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VIOLENCE, VOTER PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY: EXAMINING NIGERIA'S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

Electoral violence constitutes a major impediment to democratic governance in Nigeria, with implications that extend beyond physical insecurity to political participation, institutional trust, and the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. This article examines how electoral violence influenced voter participation, public confidence, and democratic legitimacy during the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State. The study employed a qualitative case-study design based on secondary data obtained from scholarly literature, official electoral documents, election observation reports, and publications of relevant institutions. The data were analyzed thematically in relation to the forms, drivers, and consequences of electoral violence. Findings indicate that electoral violence in Anambra State manifested through both direct and structural mechanisms, including intimidation, threats, attacks on electoral personnel and facilities, disruption of electoral activities, insecurity, logistical constraints, and institutional barriers to effective electoral participation. The evidence further identifies intense political competition, elite interests, insecurity, socioeconomic vulnerability, and institutional weaknesses as important conditions associated with electoral violence. Official reports on the 2023 general elections document significant security-related challenges affecting election administration, including the destruction or loss of electoral equipment and transportation difficulties resulting from insecurity. Nationally, the European Union Election Observation Mission documented 101 cases of campaign-related violence

associated with 74 fatalities during its observation period. These conditions contributed to fear, voter apathy, declining confidence in electoral institutions, and concerns about the credibility and legitimacy of electoral outcomes. The article argues that electoral violence should be understood not merely as a security challenge but as a broader threat to democratic legitimacy and effective political participation. It concludes that strengthening democratic legitimacy in Nigeria requires greater institutional independence, professional and accountable election security, effective enforcement of electoral laws, socioeconomic inclusion, comprehensive civic education, and improved transparency and reliability in the deployment of electoral technologies.

Keywords: Electoral violence; democratic legitimacy; voter apathy; institutional trust; political participation; electoral governance; Anambra State; Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Elections constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which citizens participate in democratic governance. They provide an institutional avenue for citizens to choose political representatives, influence the direction of public policy and confer legitimacy upon governments. In democratic systems, therefore, elections are expected to reflect the freely expressed preferences of citizens and to facilitate peaceful political succession.

The credibility of an electoral system is consequently central to democratic legitimacy. An election may be formally conducted but still experience a legitimacy deficit where citizens perceive the process as violent, manipulated, exclusionary or institutionally compromised. Electoral violence is particularly damaging because it can interfere with citizens' ability to exercise their political rights while simultaneously weakening confidence in the institutions responsible for conducting elections.

Nigeria's democratic experience since 1999 illustrates this challenge. Although the country has maintained uninterrupted civilian government since the end of military rule, elections have continued to be affected by allegations of vote buying, intimidation, electoral malpractice, institutional weaknesses, political violence and declining public confidence.

The 2023 presidential election was particularly significant. The election was conducted under the Electoral Act 2022 and involved important technological innovations, especially the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV). These innovations generated expectations that electoral transparency and credibility would improve. However, operational challenges, insecurity and controversies concerning electoral administration subsequently generated considerable public concern.

The European Union Election Observation Mission reported that the 2023 elections were affected by orchestrated violence and recorded 101 cases of campaign-related violence resulting in 74 fatalities during its observation period. Similarly, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) documented significant political violence in the period preceding the election, including violence involving party supporters, civilians and electoral officials.

These national dynamics were particularly relevant to Anambra State. The state entered the 2023 presidential election within a challenging security environment. ACLED reported that Anambra experienced considerable violence in the pre-election period, including attacks involving civilians, police facilities and electoral offices.

Official INEC documentation also demonstrates the extent to which insecurity affected election administration in Anambra. The commission reported that 5,892 BVAS machines were configured for the state, with additional machines supplied as backups, while 13 BVAS machines were subsequently reported missing because of electoral violence. INEC also indicated that its original provision of 2,063 vehicles was inadequate given the security situation and that the state eventually utilized 4,549 vehicles to meet transportation requirements.

The significance of these developments extends beyond the immediate conduct of an election. Where citizens encounter insecurity, administrative delays, technological difficulties or institutional uncertainty, their willingness to participate may decline. More importantly, repeated experiences of electoral problems can weaken trust in democratic institutions.

This article therefore shifts the analytical emphasis from electoral violence merely as a form of political disorder to electoral violence as a **crisis of democratic legitimacy**. It examines how violence, insecurity and institutional weaknesses interacted during the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State and considers their implications for voter participation, institutional trust and democratic consolidation.

2. Statement of the Problem

Nigeria has maintained democratic government since 1999, but the continuation of elections has not necessarily translated into the consolidation of democratic norms and institutions.

A major obstacle is electoral violence. Violence can prevent citizens from voting, intimidate political opponents, disrupt election officials, damage electoral materials and undermine confidence in electoral institutions.

The problem becomes more serious where electoral violence occurs alongside institutional weaknesses. Delayed deployment of materials, malfunctioning equipment, insecurity and

uncertainty surrounding electoral procedures may reinforce citizens' perceptions that the electoral system is unreliable.

Anambra State provides an important case for examining these dynamics because the 2023 presidential election occurred against a background of serious insecurity. ACLED identified the South East as a major centre of pre-election violence and reported that Anambra was among the states experiencing significant violence involving electoral institutions and political actors.

At the same time, electoral technology was expected to strengthen public confidence. The failure of technological innovations to consistently meet public expectations risked transforming a reform intended to improve legitimacy into another source of institutional distrust.

The central problem addressed in this article is therefore the extent to which electoral violence and associated institutional weaknesses undermined **citizen participation, institutional trust and democratic legitimacy** during the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State.

3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective is to examine electoral violence and its implications for democratic legitimacy in Nigeria, using the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State as a case study.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. examine the forms and patterns of electoral violence associated with the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State;
2. identify the political, institutional, security and socioeconomic factors associated with electoral violence;
3. examine the implications of electoral violence for voter participation;
4. assess the relationship between electoral violence, institutional weaknesses and public confidence; and
5. examine the implications of electoral violence for democratic legitimacy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

4. Research Questions

1. What forms of electoral violence characterized the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State?

2. What factors contributed to electoral violence during the election?
3. How did electoral violence affect voter participation?
4. How did electoral violence and institutional weaknesses affect public confidence in electoral institutions?
5. What implications did electoral violence have for democratic legitimacy and democratic consolidation?

5. Conceptual Review

5.1 Electoral Violence

Electoral violence refers to the use or threat of physical, psychological, political or coercive force intended to influence electoral behaviour, disrupt electoral processes or affect electoral outcomes.

Electoral violence can occur throughout the electoral cycle.

Pre-election violence

This includes:

- political clashes;
- threats against opponents;
- attacks on party supporters;
- destruction of campaign facilities;
- intimidation; and
- politically motivated killings.

Election-day violence

This may involve:

- attacks on voters;
- disruption of polling;
- ballot destruction or snatching;

- attacks on electoral officials;
- destruction of electoral equipment; and
- intimidation at polling units.

Post-election violence

Post-election violence may emerge from:

- rejection of results;
- protests;
- political disputes;
- retaliatory attacks; and
- conflicts arising from electoral litigation.

Electoral violence should also be understood in structural terms. Administrative exclusion, inadequate infrastructure, insecurity and technological failures may restrict citizens' effective ability to participate even without direct physical assault.

5.2 Democratic Legitimacy

Democratic legitimacy refers to the extent to which citizens perceive political institutions and political authority as rightful, credible and acceptable.

Elections represent one of the principal mechanisms through which democratic legitimacy is produced. Citizens accept governments as legitimate partly because they believe that political authority derives from a credible electoral process.

Where citizens perceive elections as violent, manipulated or institutionally biased, legitimacy can become weakened.

Democratic legitimacy therefore depends not only on **who wins an election**, but also on **how the election is conducted**.

5.3 Voter Apathy

Voter apathy refers to declining interest or willingness among eligible citizens to participate in elections.

Electoral violence can generate voter apathy through fear, insecurity and political frustration. Citizens who believe that voting exposes them to danger or that electoral outcomes do not reflect their votes may become less willing to participate.

The result can be a self-reinforcing cycle:

Electoral violence → fear → reduced participation → weaker representation → declining institutional trust → further political disengagement.

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1 Elite Theory

Elite Theory provides an important framework for understanding electoral violence.

The theory emphasizes the concentration of political power among relatively small groups that possess disproportionate influence over political institutions and decision-making.

In highly competitive political systems, elites may seek to influence electoral processes to protect or expand their access to political power.

The theory is relevant to Nigeria because political office frequently provides access to significant political and economic resources. Consequently, electoral competition can become a high-stakes contest.

Where political actors believe that electoral defeat will result in substantial loss of political influence or access to resources, incentives for manipulation and intimidation may increase.

6.2 Prebendalism Theory

The study also employs Richard Joseph's concept of prebendalism.

Prebendalism describes a political environment in which public office is treated as a resource that can be used to provide benefits to political supporters and networks.

This framework helps explain why electoral competition may become intensely personalized.

Where political actors view public office as a means of accessing state resources, elections may be treated not merely as democratic contests but as struggles for control over distributive resources.

The combination of Elite Theory and Prebendalism therefore provides a useful analytical framework for examining electoral violence in Nigeria.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case-study design.

Anambra State was selected because of its political significance and the security challenges that affected electoral administration before and during the 2023 election.

7.2 Sources of Data

The study relied on secondary documentary sources, including:

- peer-reviewed journal articles;
- scholarly books;
- INEC publications;
- election observation reports;
- civil society reports;
- policy documents;
- conflict-monitoring reports; and
- credible media and institutional publications.

Particular attention was given to official and independent sources to improve the credibility of the analysis.

7.3 Method of Analysis

The data were subjected to thematic analysis.

The principal themes were:

1. forms of electoral violence;
2. institutional weaknesses;
3. political and socioeconomic drivers;
4. voter participation;

5. institutional trust; and
6. democratic legitimacy.

8. Findings

8.1 Electoral Violence in Anambra State

The evidence indicates that electoral violence in Anambra was multidimensional.

It included direct violence against persons and electoral institutions as well as structural conditions that restricted effective participation.

The security situation affected the preparation and administration of the election. INEC reported that electoral materials for several local government areas were handled differently because of insecurity. The commission also reported that 13 BVAS machines were missing as a result of electoral violence. (INEC Nigeria)

ACLED similarly documented attacks on electoral institutions in Anambra during the pre-election period. On 1 February 2023, for example, an unidentified armed group attacked an INEC office in Idemili South LGA, destroying election-related materials. (ACLED)

These developments demonstrate that violence affected not only voters but also the institutional infrastructure required for elections.

8.2 Institutional and Logistical Challenges

Institutional capacity emerged as another important theme.

Although INEC deployed BVAS and other technological mechanisms to improve electoral administration, the implementation environment was affected by insecurity and logistical constraints.

The INEC report indicates that the commission initially planned to use 2,063 vehicles in Anambra but ultimately had to expand transportation arrangements to 4,549 vehicles because of the security situation and operational demands. (INEC Nigeria)

This demonstrates that electoral technology cannot be separated from the broader administrative environment.

Technology requires:

- reliable electricity;

- network connectivity;
- trained personnel;
- transportation;
- physical security; and
- effective institutional coordination.

Without these conditions, technological reform may produce limited benefits.

8.3 Political Competition and Elite Interests

The findings support the proposition that political competition contributes to electoral violence where elections are perceived as high-stakes struggles.

Political elites and their networks may attempt to manipulate electoral processes where political office is strongly associated with access to resources.

The broader national evidence supports this interpretation. ACLED reported that political violence involving party supporters increased as the 2023 election approached and identified organized attacks against civilians, party supporters and electoral personnel among the principal patterns.

8.4 Insecurity and Voter Participation

Insecurity represented a major challenge to voter participation in Anambra.

Citizens who fear attacks may avoid polling stations or reduce their engagement with electoral activities.

Contemporary reporting from the election period illustrates this problem. On election day, voting had not commenced by the afternoon in some Anambra local government areas because of security concerns, while BVAS problems were also reported in some locations.

The implication is that insecurity can affect democracy even where citizens possess the formal legal right to vote.

8.5 Electoral Technology and Public Trust

The introduction of BVAS and IReV represented an important attempt to improve electoral transparency.

However, technological reform also raised public expectations.

When technology does not operate as expected, citizens may interpret technical failures as evidence of broader institutional weakness.

The experience of the 2023 election therefore illustrates an important principle:

Electoral technology can strengthen legitimacy only when it is supported by institutional competence, transparency and effective communication.

The problem is not necessarily technology itself but the institutional environment within which technology is implemented.

8.6 Electoral Violence and Voter Apathy

The evidence suggests that electoral insecurity contributed to conditions conducive to voter apathy.

Where citizens fear violence or doubt the ability of institutions to protect their votes, participation becomes less attractive.

This is particularly significant in a democratic system where legitimacy depends partly on meaningful citizen participation.

Low participation does not automatically mean that an election is illegitimate. However, persistent violence-induced disengagement can weaken the representative quality of electoral institutions.

8.7 Electoral Violence and Institutional Trust

Public confidence represents an important link between electoral violence and democratic legitimacy.

Citizens are more likely to accept election results when they believe that:

- electoral rules were fairly applied;
- electoral officials were neutral;
- votes were accurately counted;
- security agencies were professional;
- complaints were addressed; and
- electoral violations were punished.

Conversely, where citizens perceive institutional weakness, violence and irregularities, trust declines.

The 2023 election therefore generated a significant legitimacy challenge because disputes concerning electoral administration extended beyond the immediate voting process into broader debates about institutional credibility.

9. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that electoral violence is both a cause and consequence of institutional weakness.

Weak institutions create opportunities for political manipulation. At the same time, violence directed against electoral institutions further weakens their ability to perform their functions.

This creates a vicious cycle:

Institutional weakness → political manipulation → electoral violence → voter fear → reduced participation → declining trust → weakened legitimacy.

Elite Theory explains the role of political competition in this cycle. Where powerful actors perceive elections as essential to maintaining political dominance, incentives for manipulating electoral processes may increase.

Prebendalism complements this explanation by demonstrating why control of political office can become highly valuable.

The findings also demonstrate that socioeconomic conditions matter. Poverty, unemployment and youth vulnerability can provide conditions in which political actors mobilize individuals for disruptive activities.

The security environment further compounds the problem. ACLED's analysis of the 2023 election found substantial violence involving political actors and electoral institutions and identified the South East as one of the regions experiencing significant electoral violence.

Therefore, electoral violence in Nigeria cannot be addressed through election-day security alone. It requires long-term political, institutional and socioeconomic interventions.

10. Electoral Violence and the Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy

The central argument of this article is that electoral violence produces a legitimacy crisis through several interconnected mechanisms.

10.1 Violence reduces meaningful participation

Fear can prevent citizens from exercising their right to vote.

10.2 Violence weakens political equality

Citizens living in insecure communities may have fewer opportunities to participate than citizens in relatively secure environments.

10.3 Violence undermines institutional confidence

Repeated attacks, logistical failures and perceived electoral irregularities can reduce trust in electoral institutions.

10.4 Violence increases rejection of electoral outcomes

Where electoral processes are perceived as defective, losing candidates and their supporters may be less willing to accept results.

10.5 Violence weakens democratic consolidation

Democratic consolidation requires citizens and political elites to accept elections as the legitimate mechanism for political succession.

When violence becomes normalized, elections may cease to function effectively as peaceful mechanisms of political competition.

11. Implications for Democratic Consolidation

The findings have several implications for Nigeria's democratic development.

First, democratic consolidation requires more than conducting elections at regular intervals.

Second, electoral institutions must possess sufficient autonomy and capacity to administer elections effectively.

Third, political actors must accept electoral rules and reject violence as a legitimate political strategy.

Fourth, citizens must have confidence that their votes will be protected and accurately counted.

Fifth, electoral disputes must be resolved through credible judicial and institutional mechanisms.

Finally, democratic institutions must address the structural conditions that encourage political violence.

12. Conclusion

This article examined electoral violence and democratic legitimacy in Nigeria, focusing on the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State.

The findings establish that electoral violence was not simply a collection of isolated incidents. Rather, it occurred within a broader environment characterized by insecurity, political competition, institutional weaknesses, socioeconomic vulnerability and challenges associated with electoral administration.

The experience of Anambra demonstrates that electoral violence can affect democracy at several levels. It threatens physical security, disrupts electoral administration, discourages participation, weakens institutional trust and ultimately challenges democratic legitimacy.

Official INEC evidence demonstrates the practical consequences of insecurity for election administration, including substantial transportation challenges and the loss of electoral equipment through violence. Independent conflict-monitoring evidence similarly demonstrates that attacks against electoral institutions and political actors formed part of the broader electoral environment.

The study therefore concludes that Nigeria cannot achieve meaningful democratic consolidation by focusing exclusively on election-day procedures. The country must address the deeper political, institutional, security and socioeconomic conditions that make electoral violence possible.

Democratic legitimacy ultimately depends on citizens' belief that political power is acquired through credible, peaceful and inclusive electoral processes.

13. Recommendations

13.1 Strengthen INEC's Institutional Independence

The independence, professional capacity and operational resources of INEC should be strengthened to improve public confidence in electoral administration.

13.2 Enforce Electoral Laws

Electoral offences should be investigated and prosecuted consistently, regardless of the political status of perpetrators or sponsors.

13.3 Professionalize Election Security

Security agencies should receive specialized training in election security, human rights and democratic policing.

Security personnel should remain politically neutral and should protect voters, candidates and electoral officials without discrimination.

13.4 Strengthen Electoral Technology

BVAS and IReV should be continuously improved through:

- stronger digital infrastructure;
- adequate technical support;
- personnel training;
- cybersecurity;
- backup systems; and
- transparent contingency procedures.

13.5 Address Poverty and Youth Unemployment

Government should implement sustainable programmes addressing poverty, unemployment and socioeconomic exclusion, particularly among young people.

13.6 Strengthen Civic Education

Civic education should emphasize:

- peaceful participation;
- electoral rights;
- rejection of political violence;
- responsible political communication; and
- democratic accountability.

13.7 Regulate Political Financing

Greater transparency in campaign financing is required to reduce vote buying and the use of financial resources to mobilize political violence.

13.8 Strengthen Judicial Institutions

Electoral disputes should be resolved through timely, transparent and credible judicial processes.

13.9 Counter Electoral Misinformation

Electoral stakeholders should develop stronger mechanisms for identifying and correcting false information and inflammatory political narratives.

13.10 Promote Political Accountability

Political parties should discipline members involved in electoral violence and cooperate with law-enforcement agencies in prosecuting perpetrators.

14. Contribution to Knowledge

This article makes five principal contributions.

First: Localized evidence

It provides a focused analysis of Anambra State rather than treating electoral violence exclusively as a national phenomenon.

Second: Legitimacy perspective

It moves beyond the conventional treatment of electoral violence as a security problem by examining its consequences for democratic legitimacy and institutional trust.

Third: Theoretical integration

It demonstrates the complementary value of Elite Theory and Prebendalism in explaining political competition, patronage and electoral conflict.

Fourth: Technology and institutional capacity

The article contributes to contemporary debates by connecting electoral technology with broader questions of institutional capacity. The Anambra experience shows that technological innovations cannot independently resolve structural weaknesses.

Fifth: Policy relevance

The study links electoral violence to practical policy concerns involving electoral administration, security, socioeconomic empowerment, political accountability and civic participation.

15. Conceptual Model Emerging from the Study

The study proposes the following analytical relationship:

Elite competition + Prebendal politics + Socioeconomic vulnerability + Insecurity + Institutional weakness

⬇

Electoral manipulation and violence

⬇

Fear, intimidation and electoral disruption

⬇

Voter apathy and reduced participation

⬇

Declining institutional trust

⬇

Crisis of democratic legitimacy

⬇

Weak democratic consolidation

This model represents one of the paper's strongest potential contributions because it connects the **causes, mechanisms and consequences** of electoral violence rather than examining them as independent issues.

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