking electorates with blood" in the Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State. These were common warnings to scare voters away from their domain or constituencies. In an oral interview held with community leaders, it was revealed that these threats have often raised tension before, during and after elections. In most cases, the threats have made manifest to wanton destruction of properties and loss of lives. In a related development, the youth leader of Nembe, Mr. Ayibatonyo Koko, emphasized the issue of hijacking and kidnapping of election materials and officials on duty by thugs and men on military uniforms believed to be working for political parties and their sponsors as one major factor that have always fanned the embers of electoral violence in the area. This points to why our respondents were quick to say that in some instance cases, gun shots are fired throughout the night preceding Election Day. The shooting is mostly aimed at scaring potential voters and perceived political opponents.

It is germane to state that in 2019, during the national assembly elections in Brass, a high ranking police officer who was on election duty in the area was held hostage by criminal gangs believed to be sympathetic to one of the contending political parties. The picture of his kidnap and humiliation went viral on the social media. This is why Okoye (2018) notes that the notoriety of the people of Nembe and Brass in relation to politics and electoral violence has well been documented. Stressing further, he points to the demolition of a major bridge linking Bassambiri and Ogbolomabiri, two communities that made up the ancient town of Nembe. The demolition of this basic infrastructure is in connection with election violence that erupted in the 2003 general election. On the issue of lives lost, the figure varies as the literature holds different views but Okoye (2018) specifically notes that the 2015 elections in Nembe was very tense and as such no fewer than four (4) lives were lost.

Like any other factor we have identified, internal political party wrangling cannot be glossed over. The increasingly presentation of certain dramatic personnel as owners of political parties, and as such, their decisions becomes final, erods internal party democracy. This is

partly what inform Egboh and Anichie (2012), to argue that internal party democracy is an issue that have consistently eluded Nigerian democracy. This is so because political parties have often times been hijacked at all spheres by powerful individuals who impose loyalists as candidates for election thus growing the culture of impunity and total disregard for the rule of law. The Nigerian political class sees political parties as essential platform to capture power by whatever means and at all cost. Ikeanyibe (2014) argues that lack of internal democracy in the nomination of party candidates for general elections weakens party unity and institutionalization of Nigeria political parties. There are internal cleavages that made manifest in the electoral process. As a way of showing relief, in Bayelsa State many holds the view that Chief Timipa Tiwei while holding office and functioning as the state party chairman of the All Progressive Congress, secretly worked and aid the ruling People Democratic Party. Those who express this opinion have since been vindicated as he took up appointment under the people Democratic party led government of Seriake Dickson as special adviser on oil and gas and his subsequent decamping from his party APC to PDP.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The discussion so far has brought to the fore many incidents of electoral violence in Nigeria as a whole and Bayelsa State in particular during the 2015 and 2019 elections. Internal party wrangling, struggle for political power by ethnic groups and political elites alike and the seizing of election materials and kidnapping of officials by thugs sympathetic to either of the political party stands out as major enabling factors to electoral violence in Nigeria and particularly in Bayelsa State. The incidents have seriously jolted the peaceful conduct of elections in the State especially in Southern-Ijaw, Nembe and Brass local government areas. Towards preventing the eruption of electoral violence in Nigeria and particularly in Bayelsa State, the following policy suggestions are hereby proffered:

Firstly, it is suggested that political parties in Nigeria should institutionalize internal democracy in their workings. This may breed unity of purpose and translate to election victory. Close to this, the use of ethnic jingoism and primordial interest by the political elites must be discouraged. This can be achieved by way of legislation. In addition, the laws governing elections in Nigeria should be strengthened and made to accommodate stringent punishment for offenders such as those who will like to kidnap and hijack electoral materials and officials for their private gain.

Lastly, government should take practical steps to create an enabling environment for private sector to thrive, this will help provide the youths with employment; consequently, discouraging the idea of serving as thugs for election purpose.

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