

Electoral Violence and Party Politics in Nigeria, Africa: Insights from the Rivers State Local Government Election

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Abstract

Nigeria is widely regarded, both within Africa and beyond, as a nation expected to lead by example in upholding democratic principles and best practices. However, since gaining independence in 1960, its electoral process has been consistently undermined by violence, casting a shadow over its democratic development and governance. Electoral violence remains a critical challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria, often fueled by party politics and intense political rivalries. This study i) examine the key factors contributing to electoral violence in Rivers State, ii) to assess the role of political parties, security agencies, and other stakeholders in either mitigating or exacerbating electoral violence, iii) To evaluate the impact of electoral violence on democratic governance and political stability in Rivers State. This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Data were collected from a combination of primary sources, such as surveys and interviews, and secondary sources, including official reports, academic literature, and media publications. The study therefore recommends that the urgent need for electoral reforms, stronger law enforcement mechanisms, and political will to curb violence and ensure free, fair, and credible elections. The paper concludes by offering policy recommendations for mitigating electoral violence and strengthening democratic institutions in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: Electoral violence, party politics, electoral malpractice, political thuggery, political violence.

1.0 Introduction

Across the globe, regular and periodic elections are regarded as a cornerstone of people-centered governance. Elections enable citizens to hold public officeholders accountable and influence political leadership. As Ediagbonya, Olumide, and Ukhurebor, (2023) observe: *"The quality of elections is one of the criteria used to assess the degree of democratic consolidation in emerging*

democracies." Despite this, organizing free and fair elections remains a significant challenge for many new democracies in West Africa particularly Nigeria.

In Nigeria and other African countries, electoral processes are frequently marred by violence, manipulation, and partisan conflicts. Electoral violence ranging from intimidation and physical assaults to destruction of property and loss of life has become a recurring and deeply concerning feature of Nigeria's political landscape, especially at the grassroots level. This pattern undermines democratic governance, erodes public trust in electoral institutions, and destabilizes the political system.

After Nigeria successfully returned to democratic governance in 1999, the country continued to grapple with enduring challenges such as electoral malpractice, political violence, voter intimidation, and, at times, credible allegations of fraud. These persistent issues remain significant obstacles in Nigeria's pursuit of transparent, free, and credible elections. Despite ongoing efforts to reform the electoral process, the 2023 presidential election was marred by troubling incidents of electoral violence. Reports and allegations indicated possible involvement by members of the ruling political elite, raising fresh concerns about the integrity of the democratic process (Ibrahim, 2023; Vanguard, 2023).

While electoral violence is not unique to Nigeria, its frequency and intensity within the country demand focused scholarly attention. The problem is especially acute during local government elections, where party rivalry and weak regulatory mechanisms often fuel violent confrontations. These elections, though sometimes perceived as less consequential than national ones, offer critical insights into grassroots political dynamics and the broader electoral landscape.

Rivers State, situated in the oil-rich Niger Delta region, presents a compelling case for examining the nexus between electoral violence and party politics. The state's history of fierce political rivalry and economic significance has made it a hotspot for political contestation. Local elections in Rivers State are frequently characterized by voter intimidation, ballot box snatching, destruction of electoral materials, and even loss of life. Political actors often employ both legal and extra-legal means to maintain control over local governance structures, turning elections into arenas of violent competition rather than democratic engagement. For instance, the political confrontation between the Governor of Rivers State, Siminalayi Fubara, and his immediate predecessor and current Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Nyesom Wike, escalated to an alarming level during the recently concluded local government elections in Rivers State.

The research problem lies in the continued prevalence of electoral violence in Nigeria despite the institutionalization of democratic elections. Existing studies have focused predominantly on national elections, leaving a gap in our understanding of the dynamics at the local level. This oversight limits our ability to develop effective, context-specific strategies to prevent violence and promote credible elections.

Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to:

1. Explore the root causes and manifestations of electoral violence in Rivers State.
2. Assess the role of political parties, security agencies, and other stakeholders in exacerbating electoral violence in Rivers State.
3. Evaluate the impact of electoral violence on democratic governance and political stability in Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Electoral violence remains a recurrent and deeply entrenched issue within Nigeria's democratic trajectory, particularly in Rivers State, where political competition frequently escalates into hostility, coercion, and physical aggression. Despite the formal institutionalization of democratic governance and the regular conduct of elections, the persistence of electoral violence poses a significant obstacle to democratic consolidation and political stability (Höglund, 2009; Omotola, 2010). This troubling pattern raises urgent questions regarding the structural and contextual factors that drive and sustain such violence in the state.

Although existing scholarly works and policy discussions have identified several contributory factors including political godfatherism, ethnic rivalries, economic marginalization, and institutional frailty many of these analyses tend to adopt a generalized national perspective, thereby neglecting the specific political configurations and historical peculiarities of Rivers State (Ibeanu, 2007; Albert, 2005). As such, there is a pressing need for a localized and context-sensitive investigation that probes the underlying drivers and manifestations of electoral violence in the state.

Moreover, while political parties, security agencies, and electoral institutions are often cited as critical stakeholders in either curbing or aggravating election-related violence, the precise roles these actors play whether through action, inaction, or collusion have not been sufficiently examined, especially within the unique political economy of Rivers State. The apparent complicity of some state actors, coupled with weak institutional oversight and accountability, has arguably normalized electoral violence as a strategic instrument of political contestation.

The ramifications of this violence are profound and multifaceted. Beyond the immediate loss of life, displacement, and psychological trauma inflicted on citizens, electoral violence in Rivers State contributes to the erosion of public confidence in the electoral process, undermines democratic legitimacy, and weakens the foundations of participatory governance (Nwolise, 2007; Rotberg, 2014). It also deters meaningful political engagement, especially among marginalized groups such as women and youth, who often bear the brunt of violence yet remain excluded from power structures.

In light of these challenges, this study seeks to fill the existing gaps in literature by undertaking a critical examination of the root causes and forms of electoral violence in Rivers State. It also aims to assess the role of political parties, security institutions, and other key stakeholders in the perpetuation or prevention of such violence. Ultimately, the study will evaluate the broader implications of electoral violence for democratic governance and political stability in Rivers State and, by extension, Nigeria's evolving democratic experience

2.0 Literature Review

This section reviews the existing literature based on the following sub-thematic issues:

- ❖ Election
- ❖ Electoral Violence
- ❖ Party Politics in Nigeria

The concept of an election has been interpreted in various ways by scholars from different academic backgrounds. According to Ojo (2007), an election is the process or act of selecting a person or group of people for a specific office, carried out by voters who are legally qualified to participate. Similarly, Agu (2014) views an election as an officially sanctioned and legally structured method through which citizens select leaders to manage public affairs. More broadly, an election refers to a formal decision-making process in which a population chooses one or more individuals to occupy public office. An election is the process of selecting a representative or leader from among a group of candidates or political parties. Anifowose (2003) describes it as a process through which the masses participate in choosing from among the elite to occupy positions of authority within a political system.

In post-colonial Africa, elections became a central mechanism for attaining political power. Ironically, while it is possible to have elections without genuine democracy, it is widely accepted that democracy cannot exist without elections. This highlights the crucial role that elections play in the functioning and legitimacy of democratic systems (Luqman, 2009)

Omotola (2010) asserts that the physical dimension of electoral violence includes acts such as arson, looting, shootings, the violent disruption of campaign rallies, and armed attacks on polling and collation centers. These attacks often involve the forceful seizure of electoral materials typically with the use of dangerous weapons as well as incidents of hostage-taking, kidnapping, and, most critically, the assassination of political opponents.

In contrast, structural electoral violence refers to more systemic and institutionalized forms of manipulation. Nwolise (2007) identifies these as the use of government coercion to compel voter registration or turnout, abuse of incumbency powers, denial of fair opportunities to opposition parties and candidates, politicization of security and electoral officials, and the falsification of election results. These practices undermine electoral integrity by skewing the process in favor of particular political actors.

Höglund (2009) argues that electoral violence represents the highest and most extreme manifestation of electoral fraud. While electoral fraud involves covert attempts to manipulate electoral outcomes, electoral violence takes a more direct and forceful approach. Sisk (2008) defines electoral violence as “acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition.”

Atuobi (2008) further explains that electoral violence encompasses intentional acts designed to influence the electoral process either by causing delays, disruptions, or manipulating the results to determine election outcomes or influence public opinion in plebiscites. In essence, electoral violence is a coercive tool used by political actors to advance personal or group interests and to achieve specific political goals (Höglund, 2009).

Gani Yoroms (2015) describes electoral violence as a phenomenon commonly seen in fragile democracies, where it arises as a direct response to the failure of the political system to meet the expectations of the electorate. In such contexts, electoral violence becomes both a symptom and a consequence of broader governance failures and democratic deficits.

Electoral violence is one of the most pressing challenges confronting many democratic societies. It can be defined as violence motivated by elections, used to coerce, intimidate, or forcefully influence voter behavior, voting patterns, or to overturn electoral outcomes in favor of a particular individual, group, or political party.

In broader terms, electoral violence refers to any form of physical harm or threat directed at individuals or property involved in the electoral process. This violence may occur before, during, or after elections, with the intent to disrupt or manipulate the democratic process.

Pre-election violence often includes attacks on political opponents, vandalism of campaign materials, or threats aimed at discouraging voter participation. During elections, it may involve ballot box snatching, intimidation at polling units, or physical confrontations. Post-election violence, on the other hand, frequently results from the manipulation or rejection of election results, or disputes surrounding democratic transitions, such as the handover from one administration to another.

Nwokike, Ezeneme, and Okafor (2023) observe that:

"The impact of electoral violence on Nigeria's democracy is nothing short of catastrophic. When acts of violence and intimidation are used to suppress opposition voices and stifle free and fair debate, the very essence of the democratic process is undermined and weakened. This erosion of democratic principles has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the immediate aftermath of an election."

They further emphasize:

"One of the most significant consequences of electoral violence is the erosion of public trust in the electoral process. When citizens witness or experience violence during elections, they lose faith in the system's ability to accurately represent their voices and choices."

This loss of trust is detrimental to democratic consolidation, as citizens begin to disengage from civic participation, leading to lower voter turnout, weakened institutions, and increased political apathy.

Moreover, the intense struggle for political power, particularly among registered political parties, ethnic groups, and religious factions, continues to fuel political violence in Nigeria. This has been exacerbated by the rise of armed thugs, often loyal to powerful political figures, who use violence as a tool for political gain.

Ediagbonya et al. (2023) affirm this concern, stating:

"Politics is the cause of a large number of deaths in Nigeria through acts of violence, thuggery, political assassination, and crimes that are directly linked to the quest for power. In the process, many criminal offenses are committed. Security personnel are frequently mobilized to harass or intimidate political opponents, or even to take sides, thereby undermining free, fair, and credible elections."

This persistent cycle of violence not only destabilizes the political landscape but also threatens the future of democracy in Nigeria. To safeguard democratic values, it is imperative to address the root causes of electoral violence and ensure accountability for political actors who perpetuate it

Omotola (2010) identifies three key issues in leadership that are central to the analysis of party politics and democratic governance in Nigeria. These issues are Leadership Ascension, Leadership Operation, and Leadership Succession. Leadership Ascension refers to the processes and strategies through which individuals aspire to and ultimately attain political leadership positions. This includes both formal and informal pathways to power.

Building on this, Rotberg (2014) elaborates on the roles political actors entrusted with state authority play during various leadership transitions. These roles are critical to understanding the dynamics of leadership and form a central theme of this discussion. A primary function of political parties is to present and elect candidates to public office under a party label, regardless of whether the electoral process is credible or flawed (Patz, 2010).

Unlike the practice in many African democracies where democratic principles are often unstable Western political parties typically engage in structured candidate preparation. This includes training individuals for elective positions and adhering to internal party democracy, rather than imposing candidates without due process. Additionally, political parties in developed democracies are involved in voter education, public sensitization, and the recruitment and compensation of party workers. These functions contribute to a healthier democratic system.

In contrast, while Nigerian political parties perform some of these functions, Fagbadebo, Odeyemi, & Agunyai (2014) argue that they are more prominently engaged in internal rivalries, efforts to suppress opposition, the imposition of preferred candidates, and manipulation of the electoral process. These negative tendencies, as highlighted by Fagbadebo and colleagues, often lead to vote buying and the commercialization of electioneering, as was evident during the 2024 local government elections in Rivers State. Such practices undermine democratic principles and compromise the integrity of the electoral process in Nigeria.

The ultimate aim of any political party is to secure control of government. In the African context, however, gaining leadership through party politics often requires significant influence, strategic maneuvering, and backing from powerful individuals commonly referred to as *godfathers*. In Nigeria, in particular, participating in elections is highly capital-intensive, as the process is both fiercely contested and deeply competitive.

Theoretical Framework

The intersection of electoral violence and party politics in Nigeria can be best understood through the lens of the Conflict Theory and the Elite Theory, both of which offer critical insights into the dynamics of power, competition, and institutional failure that underpin political processes in Nigeria, especially at the local level.

Political Conflict Theory

Rooted in the works of Karl Marx, Conflict Theory posits that society is in a state of perpetual conflict due to competition for limited resources (Dahrendorf, 1959). Within this framework, political power is often unequally distributed, and those in control of state institutions deploy violence and coercion to maintain dominance. In the context of Nigeria, and particularly Rivers State, electoral violence serves as a mechanism through which political actors assert control, manipulate electoral outcomes, and undermine democratic institutions.

Electoral violence during local government elections in Rivers State is not random but often orchestrated by political elites to secure political power. As such, the theory helps to explain how political parties, particularly dominant ones, mobilize violence to protect vested interests, limit political participation, and reinforce clientelistic networks (Ibeanu, 2007). The fierce competition among rival factions within and across parties in Rivers State reflects this systemic struggle over access to power and resources.

Elite Theory

Elite Theory, advanced by theorists like Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, argues that a small minority, consisting of members of the economic and political elite, hold the most power—and that this power is independent of democratic elections (Bottomore, 1993). In Nigeria, elite dominance manifests in the control of political parties by godfathers and political patrons who direct the course of party politics, often sidelining democratic processes in favor of personal or group interests (Albert, 2005).

This theory is particularly applicable in the Rivers State scenario, where political elites manipulate local government elections to consolidate their hegemony. The theory explains how elite capture of political parties and electoral institutions often leads to the normalization of violence as a strategic tool. The 2025 Rivers State local government elections, for instance, were marred by reports of security suppression, intimidation, and logistical irregularities that favored the ruling party, reinforcing elite theory's claim that democracy in Nigeria is often subverted by a few powerful individuals.

Justification for Application

The application of Political Conflict and Elite theories is justified in analyzing electoral violence and party politics in Nigeria, particularly within subnational contexts like Rivers State. Both frameworks shift the analysis from surface-level electoral irregularities to the underlying power structures and socio-political dynamics that sustain violence. They also provide a robust analytical foundation to explore how institutional weaknesses, party indiscipline, and economic disparities fuel violent contestation over power.

Moreover, these theories are especially suited to African political contexts, where colonial legacies, weak democratic institutions, and elite manipulation continue to shape political outcomes. Applying these perspectives enriches our understanding of electoral violence not merely as a breakdown of order but as a rational and systemic feature of competitive party politics in fragile democracies like Nigeria (Omotola, 2010; Höglund, 2009)

3.1 METHODOLOGY

The qualitative descriptive research approach adopted in this study enables an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of electoral violence and party politics during the 2024 Local Government elections. This method is particularly useful for capturing the complexities and contextual realities of political events, as it allows for detailed descriptions and interpretations.

By analyzing reports from both international and national election observers, along with credible accounts from reputable national newspapers, the study obtains a comprehensive understanding of the scope, nature, and patterns of electoral violence and political party activities.

In addition, existing scholarly literature on electoral violence and party politics in Nigeria provides critical insights into the root causes, motivations, and long-term consequences of such incidents. These academic perspectives help to contextualize the findings and offer a deeper understanding of the recurring challenges within Nigeria's electoral system

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Research Objectives 1: Explore the root causes and manifestations of electoral violence in Rivers State.

Rivers State, a critical oil-producing hub in Nigeria, has unfortunately become synonymous with electoral violence. The state's political landscape, characterized by intense rivalries and a high-stakes struggle for power, has consistently witnessed disruptions, intimidation, and bloodshed during elections. Understanding the complex interplay of factors contributing to this recurring problem is crucial for fostering a more peaceful and democratic electoral process.

➤ Intense political rivalry and polarization.

The state's political scene is largely dominated by two major parties, and the competition between them is often fierce and uncompromising. This rivalry is not merely about policy differences; it is deeply personal and rooted in a struggle for control over resources and patronage. The "winner-takes-all" mentality prevalent in Nigerian politics exacerbates this, as electoral victory translates to significant economic and political advantages. This high-stakes environment creates a climate of desperation, where political actors are willing to resort to violence to secure victory.

➤ Proliferation of small arms and light weapons plays a critical role in fueling electoral violence.

Rivers State, like many other parts of the Niger Delta, has a history of militancy and resource conflicts. This has led to the widespread availability of weapons, which are easily accessible to political thugs and criminal elements. These weapons are often used to intimidate voters, disrupt polling stations, and carry out violent attacks against political opponents. The lack of effective arms control and disarmament measures has allowed this problem to persist, creating a volatile environment during elections.

➤ **The role of political thugs and cult groups cannot be overstated.**

These groups, often recruited and armed by political actors, are instrumental in carrying out violent attacks and disrupting the electoral process. They operate with impunity, knowing that they are protected by powerful individuals. The lack of accountability for their actions further emboldens them, creating a cycle of violence. The influence of these groups extends beyond elections, contributing to general insecurity and instability in the state. Consequently, these individuals have evolved in both status and operational capacity. They no longer rely on crude weapons such as clubs; instead, they now utilize sophisticated small arms, not only to intimidate but also to kill when deemed necessary. Recent developments in the political landscape indicate that they do not fear the police, as they possess the resources to confront law enforcement when required. Furthermore, evidence suggests that they are not deterred by the military either (Agbese, 2019).

➤ **Economic factors**

Rivers State is rich in oil resources, which translates to substantial revenue for the government. This wealth, however, is not evenly distributed, leading to widespread poverty and inequality. Many young people, facing unemployment and economic hardship, are easily recruited by political actors to engage in violence. The promise of financial rewards and the allure of power make them susceptible to manipulation. The desperation created by economic deprivation fuels the willingness to participate in electoral violence.

➤ **The weakness of electoral institutions and the lack of trust in the electoral process**

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has often been accused of bias and incompetence, leading to a lack of confidence in its ability to conduct free and fair elections. This lack of trust encourages political actors to resort to violence, as they believe that the electoral process is not credible. Furthermore, the slow pace of judicial processes and the lack of effective prosecution of electoral offenders create a culture of impunity.

➤ **The role of security agencies.**

While security agencies are tasked with maintaining peace and order during elections, their actions have often been controversial. Accusations of bias, excessive use of force, and complicity in electoral malpractice have eroded public trust. The lack of professionalism and the politicization of security agencies have contributed to the problem of electoral violence. There were reports of skirmishes concerning the police allegedly carting away election materials,

prompts the Governor to visit the headquarters of the Rivers State Independent Electoral Commission (RSIEC) to confront the police over the incident (Abati, 2025)

➤ **Ethnic and communal tensions**

Rivers State is a diverse state with numerous ethnic groups and communities. These groups often have historical grievances and rivalries, which can be exploited by political actors to incite violence. The manipulation of ethnic and communal identities can create divisions and escalate tensions, leading to violent clashes during elections.

4.2 Research Objectives 2: Assessing the Role of Political Parties, Security Agencies, and Other Stakeholders in Exacerbating Electoral Violence in Rivers State

Rivers State, a pivotal state in Nigeria's political and economic landscape, has consistently witnessed a disturbing trend of electoral violence. Understanding the intricate roles of political parties, security agencies, and other stakeholders is crucial to unraveling the complex dynamics that perpetuate this issue. Their actions, whether intentional or unintentional, significantly impact the electoral environment, either contributing to or mitigating violence

➤ **Political Parties: The Central Actors and Their Complex Influence**

In Rivers State, the intense rivalry between dominant political parties often sets the stage for electoral violence. These parties, while ideally meant to champion democratic ideals, frequently become the primary catalysts for disorder. A disturbing trend in Rivers State is the recruitment and arming of youth and cult groups by political parties. These groups are deployed to intimidate opponents, disrupt rallies, and manipulate election outcomes. This practice creates a volatile environment where violence becomes the norm.

➤ **"Do-or-Die" Politics and Inflammatory Rhetoric**

The "winner-takes-all" mentality, coupled with the use of inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech, fuels animosity and polarization. Political actors often resort to divisive language, exploiting ethnic and communal tensions to gain an advantage. Political actors often use hate speech and inflammatory language in rallies and media appearances, contributing to a charged atmosphere that increases the risk of violent confrontations.

There is an urgent need to reform the local council election process in Nigeria, as it has consistently produced outcomes that overwhelmingly favor the ruling party in each state or, in many cases, a proxy party aligned with the incumbent Governor. State Governors have effectively seized control of the local government electoral process. For instance, in the last week of September, the Anambra State Independent Electoral Commission (ANSIEC) declared the ruling All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) victorious in all 21 local government councils and 326 wards of the state.

Similarly, in Rivers State, the Governor's proxy party, the APP, gained political prominence. In Benue State, local council elections held on Saturday, October 5, followed the same pattern: the ruling party, led by Governor Hyacinth Alia a Catholic priest turned politician won all 23 chairmanship positions and all 276 councillorship seats. These trends highlight the need to critically rethink, review, and reform the local government election system, which currently

appears to serve primarily the interests of incumbent Governors rather than the democratic will of the people

➤ **Lack of Internal Party Democracy**

The absence of transparent and democratic processes within political parties exacerbates tensions. Imposed candidates and manipulated primaries breed resentment, which can spill over into electoral violence. Disagreements within parties over candidate selection have led to factionalism and violence, especially during party primaries.

➤ **Financial Inducement and Vote Buying**

The pervasive practice of vote buying and financial inducement creates a culture of transactional politics. This undermines the integrity of the electoral process and can lead to violence when promises are not fulfilled or when opponents attempt to disrupt these activities.

➤ **Distrust of Electoral Processes**

Parties and their leaders who consistently cast doubt on the neutrality and integrity of INEC create an environment that encourages violence. When the electoral process is not trusted, some parties may feel that violence is the only way to achieve their goals.

Security Agencies

Security agencies such as the Nigerian Police Force, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and sometimes the military play a vital role in securing the electoral process. In Rivers State, security agencies have been accused of bias and partisanship during elections:

In Ward 19, Elekahia, it was reported that police officers invaded the polling unit and disrupted the voting process. On Monday, following the police announcement that local council secretariats had been unsealed, hoodlums attacked the local government offices in Ikwerre, Emohua, Ahoada East, and Eleme, setting them ablaze (Thisdaylive, 2025). In past elections, there have been reports of brutality and intimidation by security forces, especially in strongholds of the opposition. This creates fear and could provoke violent resistance. The use of excessive force by security personnel during elections can escalate tensions and lead to violence.

➤ **Allegations of Partisanship**

Security personnel are sometimes accused of acting on behalf of certain politicians or parties, aiding in the disruption of voting or protection of thugs. Security agencies have frequently been accused of bias and partisanship, favoring one political party over another. This undermines public trust and fuels resentment. The role of the Nigeria Police Force in the Rivers crisis is deeply concerning. Under Sections 214 to 216 of the 1999 Constitution and Section 4 of the Police Act, the Police have a constitutional mandate to protect lives and property. It is a troubling anomaly in Nigeria's democratic process that a court of law could issue an order preventing the Police from providing security in any part of the country, and that the police leadership would comply without immediately challenging such an order. Consequently, the elections in Rivers State were conducted without police security. This development regrettably highlights the Nigeria Police Force's increasing marginalization in electoral matters (Abati, 2025)

➤ **Lack of Professionalism, Accountability and Training**

Inadequate training, poor equipment, and lack of professionalism can hinder the ability of security agencies to effectively manage electoral violence. The lack of accountability for security personnel who engage in misconduct encourages impunity and perpetuates the problem. . In many cases, law enforcement fails to respond promptly to reports of violence or electoral malpractice, allowing impunity to thrive.

Other Stakeholders (Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), the Media, Judiciary and RSINEC)

Other stakeholders, including civil society organizations, the media, traditional and religious leaders, and INEC, also play significant roles in shaping the electoral environment. The River State Independent National Electoral Commission (RSINEC) has a constitutional mandate to conduct free, fair, and credible elections. Likewise the Civil Society Organizations and the Media, inclusive the Traditional ruler and Religious leaders also contribute to electoral violence.

➤ **Logistical failures**

Late arrival of election materials, malfunctioning BVAS machines, or missing result sheets can cause frustrations and lead to violence. Sometimes, INEC officials are suspected of colluding with political actors or manipulating results, tensions quickly escalate. Also, lack of timely updates and unclear procedures often leave voters feeling disenfranchised and spark unrest.

➤ **Partisan reporting by media**

Partisan reporting by local media outlets has emerged as a significant factor exacerbating electoral violence in Rivers State. Some media organizations have been accused of aligning with specific political interests, thereby compromising journalistic neutrality and objectivity. Rather than providing accurate, balanced, and fact-based reporting, these outlets often disseminate propaganda, sensationalize events, and promote narratives that favor one political faction over another.

This type of reporting can inflame political tensions, deepen divisions among the electorate, and incite hostile actions by portraying opponents in a negative or threatening light. In such a polarized environment, misinformation and biased coverage can provoke fear, anger, and suspicion, leading to confrontations and acts of violence during the electoral process. Moreover, when the public perceives the media as tools of political manipulation, trust in democratic institutions and the electoral process is further eroded. Consequently, partisan media practices undermine efforts to promote peaceful, transparent, and credible elections in Rivers State

➤ **Biased or compromised CSOs**

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in promoting democratic governance and peaceful elections is critical; however, when these organizations are perceived as biased or compromised; their ability to contribute meaningfully to electoral integrity is significantly diminished. In Rivers State, the perception that certain CSOs align with political interests or act as extensions of partisan groups has weakened public confidence in their neutrality.

This lack of trust undermines their credibility and hampers their efforts to mediate electoral disputes or advocate for non-violent political engagement. Instead of serving as impartial watchdogs and peacebuilders, compromised CSOs may inadvertently contribute to political polarization and escalate tensions among electoral stakeholders. Their perceived partiality can provoke resentment among opposition parties and disenfranchised groups, who may view the electoral process as rigged or unjust, thereby increasing the likelihood of violent responses. Furthermore, the absence of trusted, neutral intermediaries during elections reduces opportunities for dialogue and conflict resolution. As such, biased or compromised CSOs represent a serious impediment to peaceful electoral outcomes and a contributing factor to the persistence of electoral violence in Rivers State.

➤ **Judiciary**

The judiciary's role in the Rivers State election has raised serious concerns about constitutional adherence and institutional impartiality. It is troubling that a court of law could issue an order prohibiting security agencies from fulfilling their constitutional mandate to provide security during elections. Such decisions appear to contravene both the spirit and the letter of the Constitution. Additionally, the phenomenon of courts of equal and coordinate jurisdiction issuing conflicting orders often enabling political actors to engage in forum shopping from Port Harcourt to Abuja undermines the coherence and integrity of the judicial system.

In a public interview, Governor Fubara expressed dismay over the conduct of the Nigerian Police and their selective adherence to court orders. He criticized a recent police press statement, describing it as contradictory and misleading. Fubara noted the irony of the Police suddenly citing court orders to justify their inaction, despite a long history of disregarding judicial rulings. He emphasized that the Constitution does not prohibit the conduct of elections, and that grievances can be addressed through lawful channels, citing Section 84(15) of the Electoral Act, 2022. Moreover, he questioned why the Police failed to comply with an existing court order mandating the continuation of the local government election process, accuse them of cherry-picking which orders to obey. He lamented a growing culture of impunity and political manipulation, stressing that for any nation to develop and prosper, constitutionalism must be upheld above all else (Olokun cited in Nigerian Democratic Report, 2025).

State institutions particularly the judiciary and the police must act in the public interest and be guided by principles of justice, peace, and equality. When these institutions are perceived as politicized or inconsistent, public trust erodes, and the risk of electoral violence increases. A functioning democracy depends on the impartial and lawful conduct of all its institutions, especially during critical periods such as elections

4.3 Research objectives 3: Evaluating the Impact of Electoral Violence on Democratic Governance and Political Stability in Rivers State

Rivers State, a critical economic and political hub in Nigeria, has unfortunately been plagued by recurring incidents of electoral violence. This persistent issue casts a long shadow over the state's democratic governance and political stability, undermining the very foundations of a functional democracy. Evaluating the multifaceted impact of this violence is crucial to understanding the challenges facing the state.

➤ **Undermining Electoral Credibility**

When elections are marred by violence, the credibility of the process is called into question. In Rivers State, elections have often been discredited by violent disruptions at polling stations, voter intimidation, and vote-buying. Such incidents reduce public trust in the electoral system and create a perception that elections are won not through the will of the people but through manipulation and force. As a result, many citizens become disillusioned with democracy and disengage from the political process. On Election Day, incidents of violence were reported in the Ogunabali area of Port Harcourt, where voters were attacked and election materials were destroyed (Abati, 2025)

➤ **Discouraging Voter Participation**

One of the most immediate impacts of electoral violence is low voter turnout. In Rivers State, fears of violence have discouraged voters from coming out on Election Day. The sight of armed thugs, reports of killings, and widespread insecurity instill fear among citizens, particularly women, youth, and vulnerable groups. When citizens do not feel safe to vote, democracy loses its essence as a government by the people. Nigeria's two major political parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), declined to participate in the elections for various reasons. However, it was alleged that candidates affiliated with one of the factions claiming leadership of the APC in the state contested the polls. Reports also indicated that both Governor Fubara and former Governor Wike lost in their respective polling units and wards, as their party did not field candidates (Nigeria Democratic Report, 2025).

➤ **Governance Paralysis and Loss of Public Trust**

Electoral violence often brings to power individuals who may not have emerged through legitimate means. When the public perceives that leaders are not elected based on popular will, legitimacy is lost. In Rivers State, this has resulted in widespread skepticism toward political leaders and institutions. The lack of legitimacy weakens the social contract between the government and the governed, leading to poor civic engagement and increased resistance to government policies.

➤ **Disruption of Economic Activities**

Rivers State, as a major oil-producing region, is critical to Nigeria's economy. During periods of electoral violence, businesses often shut down, workers stay at home, and economic activities grind to a halt. Violence disrupts transportation, scares away investors, and damages infrastructure. Violence erupted in several locations following explosions that damaged multiple buildings, including the Secretariat of the All Progressives Congress (APC) along Aba Road in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State. The blast destroyed the gate of the secretariat and caused damage to doors, windows, and other property (Nigeria Democratic Report, 2025)

➤ **Recruitment of Youth for Violence**

Politicians often recruit unemployed or underemployed youth to act as enforcers during elections. These young men are given arms and money, further militarizing the political space. After elections, many of these individuals are left unemployed but still armed, leading to increases in armed robbery, kidnapping, and cult-related violence.

➤ **Loss of Civilian Oversight**

The growing influence of security forces in political affairs erodes civilian oversight and poses long-term risks to democracy. In some instances, security agents have been accused of aiding particular candidates or parties, further delegitimizing the electoral process. In response to the threat of violence, elections in Rivers State are often heavily militarized. While this is intended to ensure security, the presence of soldiers and police at polling units intimidate voters and create the impression of a war zone rather than a democratic exercise.

5.1 Recommendations

- 1 **Address Socioeconomic and Political Root Causes:** The government, in collaboration with civil society organizations and academic institutions, should initiate comprehensive and context-specific interventions aimed at addressing the root causes of electoral violence in Rivers State. These should include tackling poverty, unemployment, youth disenfranchisement, and the politicization of ethnic identities factors that often serve as catalysts for violence. Sustainable empowerment programs and political education campaigns should be institutionalized to reduce the vulnerability of youths to political manipulation and violent mobilization.
- 2 **Strengthen Institutional Accountability and Oversight Mechanisms:** There is a critical need to enhance the regulatory and oversight frameworks governing the conduct of political parties, security agencies, and electoral bodies. Independent monitoring bodies should be empowered to investigate and sanction political actors and security personnel found complicit in electoral misconduct. Electoral reforms must include stricter enforcement of the Electoral Act, training of security operatives on neutrality and human rights standards, and increased transparency in the activities of political stakeholders during election periods.
- 3 **Promote Democratic Values and Inclusive Governance:** To mitigate the long-term impact of electoral violence on democratic governance and political stability, state institutions should invest in promoting democratic values, civic engagement, and inclusive governance. This can be achieved through sustained public awareness campaigns, community dialogue platforms, and the integration of democratic education into school curricula. Furthermore, mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution should be strengthened to reduce the tendency for violent responses to political grievances.

6.1 CONCLUSION

Addressing electoral violence in Rivers State requires a multi-faceted approach. Strengthening electoral institutions, tackling the proliferation of arms, addressing economic inequality, promoting responsible journalism, and fostering a culture of accountability are all essential steps. Furthermore, political leaders must demonstrate a genuine commitment to peace and stability. Only through a concerted effort by all stakeholders can Rivers State break the cycle of electoral violence and build a more peaceful and democratic future.

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