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STATE, YOUTH AND ELECTORAL  
VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH  
REPUBLIC: THE IMPERATIVE OF A  
NATIONALLY COORDINATED YOUTH  
EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM

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**STATE, YOUTH AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC:  
THE IMPERATIVE OF A NATIONALLY COORDINATED YOUTH EMPOWERMENT  
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**ABSTRACT**

One manifestation of Nigeria's crisis of governance since the advent of civil rule in 1999 is the spate of youth violence that has characterized the electoral process. From the plains up north to the creeks in the south, Nigeria's electoral process within the past decade has been mired in violence so much as to make mockery of the democratization process. A lot of works (Bangura: 1997, Momoh: 2000, Yau: 2000) have studied how Nigeria's economic crisis and the attendant structural adjustment programme of the 1980s resulted in the alienation and marginalization of the youth, thereby exacerbating the whole phenomenon of youth restiveness in general. However, very few works have attempted to study the relationship between competition for political power and youth restiveness under the current "democratic era". This paper is an effort in this regard. With insights from the situation in Rivers and Gombe state, the paper demonstrates how the electoral process has been subverted by hijacking the state machinery and through the exploitation of the youth- a process which has served as an impetus for the escalation of not only electoral violence but youth restiveness in general. Finally the paper advocates for a comprehensive nationally coordinated youth empowerment programme as a viable panacea for arresting the negative trend of youth restiveness in general.

**Key terms: State, Youth and Electoral violence.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Nigeria has become a conflict prone society with the youths at the heart of most violent conflicts in the country. A recent study suggests that the youths are prosecutors of 90-95% of violent conflicts in Nigeria (Omeje: 2007). Granted, a situation where the youths are the main prosecutors of violent conflicts is not peculiar to Nigeria alone. However, the anxiety over the Nigerian situation is as a result of the sheer magnitude, complexity, frequency, ramifications and seeming intractability of most violent conflicts the country has witnessed since the advent of democracy in 1999.

It is generally agreed amongst independent monitoring groups and researchers that in spite of its history of military repression, Nigeria's fourth republic since 1999 has seen only limited improvement in political freedom and order. For example in a report prepared after the April 2007 general elections the human rights watch (HRW) noted:

Many of Nigeria's ostensibly elected leaders obtained their positions by demonstrating an ability to use corruption and political violence to prevail in sham elections. In violent and brazenly rigged polls, government officials have denied millions of Nigerians any real voice in selecting their political leaders. In place of democratic competition struggles for political office have often been waged violently in the streets by gangs of thugs- youths - recruited by politicians to help them seize control of power (HRW: 2007:12).

At the heart of Nigeria's crisis of governance particularly as manifested in electoral violence is a complex linkage between the state and the youth, who are the prosecutors of the violence. Regrettably, hundreds of Nigerians have lost their lives in the crossfire or as paid fighters for the country's political leaders. Prior to the advent of civil rule in 1999, scholars (Bangura: 1997, Momoh: 2000, Yau: 2000) have established that Nigeria's economic crisis of the 1980's and the attendant structural adjustment

programme resulted in the alienation and marginalization of the youth, thereby exacerbating the whole phenomenon of youth restiveness in general. However, with the advent of civil rule and the rise of electoral violence, and youth restiveness in general, a lot is yet to be done in understanding the nexus between the youth and electoral violence in the Nigerian “democratic context”. Is electoral violence an inevitable result of democracy in Nigeria? What role has the state played in either averting or encouraging the high incidence of electoral violence within the past nine years in Nigeria? Through a critical examination of the theoretical underpinnings of electoral violence in democratic contexts and from empirical analysis of the situation in Rivers and Gombe states this paper is an investigation of the factors that motivate the youth into violence, particularly with regard to the electoral process? And what measures can best address this problem? To find answers to the foregoing problem this paper relied on interviews and observations conducted by the researcher from 2003 till date, as well as the works of Human Rights Watch (HRW).

The paper is divided into four parts. Following this introduction is an examination of the conceptual and theoretical issues surrounding the state, youth and electoral violence, the third part focuses on case studies and finally the fourth part is the conclusions and recommendations.

## **CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES**

### **THE STATE AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA**

A state perhaps in the most common context is seen as an organized political community within a definite territory that possesses sovereignty. In this context, the state possesses such attributes as a government, population, a defined territory and

sovereignty, and is recognized in international law as a legal entity. However, a state may also refer to that political organization comprising the individuals and institutions authorized to formulate public policies and conduct the affairs of a country. Here the state is seen as a system comprising the executive, legislature, judiciary, police, military and other key institutions that co-ordinate the daily affairs of a country. Thus, while the former describes a fixed and somewhat permanent entity, the latter conception of the state is one that is particularly fluid and dynamic. For the purposes of this paper, the state is particularly seen from the latter perspective since electoral violence (as shall be demonstrated later) is a phenomenon perpetuated by the youths working in tandem with the elected officials of the state.

The linkage between the state, youth and electoral violence in Nigeria cannot be clearly understood outside the context of the nature and character of the Nigerian state. As Okolie (2005: 434) notes “Social science literature is replete with several strands of thoughts and explanations on the persisting and deepening incidence of electoral fraud in Nigeria’s body politic however, these explanations appear to melt in the boiling pot of the character and parasitic nature of the Nigerian state. That state power in Nigeria has largely been used as an instrument of personal, sectional, class or primordial agenda is well documented. This informs why Ake (1996:4) for example notes that the immensity of state power and its proneness to abuse with impunity had in the past ruled out a politics of moderation and mandated a politics of lawlessness and fight for appropriation. Similarly, Ibrahim, (in Jega 2000: 47) notes that the Nigerian state has a patrimonial character where in the distinction between the public and private domains is blurred and power which has become a major source of wealth is personalized.

As largely unproductive and parasitic group the dominant class in Nigeria relies essentially on the acquisition of state power for survival and reproduction. Thus, the state in Nigeria, as in Marxist analysis has remained a veritable and potent instrument for the domination, deprivation, suppression and alienation of the many by the very few who control state power. Its post colonial character of an overdeveloped superstructure in comparison with its economic base has ensured as Miliband, (in Okolie, 2005: 435) notes, that the state is the source of economic power as well as an instrument of it. This inevitably results in a high premium attached to political power, making politics a zero sum game. Indeed, the persistence of deficient and unresponsive electoral system in Nigeria is largely a product of a low level of autonomy of the Nigerian state – a situation which makes it possible for the political leadership to use the instruments of the state to commit acts of criminality and unmitigated electoral fraud resulting in the imposition of unpopular and unelected candidates on the people (Okolie, 2005: 436).

## **YOUTH AND VIOLENCE**

The concept of youth has been subjected to diverse interpretations and flexible usage. At one level the youth are conceptualized in terms of their futuristic role as leaders of society. However, in his interrogation of the youth as a category Obi (2006: 5), aptly notes that:

The categorization of the youth as future leaders assumes the non-interrogation of the existing power relations in society and is a recipe for preparing the youths to perpetuate a particular mode of power relations that suggest a permanence of structures of dominance and interests, but with the entry and exit of occupants' overtime.

Obi continues:

This conceptualization also suggests the sub-ordination of youths to the power structure controlled by elders in order to facilitate system stability, cohesion and continuity. Political time then becomes a conveyor belt that takes the loyal and disciplined youth into future power, when the elders pass into myth and history (Obi; 2006: 6).

Thus, the danger with the categorization of the youth in terms of their futuristic role as leaders is that it implicitly relegates the role of the youth as social agents.

At another level, the youth may also be categorized as the younger generation associated with protests, social revolutions or violent change. In this case, the youth become associated with energy, activism, sacrifice and ever ready to work for social transformation as a guarantee for a better and secure future (Obi, 2006: 6). This conceptualization of the youth captures the popular youth movements of the 1960's in the heady days of the civil rights movements in the United States, the pro democracy demonstrations of June 1989 at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China and the more recent anti- globalization movements which have all been at the vanguard of the movement for change. On the one hand, the youth can be engaged in violence or criminality particularly in the context where they are victims of social decay, manipulation or exclusion from the distribution of resources and opportunities in society. In other contexts, the place of youths within a given mode of production and their access/ non-access to the social surplus influences their politics. It is also important to understand that for some youths particularly in the poverty stricken economies of the developing world, Nigeria inclusive, what is paramount is survival. They must first of all survive before they can begin to think of fighting for a future. And as Obi (2006: 9) notes:

Where the very fact of survival is embedded in conflict, then the struggle for survival for the future is ambushed by more violence that sucks in young people into the vortex of class, ethnic, generational, communal and political agendas.

In any case, it is important to dwell on the concept of youth beyond the United Nations range of people between 18 and 24 years of age. While the United Nations has placed the age of 24 years as the upper limit, an organization like the common wealth has put it at 29. The emerging trend in some communities in Africa is that people in their 30's and sometimes 40's still see themselves as youths when they should normally be considered adults. This may be because they are unemployed and unmarried. Increasingly, youth identity in contemporary Africa has become synonymous with unemployment and poverty, in which young people continue to depend on their parents or relatives; making them in many respect "adults youths" (Obi, 2006). It also explains why such youths are available to be exploited by older people to act as perpetrators and victims of the production of violence. Referring to this social category as extended youths Gore and Pratten (2003: 216) perceive them as being defined irrespective of actual age, through economic and social circumstance and little prospect for future advancement. Summarily, our conception of the youth should reflect Wyn and White's (1997:25) rethinking of the youth in relational terms rather than age terms. That is, to focus on the way youths are constructed through social institutions determined by social, cultural, political and economic specificities rather than solely by age or the experience of being young alone.

## **ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN DEMOCRATIC CONTEXTS**

The term electoral violence has been used generically in two strands of research. At the first instance, electoral violence is seen as a sub-set of activities in a larger political conflict. In this context, electoral violence has been studied as part of the trajectory of ethnic or communal violence in divided societies such as Kenya, Sri-Lanka and India - where it has been noted that violence tends to cluster around election times (Hoglund: 2006). In a second approach electoral violence is seen as the ultimate kind of electoral fraud (Hoglund, 2006: 5). And electoral fraud has been defined as clandestine efforts to shape election results (Lehoueq, 2003: 223, in Hoglund). In another submission, Schwartz (2000: 2) notes that electoral violence is simply violence aimed at the electoral process and is geared towards wining political competition or power through, subverting the ends of the electoral and democratic process. Mwangi, (in Schwartz, 2000:3), notes that its tool of trade is the intimidation and disempowerment of political opponents. Thus, electoral violence take place not just at election periods but also in the periods leading up to elections, during the election, and in the period immediately following elections such as during counting of ballots. In line with the foregoing, it has become common in Nigeria's fourth republic for many political figures to openly recruit and arm the youth to unleash terror upon their opponents and ordinary members of the public during election periods.

Electoral violence does not occur in all democracies. Yet, in recent years, violence in connection to elections particularly in the so called "emerging democracies" have attracted attention precisely because they seem extraordinary and scandalous in a system that is supposed to be by definition non-violent (Reif, 2005: 1). There is hardly

any basis for making broad generalizations on electoral violence in democracies across countries due to cultural, social, economic and political specificities. A specific country may also display markedly different levels of electoral violence across time. For instance in December 2002 Kenya achieved a historic transfer of power to an opposition coalition through a relatively peaceful election. Contrary to popular expectations the violence which seemed destined to derail the prospect for peaceful elections declined markedly in the run up to the elections - so much that observers described the elections with an air of surprise highlighting that it had defied fears with the uncharacteristic order and calm which accompanied the change of power (Schwartz, 2000: 3). By contrast, the December 2007 elections in Kenya plunged the country in a crisis for a period of over two months. Even in Nigeria the 1993 presidential elections has severally been referred to as free, fair and peaceful in comparism to other elections the country has had since then. Neither theories on elections and democracy nor theories on political violence have been fully tested to explain the variation in electoral violence across and within countries. Nevertheless, some dominant models of the precipitants of electoral violence abound.

In her analysis of electoral violence in conflict societies, Hoglund (2006) identifies three areas in which the precipitants of violence with regard to polling can be found. These are: firstly, the nature of conflict societies whereby the stakes involved in wining or loosing elections are sometimes fundamental to the well being of entire communities. Secondly, the conflictive dimension of democracy, in which a prevailing assumption both within theory and practice has been that peace and democracy are mutually reinforcing. While more democracy is probably the answer to political violence in the long run, an expanding body of scholarly work has contended that democratization

process- particularly in post conflict societies is highly conflictual. Indeed, under certain circumstances democratization will make a return to war more likely (Mansfield and Snyder 2001, Paris 2004, Snyder 2000). Finally, the third precipitant of electoral violence as identified by Hougland is the design of electoral systems and administration. The electoral mechanisms i.e. electoral administration and electoral system design are central to understanding the attractiveness of violence in some societies and among certain actors.

In another submission Schwartz (2000:5) outlines a nature versus nurture school of thought towards understanding the factors giving rise to electoral violence. This nature versus nurture schools of thought is based on metaphysical and dialectical reasons. On the metaphysical front violence is seen as part of nature meaning that certain human beings are so bad that they are inherently violent. Hence the only way to deal with the problem is to get rid of them. Dialectically however, violence is seen as a result of the prevailing environment surrounding the individual. In this case it is clear that there is room to change the situation and hence alleviate or totally eliminate the violence. Hence, this view encourages political dialogue and negotiations between competing parties. Electoral violence can also be explained by cultural factors. Here some societies (Nigeria for example) exhibit a political culture of thuggery that generally pre-disposes actors to engage in violence and intimidation during political contests. The decay of political, social and economic system may also result in violence becoming a tool for settling political contests. There is also a structural explanation to electoral violence. In this regard the structures of society and politics may be organized in such a way as to generate conflicts. It is within this school of thought that selective application of the law,

and the lack of even electoral playing field –which have been characteristic of Nigeria’s fourth republic- fall. Against this backdrop, we contend that evidence suggests that the parasitic nature of the dominant class within the context of the personalized nature of Nigerian politics ensures their engagement in a systematic exploitation of the youth resulting in electoral violence and youth restiveness. The situation in Rivers and Gombe states is used to illustrate this.

## **CASE STUDIES**

### **STATE, YOUTH AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN RIVERS STATE**

River state is one of Nigeria’s thirty six states created on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1967 by a military decree of the Gowon administration (1966-1975). With its capital in Port Harcourt, the state is bounded in the south by the Atlantic Ocean, to the north by Imo and Abia states, to the east by Akwa-Ibom state and to the west by Bayelsa and Delta states. In contemporary Nigeria, Rivers state has acquired the unofficial reputation as the capital of Nigeria’s booming oil industry with a state government that is the wealthiest in the country. Unfortunately, the wealth of the state has heightened the stakes for political competition with dire consequences for the people of Rivers in general.

Evidence from the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Rivers state reveals how the incumbent state government subverted the electoral process by exploiting the youths. In particular, the state government through the incumbent People’s Democratic Party (PDP) used violence as an instrument by arming the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Asari Dokubo and the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) led by Ateke Tom. Ateke Tom for example acknowledged the role he played in the 2003 elections in an interview by the Human Rights Watch when he noted: “Governor Odili had promised

cash and jobs in great quantities for me and my boys and in return any place he sent me I conquered for him” (HRW, 2007:81).

Following the 2003 elections, the spate of electoral motivated violence in Rivers state quickly deteriorated as much of the compensation that PDP politicians promised to the groups they helped finance and arm during the 2003 elections never materialized. Specifically, many of the youths recruited by the politicians to carry out electoral violence complained that they were promised cash payments and jobs after the elections. There was however widespread complaints among these youth that rather than fulfill their promises, their sponsors including the then governor – Peter Odili simply dumped them once comfortably ensconced in office. As noted in an interview conducted by the HRW (2007) “the armed youths felt betrayed by the kind of contracts they made with the politicians in 2003. They felt that having participated in rigging the elections, they deserved a stake”. The result of these broken promises was a rapid deterioration of relations between many armed groups and their former sponsors. Rives state has since been awash with guns since the 2003 polls, when politicians sparked the ongoing influx of arms into the region to arm their proxy gangs. Many of these alienated gangs have subsequently moved into using their weaponry to spark an ongoing wave of violent crime, providing protection for or asserting control over oil bunkering operations and other criminal activities to make up for their loss of lucrative political sponsors.

The spiral of violence that followed the 2003 elections repeated itself after the 2007 elections. Another prominent militant Soboma George and his outlaws were reportedly hired by the PDP to help rig the 2007 elections in Rivers state. One cult member described in a meeting in government house in Port-Harcourt just prior to the April 2007

elections during which he saw government officials hand out between 5 to 10 million naira to several different cult groups in return for assisting or simply accepting the PDP's plan to rig the polls (HRW, 2007). In August 2007 Port Harcourt descended into chaos with armed gangs waging battles in the streets of the city and wrecking devastation on the surrounding communities- fighting's which was linked to struggles between various gangs to assert claims on political patronage including money and oil bunkering routes from the state government.

### **STATE, YOUTH AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN GOMBE STATE**

Gombe state was created on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1996 by the Babangida administration out of the then Bauchi state. The state lies within the north-eastern region of Nigeria and occupies a total land area of about 20,265sq km. The state had by 1998 an estimated population of 1,820,415 inhabitants. Ahead of Nigeria's 2003 polls the PDP and to a lesser extent other parties mobilized large numbers of young men ostensibly to protect their votes from attempts at rigging by rival parties. However, according to community leaders, civil society activists and other residents of the state interviewed by the HRW (2007), those youths were used to help rig the PDP to victory that year by stealing and stuffing ballot boxes, chasing away voters and intimidating the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials. This was the origin of a continuing wave of violence that had by the time of Nigeria's 2007 polls gotten entirely out of control.

Gombe state like the rest of Nigeria is home to large numbers of unemployed youths who have little opportunity for legitimate employment or socio – economic advancement. As is also true across many parts of Nigeria, in Gombe state some of these youths have formed loosely organized criminal gangs and turned to violent crime to make

a living. Residents of Gombe generally refer to the member of these gangs collectively as kalare or kalare boys. In parallel with other situations in the country, the kalare boys have proven easy prey for politicians who offer them small amount of money, drugs, alcohol and weapons in exchange for engaging in acts of intimidation and assault or simply to accompany their campaigns in a demonstration of muscle (HRW, 2007: 95). Since 2003, Gombe's kalare boys have committed not only politically related crimes but also other forms of violent abuses with complete impunity. From politically motivated attacks in 2003 their activities have degenerated into assault, rape, harassment and extortion of ordinary civilians alongside their continuing political role, most notably during the election period of 2007.

During the 2007 elections campaigns and on election day, kalare thugs played a significant role committing violence and intimidation on behalf of major political parties. However, observations by the researcher as well as those of the HRW indicate that the clear majority of the kalare thugs' active during the elections were working for the PDP. As Ma'azu (in HRW, 2007: 94), the PDP youth leader in Gombe state puts it "thank God we have more boys than the opposition". Other activist aptly notes that PDP's edge in terms of Kalare recruitment was due largely to the fact that the ruling party had more resources to spend on hiring them. The violence perpetuated by kalare members has not been confined to election periods. Gombe state residents, caught between political violence and the epidemic of violent crime these political activities spawned, have been trapped in a state of persistent insecurity.

There are two very important realities that flows from the foregoing; firstly, that many of the youths engaged in perpetuating electoral violence have been promised cash or jobs for engaging in electoral violence and secondly, that rather than acting spontaneously the youths who have been engaged in violence - at least from our case studies- were actually employed by the by the incumbent state government. This suggests that poverty and (or) unemployment was a very important factor that predisposed the youths to being exploited as instruments of violence by the incumbent governments. Exploited, because rather than engaging in social provisioning which unfortunately is largely precluded by the very nature of the state, the politicians actively invest in violence in the scramble for appropriation of state resources.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper has attempted to show that there is a complex linkage between the state, youth and electoral violence in Nigeria's fourth republic. Its central thesis is that the hijacking of the state machinery in the scramble for appropriation of state resources is what has facilitated the spate of electoral violence and youth restiveness in general. With evidence from Rivers and Gombe states the paper has shown that in addition to the parasitic nature of the dominant class, unemployment and poverty have been major factors in the spate of electoral violence and youth restiveness in Nigeria's fourth republic. And unless these underlying issues are addressed the campaign against electoral violence and youth restiveness cannot yield positive results. Against this backdrop the following recommendation is made.

That Nigeria has not had a comprehensive nationally coordinated youth empowerment programme is not an overstatement. Especially in the light of the fact that

efforts at developing the youths have been superficially represented as part of broader economic development blueprints. Indeed, it seems only recently has the role of youths as social agents become recognized. We therefore propose that to arrest the negative trend of electoral violence and youth restiveness a specialized agency with the necessary legal backing independent from the government should be established at the national, state and local government levels; particularly for the task of empowering the youth. This is imperative because in a situation where the youths are gainfully engaged they are likely to lose the incentive of being subjected to the manipulations of a parasitic political class.

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