



THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN CURTAILING ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND SUSTAINING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

<sup>1</sup>Obasanjo S. Balogun, and <sup>2,\*</sup> Joseph O. Fayeye

<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate Student in the Department of Sociology, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's political landscape is faced with series of challenges and socio-political factors that portend hindrances to sustainable democratic governance. Over the years, the conduct of elections has been a problematic as violence remains the hallmark of Nigerian politics. Electoral violence has assumed a worrisome dimension in the Nigerian democratic system. Nearly all elections in Nigeria have been marred by violence. The spate of general election violence has formed a pattern resulting in threat to peace and order. The main objective of this paper is to assess the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in curtailing electoral violence and how they sustain democratic governance. The study used secondary data sources to analyze the issue of electoral violence and democratic governance in Nigeria. It concluded with policy options that could enhance the civil society organizations in playing more roles to forestall violence and sustain democratic governance in Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Jega (2007), in the Nigerian context, democracy is something much talked about, greatly aspired and strenuously struggled for. It is a set objective pursued with apparent vigor but not yet attained. It is an aspiration clearly cherished by many but is far from being realized. Democracy has turned out to be a sort of a mirage. Nigerians have been searching for democracy through constitutional reforms and transition programs and they have been continuously disappointed. Jega (2007) noted further that all practical purposes, democracy has remained elusive in Nigeria despite substantial expenditure in energy and resources, political engineering and experimentation. Whereas for many of the third world countries in the 1990s, the major concern was with democratic consolidation, in Nigeria, the primary concern has been how to end the vicious circle of military rule and bring about credible civilian democratic rule" (Jega, 2007:22). The position expressed by Jega (2007) presents a graphic summary of the situation among Nigerians in their long quest for democratic governance or the civilian rule. This was because the Nigerian political landscape had been dominated by the long years of military interregnum. Hence, the prayer for democratic governance was granted and the aspirations turned reality when on May 29, 1999, the military stepped aside by relinquishing power to the civilian-determined government. This transition however marked the beginning of the journey to the current Nigerian Fourth Republic. The Nigerians quest for democratic governance is premised on:

- the desire that democratic governance would

bring about social justice and equitable distribution of resources;

- the understanding that democratic governance would correct the present social and economic retardation and foster rapid social and economic development, thereby repositioning the country on a global space among the most vibrant economically developed nations;
- that democracy would definitely put an end to the present infrastructural decadence and inadequacies;
- an end to the notorious brutality and abuse of human rights, thereby ensuring safety of lives and property of the citizens, thus guarantee citizens' freedoms and rights;
- the rule of law that guarantee equality before the law, fair and timely dispensation of justice;
- the mandate of the people and their consent respected in the choice of their own leaders and representatives without imposition of candidates or representative;
- a maximum and prudence utilization of the collectively owned resources for human capital development and for collective good; and
- the transformation and restructuring of Nigeria for global social, economic and political development.

Despite the forgoing aspirations, democracy as a governance has been a disappointment to scholars, stakeholders, and above all, the citizens. This is because the system has not reciprocated the aspirations of the people. The system has witnessed so much electoral disturbances. According to Kukah (2010), in themselves, elections ought to be merely a

\*Corresponding author: josephfayeye@yahoo.com

mechanism for making it possible for persons to compete and win the right to hold certain public offices. Sadly, elections have become the greatest threat to the democratic ethos in Nigeria. Nigeria since its political independence and sovereignty has been characterized by series of politically motivated violence. These violence, no doubt have constituted setback to social, economic and political development. Corroborating the foregoing is the observation of Alemika (2011) that past elections in Nigeria were characterized by both psychological and physical violence. Soyinka (2011) lamented over the state of Nigerian nation especially the political violence that has characterized the polity in the past 10 years that was unprecedented in the country's history (Sunday Punch, 2011, p.13). Having witnessed so many unwarranted political or electoral violence in the past, Nigerian state still face the grim realities of threatened political instability, insecurity of lives and property occasioned by the present spate of the act of terrorism which no doubt is an offshoot of the same violent political agitations. These are rapidly setting the country on the path of adverse collapse unless urgent measures are put in place. This paper is thus interested in the roles played by the Civil Society Organizations in managing violence and sustaining democratic governance.

### Aims and Objectives

The aim of this paper is to examine the roles played by civil society organizations (CSOs) in curtailing electoral violence and sustaining democratic governance in Nigeria. To achieve this aim, the following specific objectives were proposed:

1. A conceptualization of key terms and issues in electoral violence in Nigeria.
2. An examination of the main factors in electoral violence in Nigeria.
3. An assessment of pattern of electoral violence in Nigeria.
4. An evaluation of the role of civil society organization in prevention of electoral violence in Nigeria.
5. The development of strategic options for improved roles of the civil society peace in building.

### Methodology

This paper is essentially a desk research with reliance on secondary sources of data in published outlets. Its scope is limited to issue and content analysis within the time frame of a decade between 2001 and 2011.

### Conceptual Clarifications:

For proper articulation of the problem addressed in this paper, the following key terms are clarified:

**Election:** According to Ogu (2011), election is the process of reaching a consensus on the representative of the citizen of a particular state in public offices. Ujo (2000) on the other hand conceived election as a procedure that allows members of an organization or community to choose representative who will hold position of authority within it. Ugiagbe (2010) noted that

elections are the acceptable means of effecting changes in government in contemporary democracies. Balogun (2003) also opined that elections are generally conceived as a means of peaceful change of leadership in societies. He added that elections empower ordinary citizens to choose among contestants for political offices and promote or encourage participation in governance.

**Violence:** Is defined as the use of physical force to injure somebody or damage something (Encarta Dictionary). Generally, violence involves the threat or use of physical force with the intention of injuring, killing and intimidating another person. It also involves destruction of property with a view to inflicting emotional or psychological injury and economic loss on another person (Alemika, 2011). Quoting Otite (1990), Balogun (2003) submitted that violence is an act against an individual or group, with the intent to cause injury or death. Violence and conflict arise from the pursuit of varying interests, goals and aspirations by individuals, and or groups. Violence is a fact of life, especially in plural societies like Nigeria and it could affect positive change.

**Electoral Violence:** This manifests in all forms of violence that emanate, at any stage, from differences in views, opinions and practices during the process of elections (Balogun, 2003). Igbuzor (2004) also conceived electoral violence as any act of violence perpetrated in the course of political activities including pre, during and post election periods and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral process.

**Electoral Process:** Electoral process refers to the method by which a person is elected to public office (<http://definitions.uslegal.com/e/electoral-process/>).

**Democratic Governance:** It is concept that emerged from the principles that are based on the understanding that an effective system of democratic governance is one which is based on representative, equitable (across gender and other categories), transparent, accountable and inclusive institutions; a vibrant, responsible and capable media; and a dynamic civil society which is engaged in the political process (Report of the Media Owners/Editors Forum, 2010).

**Democracy:** Although it is difficult to give a universal definition of democracy, some relevant conceptions are presented. According to Jega (2007) if there is any consensus on what democracy means, it is perhaps in relation to the understanding that it is not personal rule and that it is different from authoritarian/dictatorial rule. He noted further that it is based on some form of participation and/or representation. It is assumed that in a democratic political system, government derives legitimacy from the people. Government also exercises authority within the framework of a body of supreme laws called the constitution. Citizens have equal political rights to vote and be voted for.

According to Karl (1990:2) cited in Jega (2007:17) democracy is a set of institutions that permits the entire adult population to act as citizens by choosing their leading decision-makers in

competitive, fair and regular scheduled elections which are held in the context of the rule of law, guarantees for political freedom, and limited military prerogative. Furthermore, democracy, according to Hoffman and Graham (2009: 101) involves both direct participation and representation, and representation needs to be based on a sense that the representative can empathize with the problems of their constituents. All the forgoing lent credence to the conventional definition of democracy that is the government of the people, by the people and for the people. It provides elements for the rule by the majority and the involvement of the literally all citizens in the electoral process.

**Civil Society Organizations:** Civil society is composed of the totality of voluntary social relationships, civic and social organizations, and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society, as distinct from the force-backed structures of a state (regardless of that state's political system), the commercial institutions of the market, and private criminal organizations like the mafia. Together, state, market, civil society constitutes the entirety of a society, and the relations between these components determine the character of a society and its structure ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil\\_society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_society)). The London School of Economics Centre also defined Civil Society as the arena of unforced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

In the same vein, Schmitter (1997:240) as cited in Jega (2007: 246) conceptualizes it as a set or system of self-organised intermediary groups that:

- are relatively independent of both public authorities and private units of production, that is, of firms and families
- are capable of deliberating about and taking collective actions in defense or promotion of their interests or passions;
- do not seek to replace either the agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole; and
- agree to act within pre-established rules of civil nature that is, conveying mutual respect.

#### Factors that instigate Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Several factors have been identified and classified as instigating electoral violence in Nigeria.

1. **The nature of politics and citizen participation:** Kukah (2010) attributed sources of electoral violence to the essence of politics itself. He maintains that electoral violence persists because politics is the

means for the allocation of resources for the improvement of the human condition. When citizens are dissatisfied with governance the temptation to resort to violence is often presented as a just recourse to seeking justice and fairness. Perpetrators of violence do not see themselves as threatening the system. Rather they believe they are correcting it.

2. **Failure to adhere to political rule of the game:** Alemika (2011) notes that electoral violence in the country can be attributed to the actions and inactions of several actors who are determined to secure or retain political power without adhering to the rules of democratic competitive elections. He added that the long-term negative effects of electoral fraud and violence negate national integration, security and development.
3. **Low capacity of the state to manage violence:** Claude Ake (1996: 73) as cited by Alemika (2011) maintains that: The state is appeared privatized because it remains an enormous force but no longer a public force that can guarantee the rule of law but a formidable threat to all except the few who control it. Lawlessness and the low capacity of the state to mediate conflicts heighten electoral violence. In such a privatized state, those in power use violence and state repressive apparatus to retain power at all cost. Those who are excluded from governance will resort to violence in their quest for office.
4. **Outright state failure:** Kukah (2010) also emphasizes that the persistence of violence in almost every area of Nigeria national life is a symptom of the weakness of the apparatus of the state. Electoral violence is merely an extension of a series of expressions of violence arising from the widespread frustration of joblessness, lack of infrastructure, weakness and corruption of state institutions, poverty and so on. He noted that a state that is unable to meet its obligation to its citizens loses any right to make citizens comply with basic tenets of human conduct and decency.
5. **Poor deterrence in penal policy:** The recurring menaces of electoral violence are occasioned by the inability of the government to mete out punishments to the perpetrators. So the culture of impunity gives the perpetrator the *freedom* to trample upon the traps of the criminal law without being trapped or caught (Kukah 2010).
6. **Other factors:** Several other factors like poverty, lapses in security sector, culture of impunity, corruption, lack of political education, greediness, perceived marginalization, ethnicity, problem of the political elite, misplacement of priorities, and problem of integrated political culture and civic education among others.

#### Patterns of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Electoral violence in Nigeria takes different forms and patterns. It has been broadly categorised into two groups by Ogunkunle (2011). The first is psychological violence. This includes destruction of posters belonging to political opponents, intimidation, use of media, threat laden songs among others. The second category is physical violence.

These includes physical or direct attacks which result in assault, grievous bodily harm, death, disruption of meetings or campaigns among others. Generally, these electoral violence usually occur before, during, and after elections. It is often directed to the political opponents, loyalists, electoral officials, and the larger community. Some major forms of manifestations of electoral violence in Nigeria include: arsons, assassinations or murder, violent protest, assaults, ballots snatching, destruction of election materials, kidnapping and civil disobedience.

### **The Civil Society Organizations Role in Curtailing Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

All over the world civil society organizations are at the center of promoting good democratic governance and ensuring a human-centered development programmes. In the past, civil society organizations were in the vanguard for positive change in Nigeria. The presence of civil society in the Nationalists Movements of the colonial days both in Nigeria as in other African States is noteworthy. In Nigeria, the civil society organizations as Pro-Democracy Movements were active from the mid 1980s till the May 29, 1999 when Nigeria was returned to democracy. For instance, the 1990s saw the most heated anti-military Campaigns and Movements championed by National Alliance for Democratic Coalition (NADECO), Women In Nigeria (WIN), Campaign for Democracy (CD) and other civil groups became thorns in the flesh of the military regimes, and enhanced democratic transition. The above position was reinforced in the assertion that the Nigerian civil society has profound roles to play in sustaining democracy in Nigeria. These roles the civil society has played historically in all societies which have succeeded in becoming mature democracies, as well as societies which are striving to consolidate their fledging transition democracy (Jega, 2007:245, Schmitter, 1997). Jega (2007:245) noted further that the Nigerian civil society has a responsibility to play a positive role in meeting the enormous challenges, if not obstacles pose to national aspirations for a successful civilian transition, as well as democratic consolidation and sustainability. These CSOs roles are contained in what may be termed directional guide in curtailing electoral violence in Nigeria.

#### **a. Liberation Role:**

The liberation role of the civil society and its integrated organizations in curtailing the electoral violence in Nigeria is tied to mass education and political socialization. The continued existence of electoral violence in Nigeria is directly linked to lack of adequate knowledge or familiarity with the basic principles of democracy mostly among the general populace. The liberation role is therefore a process which the civil society organizations had focused through activities that practically educating the Nigerian society especially the masses about the profound ideas and benefits of democratic governance. The improved knowledge of the electorates about the principles of democracy is able to foster their willingness and readiness to shun electoral violence and concentrate more on building consolidated democratic system of governance in Nigeria. Although, Obasola (2011) asserted that it is obvious that the campaign against political violence and unwarranted

killings has not yielded results; the liberation role of CSOs cannot be thrown overboard.

#### **b. Collaborative Role:**

As an imperative role, the civil society organizations collaborate with other related and relevant agencies of the government, especially the security sector, and the media as well to unravel past culprits of the electoral/political violence so as to bring them to book. The Nigerian civil society organizations also seek justice and mount pressures on the government to deter perpetrators of electoral violence through quick dispensation of justice. The culture of impunity has contributed to the escalation of all kinds of criminalities including electoral violence in Nigeria. This role has led to the constitution of panels, commissions, inter-agencies joint efforts in curtailing electoral violence. Critics are quick to add that it is not enough to bemoan the rising spate of violence; that there are no need for commission or panel of enquiry into the frequent uprisings and killings. The government and the security agencies should make necessary arrests and mete out adequate punishment where necessary (Obasola, 2011).

#### **c. Re-Orientation Role**

This role is more latent than manifest in the body politic of Nigeria. CSOs are expected to give the political elites and leaders a sense of reasoning to live on or ponder about. This pertains to good governance and the promotion of good image for Nigeria. Literally, the CSOs are expected to call back home political leaders and politicians to the imperative task of building an integrated Nigeria. When CSO effectively carry this out, it should ensure that leaders are accountable, transparent and honest in their dealings with the collectively owned resources. The importance of the imperative re-orientation role of the civil society organizations is obvious in that it is argued that the horrendous bloodshed during elections in the country is often triggered by high estate electoral contests over power and the spoils of office. Furthermore, International Crises Group observed that 'the oil revenues are considered-nearly \$74 billion in 2008 alone-but 92 percent of Nigerians live on less than \$2 a day and 70 percent on less than \$1. The group added that the social indicators, especially in the north, are among the world's worst. In some region, the state offers no water, electricity or education while unemployment, especially among youths is widespread (Sunday Punch 2011, p.13).

#### **Conclusion**

Electoral violence is a serious challenge to the Nigerians quest for democratic governance. It has posed a serious threat to her democratic consolidation. It must be addressed with all sense of seriousness using every available means within the framework of laws. The causes of this menace are attributed to various factors such as the prolonged military rules, the perceived incompatibility nature of the people that composed Nigeria, the long years of state neglect of its statutory obligation to the citizenry, perceived marginalization, politics of exclusion and inclusions, issue of poverty, unemployment, mismanagement of collectively owned resources, corruption, culture of impunity, lack of integrated political culture among others. The civil society organizations (CSOs) play various

roles in curtailing electoral violence and sustenance of democracy. These roles include librating, collaborative and re-orientation. The extent of performance in terms of effectiveness was not emphasized in this paper. However a valid conclusion here is that violence would escalate and good democratic governance would be a fugitive utopia in the absence of manifest and latent roles of civil society organizations in Nigeria.

### Recommendations

The following are recommendations made to enhance the CSOs roles in curtailing violence and sustenance of democratic government in Nigeria.

- Civil society should be strengthened by the government at Federal, State and Local levels for effectiveness.
- Civic education should be redefined and revised and incorporated into the school curricula at all levels with emphasis on formation and functionality of CSOs
- There should be even distribution of collectively owned resources to ensure that dividends of democracy are felt even at the grass-root level in Nigeria.
- Government should be more accountable and transparent to promote citizen participation.
- Youths should be empowered to engage in productive service to reduce been mobilized for political violence.
- Religions should be separated from partisan politics with good governance, accountability and transparency as bench marks.
- The entire citizenry should be involved in positive nation building project in response to mobilization from CSOs.
- Security sector should be strengthened to be more proactive to avoid been pressurized by CSOs.
- Culprits of the electoral violence should be prosecuted and punished appropriately to avoid agitation and pressure of CSOs for fair hearing and quick dispensation of justice.
- Civil society organizations should be more proactive. They should not wait for problems to occur or live by the moment, but rather they should see the campaign against electoral violence as an ongoing project.
- Civil society organizations should move beyond holding seminars or workshop in hotels and resort centres. They should reach out to villages and communities, city centre and market squares to propagate the ideals of democracy.

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