Election Violence, Electoral Integrity in Nigeria's Democratic Process, 1999-2023

Mbadugha, Peter Chukwuemeka
Department of Political Science,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Port Harcourt
Email: Pmbadugha@Gmail.Com

Chukwu, Doris
Department of Political Science,
Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Port Harcourt

https://doi.org/10.56201/jpslr.vol.12.no11.2026.pg1.18

Abstract
The study focused on election violence and electoral integrity in the democratic process in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023. One of the major problems in the Nigerian electoral system has been the frequent occurrence of electoral violence and a low credibility of the electoral institutions that intensifies the threat of electoral instability and undermines electoral consolidation. The study examined the interrelatedness of those factors affecting electoral results, the legitimacy of the electoral processes, and sustainability of peace in Nigeria in the Fourth Republic. A historical research design was employed and secondary data sources to collect pertinent information. The method of data analysis used was Content Analysis, to systematically interpret the relevant content. The theoretical construct used was the Elite Theory that posits that dominant political elites have the ability to tip the electoral process in favour of them, affect the electoral institutions at their disposal and give the final outcomes a twist to support their interests in Nigeria's competitive political system. The study discovered that electoral violence has a significant impact on electoral integrity, namely in the distortion of electoral results, public doubt in electoral institutions and the waning legitimacy of the electoral process. It also showed that electoral tensions are only worsening due to a lack of proper observance of electoral laws, lack of efficiency in electoral institutions, and electoral process manipulation by elites. The study made several recommendations on strengthening electoral institutions, strict implementation of the electoral laws, and strengthening the independence of electoral management bodies. These reforms are required to diminish election violence and improve the integrity of elections as well as to ensure sustainable peace and democratic consolidation of Nigeria.

Keywords: *Election Violence, Electoral Integrity, Peacebuilding, Democracy.*

1. Introduction

In 1999 the country began its return to democratic rule following years of military rule which was hoped to bring political stability. The Nigerians expected that the rule of law would bring peace during elections with a non-violent administration and less political conflicts in the country. But the experience in the last elections since 1999 indicated that this desired outcome has not been fully realised, due to certain challenges (Ojakorotu et al., 2025; Okoye et al., 2025). Rather, politics, and elections have more often been linked to violence, political tension, and insecurity. Competition in Nigeria is getting fiercer over the years and this has made Nigeria more vulnerable to electoral violence. Political leadership has been transformed from a relatively peaceful election to a ring for political power as a result of the close linkage between political control and economic resources and government benefits (Agidi, 2022; Oshinfowokan, 2024).

Hence, election violence in Nigeria now constitutes one of the most perilous threats to democracy in Nigeria. Some parts of the country have experienced the loss of lives, destruction of property and displacement of many people due to violence during elections. Along with physical violence, election periods also see threats, intimidation of voters and attacks on political opponents. Such issues have diminished peoples' trust in elections and hindered many people's involvement in the electoral process. Elections that are seen as unsafe result in lower voter turnouts and lessen the trust in the democratic system (Obani et al., 2025; Chineyemba et al., 2024).

The issue of electoral integrity in Nigeria is one of the key issues that can be cited as a foundational cause of election violence in Nigeria. Electoral integrity in Nigeria is a challenge. Electoral integrity is about the transparency and fairness of election and the credibility in conducting these elections (Long, 2022). Citizens who perceive that elections are rigged, will be angrier and more frustrated. Recently, a number of studies have revealed that issues like rigging, intimidation of voters, and tampering with electoral results have eroded the confidence in the electoral process. Difficulties with peaceful elections arise when people do not have faith in the electoral system. This indicates that electoral integrity and peace building are closely intertwined as credible elections are very important for political stability (Udokwu, et al.,2024; Ogbadebo, 2024).

Political elites' attitude is another key consideration that fuels election violence in Nigeria. Election violence can be organised and encouraged by political actors with an ambition to win elections at all costs, as posited by Alozie et al (2025). Some politicians resort to violence, rather than democracy, to intimidate voters and demoralize political opponents. This has fostered a political climate that has become normalised where violence is considered an acceptable form of politics. In a study of Nigeria elections, Oshinfowokan, 2024, has demonstrated that the political elites still exert significant influence in retaining the election violence especially the general elections of 2019 and 2023. Identity-based politics has also been a major factor to election violence in Nigeria. Ethnic, religious and regional differences influence country-wide political competition. Political figures tend to favour policies that can appeal to their ethnic and religious identity rather than betterment of citizens' lives. This has led to a clash between elections as a contest amongst different groups as opposed to a democratic competition between political ideas (Chineyemba et al., 2024).

Poverty and unemployment have also contributed to election violence at a moderate level in Nigeria. A vast number of youths in the country are experiencing grave financial hardships and as a result are susceptible to being manipulated by the political powers (Zlobina et al., 2024). During electoral campaigns, politicians often hire young people without jobs, and have them serve as thugs for them. Such young people are not strangers to intimidating voters, attacking those opposing them and mischief-making in the process of voting. As a result of these socioeconomic issues like

poverty and unemployment, it has become easier for political actors to recruit young people into the realm of violent political acts (Agidi explained 2022).

Political participation in Nigeria has also been greatly affected by election violence (Udokwu et al., 2024). So, in a violent election, many citizens do not want to cast their votes, due to fear for their safety. In lieu of attending a democracy establishment of their vote, people may remain at home to avoid being involved in violence. Election violence has been a menace to Nigerian elections with its adverse effect on voter apathy in different parts of Nigeria as observed by Oladele (2025) and Ogbadebo (2024). African countries, in which citizens do not actively engage in elections, tend to have diminished democratic authority (Oshinfowokan, 2024). One of the key issues responsible for the serious problem of election violence in Nigeria is lack of accountability. Many elections see government authorities conduct post-election investigations into the causes of violence, and those who caused the violence are rarely punished. This has established a culture of impunity where the use of violence is seen as a source of impunity to use by political actors without the possibility of incurring significant repercussions. Violence during elections has been attributed to the inadequate accountabilities as stated in several recent studies, (Agidi, 2022; Idowu, 2023).

2. Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's move towards democracy in 1999 led to hopes for political stability and democratic consolidation and for credible elections. There have been a number of democratic transitions and growing political involvement in the country since then. However, despite these advances, election related violence has remained a threat to the enduring sustainability of Nigeria's democracy, the integrity of the electoral process and national peace and stability. Since 2010, election violence has been an all too common feature during electoral episodes in Nigeria, pre-, during, and after elections. Intimidation of voters, physical attacks, damage to electoral materials, snatching of ballot boxes, politically motivated killings and fights between party supporters are among the violent acts that often take place during elections. In Nigeria, such occurrences remain to erode the credibility, transparency and fairness of the elections. There is often fear, tension and insecurity in Nigeria's elections instead of them being part of a peaceful contest for political office and leadership. Election violence has seriously undermined public trust in democracy and election results. Often citizens are dissuaded from exercising their right to vote because of the lack of security and politics manipulation. It is not just about turnout it's about the validity of elected governments and the democratic process. Ambivalent behaviour has been amongst the causes of unease between the electorate, political volatility, forced removals, loss of life and livelihoods, ethnic and religious tensions, in various regions of India, due to election violence.

The issue has been seen in several elections in Nigeria. Vigorous criticism was heard during the 2007 general elections which were marked by high levels of irregularities and violence there, particularly in parts of northern Nigeria, where violent crimes occurred after the 2011 elections. The various allegations of intimidation, attacks to the electoral process, electoral malpractices and legal row during the recent general elections in 2023 have added to the challenge of electoral integrity in Nigeria and the fragility of its electoral systems. While there have been government institution, electoral body, civil society and security agency initiatives aimed at encouraging peaceful elections, there is a widespread prevalence of election violence. Yet, the implementation and effectiveness of the current mechanisms of peacebuilding or conflict management in the Nigerian socio-political settings are not optimal in averting or curbing election related violence.

3. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine how election violence affects electoral integrity in Nigeria's democratic process. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. investigate the nature and patterns of election violence in Nigeria's democratic process.
2. evaluate the effects of election violence on electoral integrity and democratic legitimacy in Nigeria.

4. Conceptual Clarification

The Concept of Election

Elections play a crucial role in democratic governance, providing opportunities for citizen expression of political will and accountability of leaders. Elections play a vital role in democracy by giving the desire of voters a voice and allowing for peacefully handed-down power. Electoral processes and their outcome are vitally important for building legitimacy and democratic consolidation as well as pacifying political instability (Lindberg, 2006). Throughout the world, elections are considered to be the best and most transparent way of changing governments in a democratic environment. They give citizens the ability to decide how, when and who will govern them. In the twenty-first century, elections have been as successful as they have been in any country at the election of leaders and as faithful as any available way to engage in the governance process. In recent years, the election has been used as a device to underwrite government leadership—when the government doesn't practice and believe in democracy on principle. Mediation is an integral part of election politics whenever there is controversy. But an election is a longstanding situation in every democracy inscribed in the nation's constitution. Typically, their watchdog would be an electoral body or commission is mentioned. The Nigerian Constitution of 1999 provides that INEC must conduct the elections. In today's states, elections are periodic, with variations in frequency from country to country. (Ejue and Ekanen, 2011; Birch and Muchlinski, 2017). Elections are an integral part of democratic governance; they offer available channels for citizens to voice their political inclinations, choose their leaders, and shape the direction of their policies. Elections are a key tool of representation that can provide legitimacy to governments, which is essential to ensure that they have received their mandate from the 'consent of the governed'. Moreover, elections are both about who becomes a leader and also about holding leaders accountable, as a way of providing an opportunity for the electorate to "reward" or "punish" the leaders of the country for their performance in office. Concept of elections has changed over the years and influenced by the historical, political and socio-economic context. Elections have been a part of transformation in society from a brief history of the electoral democracy in ancient Greece to the multi-party electoral systems of the modern nations. Today, elections take place in different sorts of political systems, from deeply democratic to semi democratic to authoritarian, and vary in degree of electoral integrity and competitiveness. This conceptual review focuses on the importance of elections, their meanings, properties, variance and conceptual theories. Generally, elections can be described as an organized procedure in which citizens choose representatives to fill public offices (Norris, 2014).

The Concept of Election Violence

Election violence hampers and weakens the electoral process and democratic consolidation. These concerns have surfaced about its implications on political security, socio-economic development and civic space. Dele (2016) cited election violence as an election conflict with various forms of action, whether spontaneous or coordinated, planned to manipulate, obstruct or affect an election

system. The acts can includeform of intimidation, for example through threats or verbal abuse, hate speech, false information, physical attacks, coercion with the excuse of protection, blackmail, the destruction of property, or even murder. Albert (2014) believes that election violence encompasses all types of organized acts that target political opponents or the political actors themselves, including physical violence, death threats, intimidation and extortion. They happen before, during and after an election on the mission of changing, obstructing or influencing the political climate. Based on the work of Ogundiya and Baba (2015), election violence refer to any type of behaviour that disrupts an election process through such means as riots, rally, inter-particip fights, political assassinating, kidnapping, thuggery and arson. The incidents take place before, during and after elections – whether they are electoral or spontaneous. Election Violence was defined by Igbuzor (2010) as violent acts which could happen and be linked to political activities both before and during elections, and after election exercise. These acts might involve thuggery, the use of force in disrupting political meetings or voting at polling stations or the use of dangerous weapons for intimidation of voters or any persons involved in the election process with the effect of causing bodily harm or injury.

Election violence has been among most adverse factors that has militated against democratic consolidation (Klaus, 2017). In many nations, elections are not viewed as a means to peaceful political change but as theaters for political parties to use violence as a political instrument for gaining power. In this type of conflict, journalists and media outlets that attempt to report on election processes or dissect election fraud are also targeted, thus reducing space for independent journalist reporting and the ability of information to flow freely in the country. Media outlets become complicit or more and more silenced and the public is denied the chance to hear impartial and unbiased information (Höglund, 2009).

The Concept of Electoral Integrity

Ensuring electoral integrity is a key element in the process of consolidating a democracy, since it is what determines the credibility of elections, the legitimacy of political leadership and public trust in democratic institutions. The controversy surrounding the issue of integrity has focused to a greater extent on what it is not than what it is. On the one hand, Schedler (2002) and Birch (2011 believe that the behaviour of incumbent governments in trying to manipulate the choice of electorates by setting a legal framework and influencing electoral umpires to design a slanted system compromises the principle of fair play and puts a stain on electoral integrity. However, the Inter Parliamentary Council (1994) claims that organising a free and fair election in compliance with the electoral procedure is what entails electoral credibility. This includes an up-to-date register of voters, free expression of franchise by all citizens who have attained the prescribed age of adulthood, vote sorting and counting without hindrance and announcement of results fairly. Norris (2014), Electoral integrity can be defined "as a holistic or comprehensive observance of the electoral laws guiding electoral conduct of a country throughout the electoral cycle through which a collective will of the people can be achieved and upon which the election can meet international standard". It's important to see that these definitions cover nomination process and election cycle and good governance. In the acceptance of the necessity to uphold integrity, academics designed a methodological and theoretical basis to assess it through the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP), at Harvard University and the University of Sydney in Australia, which was coordinated by Pippa Norris. An interesting aspect is that their academic exercise has consistently remained known and followed internationally to this day with followers from countries such as the US, Nigeria, Mexico etc. They have provided these measures to both local

and international organizations to evaluate elections and the electoral process. It provides them with the necessary precision to call the electoral process fair, credible, free or unworthy of such characterization because manipulated, malpracticed or even fake. (Bjornlund, 2004; Reynolds, 2005; Young, 2009; Vickery and Shein, 2012). They pointed out the yardsticks would help the security agencies and courts to monitor and impose sanctions upon violators of the electoral procedure. And the press would continue to spread the message of malfeasance in the electoral procedure.

The Concept of Democracy

Democracy can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, the city-state of Athens in the fifth century B.C. The term democracy comes from two Greek words: 'demos' which translate to people and 'Kratos' which means power or rule. Democracy is thus translated as 'rule by the people' but first meant 'rule by the poor' or the 'masses'. Many scholars and statesmen have variously understood the word democracy, with some focusing on various facets of the process. People like Democracy form of government more than any other of this world country. Some of its simple characteristics are conditions necessary to any really democratic society. These include the principle of equality; sovereignty of the people; respect for human rights, the rule of law; and liberty of the individual (Mark, 2013). Democracy is a concept that in theory and practice holds the right of the people to choose their leaders who in turn, must be accountable to the people as of right. As cited by Omoleke (2009) in Euginia (2010), democracy is system of government, a set of institution that functions at least two important factors which are able to consult majority number of people out of a nation about who is to be their representation and how the nation ought to be controlled. This implies universal suffrage, institutionalization of free and proper elections every period of time, elected representatives should be responsible to the electorate. One of the key characteristics of democracy is that rules in which everyone plays the game shall be agreed upon. democracy, as such, is about accountability and a system of government that protects a variety of social, economic and political rights. Scholars have not come up with a single definition of democracy as Lucky (2014) suggests. Indeed, as a discursive category, democracy has inspired an enormous amount of scholarship, underpinned largely by the diversity of experience of the countries and the various narratives that follow the experience lived in democracy (Kothari, 2007; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2005). Democracy is more than just a set of specific government institutions; it rests upon a well-understood group of values, attitudes, and practices – all of which may take different forms and expressions among different cultures and societies around the world. These are some of the essential attributes and principles of democracy:

1. Democracy is a political system that gives power and democratic responsibility to all adult citizens, either directly or through their freely elected representatives.
2. The accepted principle of democracy is majority rule, i.e., decisions are made by the majority, and they must be accepted by them, their viewpoints are respected and protected.
3. Democracies protect against over-monopolising state decision-making at the central level, and decentralise governmental decision-making as much as possible, since increasingly all governmental levels need to be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.
4. Democracies recognise that some of their important purposes are to defend such fundamental human rights as freedom of speech and religion; equality before the law; and freedom to organise and participate effectively in their political, economic and cultural life.
5. In democracies, free and fair elections are held periodically, and are open to all people of voting age.

6. In a democracy, citizens are endowed with rights, which come with a responsibility for them to engage in political processes that safeguard their rights and freedoms.
7. Democratic societies uphold values of tolerance, co-operation and compromise.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study was decided to be carried out with the theoretical approach of "elite theory". According to this theory, there is a multi-faceted interdependency of electoral behaviour and democracy in Nigeria that can be analyzed with this lens. On the other hand, according to David in 2009, theory is an abstract generalization concerning a particular phenomenon. Theories, like architectural plans, shape our perception of our " surrounding realities".

This was the theory of the elite, which was recently promoted by Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels. Originating in the field of political philosophy, the Elite Theory aims to elaborate on the concept of leadership in the context of governance, its effects in socioeconomic and political arenas. It espouses ideology that power in any state or institution is primarily held by certain select groups or factions – the elites. Based on elitism theory, as articulated by Perry and Perry (2003), it is a theory that justifies superior accomplishments and certain popularity among a privileged group of people or products as the sole source of wealth, power, influence, and prestige. The idea put forward in this theory is that any sort of consensus that is perceived for the society actually is a creation of these elites. They have proved their influence in the ability they have in manipulating the masses, particularly in the realm of mass media that they exert a strong influence in. Some of the elite theory's more prominent advocates are Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923); Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941); and Robert Michel (1876-1936) to name a few. According to Mosca (1939) in his perspective human societies are divided into two main groups: The Rulers (the elites) and The Ruled (the masses). He suggests that although this is a minority group in number, this ruling class has been dominating the power and reaping the benefits that comes with it. On the other hand, most of the population, the masses, are simply reduced to living on a subsistence level and governed by the leadership class. Mosca advocates the idea that power is held by a well-established minority, with more power than the majority because of their different characteristics: the ability to reach consensus on the different sides, cohesiveness and consciousness.

1. The Elite Theory is constructed upon several key assumptions, as follows:

i. The society is divided into two groups, the few who are considered competent, and thus entitled to the top positions in the society, and the vast majority who will be ruled.

ii. Most are basically apathetic, idle, and woefully unaware of the complexities of administrative systems and thus incapable of autonomous rule. Thus, elite groups have a say in the structural organisation, staff selection and policy formulation of these administrative systems.

iii. Overall structure, substance and performance of the administrative system reflect and mirror the preferences and values of the governing elite (2013, Mark).

Overall, the Elite Theory gives useful insights into the dynamics of election violence, electoral integrity, and peacebuilding within the Nigerian democratic process since 1999. The Nigerian political theory advanced by Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels interprets the politics of Nigeria as being run by a few small powerful elites who dominate political power, government institutions and decision making processes. In this sense electoral competition is not just democratic, but a conflict between elite factions, concerning the manipulation of state resources and political power. These elites in Nigeria create electoral outcomes by engaging in

patronizing dynamics, political godfatherism and effective mobilization of both formal and informal tools of power such as control of electoral institutions and security agencies.

6. Results and Discussion

Nature and Patterns of Election Violence in Nigeria's Democratic Process

Election violence in Nigeria comes in various shades, dimensions and trajectories, and has been observed since the return to civilian rule in 1999. The driving forces behind excessive political contestation, the inability to enforce institutions and winner-takes-all politics combine to generate incentives for violent strategies in electoral competition in Nigeria. There are various, widespread arguments that violence is a tool of electoral competition in contexts in which political victories translate into economic rewards.It consistently has been argued that in contexts where political victories mean economic rewards, violence is a tool of electoral competition, not an exception to it (Bekoe, 2012; LeBas, 2011). Electoral violence in the context of Nigeria, is therefore not accidental, but rather a part of the political-economic survival and competitive strategy (Bratton, 2008; Omotola, 2010). Voter intimidation and voter coercion claims by the presence of gunmen around polling units and threats or harassment is among the most common election related violent activities reported. Recent experiences of elections in Nigeria showed that intimidation had a strong influence on voters' voting behaviour, especially in close-race contests like Rivers, Lagos and Kano (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2019). Armed groups around polls had been widely documented and has been established as a deterrence to voters especially opposition strongholds (Ewi & Akinrinde, 2020). This is consistent with the general empirical evidence, that exposure to electoral violence lowers turnout, and undermines electoral legitimacy (Collier & Vicente, 2014). This intimidation has helped reduce voting participation in Nigeria - it dropped from 69.1% in 2003 to 35.6% in 2019, as recorded by official figures from the Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC] (2020) Not only is it a statistical reduction but an increase in public anxiety over electoral insecurity/violence.

Another closely related is political thuggery that is very common and one of the most institutionalized ways of winning over people in elections in Nigeria. Political thuggery is defined as mobilization and use of the young without jobs and criminal elements by political elites to wreak havoc on the elections, attack political opponents and contaminate the election process. Political actors in Ethiopia also resorted to organized gangs to meet the State's electoral goals during the 2007 polls, exacerbating the violence and resulting in more than 300 election-related deaths, according to Human Rights Watch (2007). Later studies have found that political violence in Nigeria is routinely delegated to informal armed groups that are given political immunity in essence (Ikelegbe, 2013; Akinola, 2017). This has been associated with poverty and structural unemployment, and is a risk indicator of political exploitation of young people (Uddin & Ukoji, 2017). The high rate of unemployment which was at more than 33% in 2020 has been identified as one of the enabling factors for recruitment into electoral violence networks in Nigeria (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020). This will be interpreted as straight relationship between socio-economic deprivation and political violence mobilisation.

Ballot box stealing is another major electoral violence which directly affects electoral integrity. This type of violence is frequently used as a tactic to curtail voting or sway outcomes to benefit those with the most power in society. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2019) recorded more than 600 cases of electoral violence in the 2019 general elections, among other incidents, which included attacks on polling units, damage to ballot boxes and disruptions to vote counting process. Likewise, in many States, the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (2019)

recorded systematic electoral materials attacks by armed groups as well as attacks on election Officials. These events contribute to a lessening of procedural legitimacy, since high-quality elections cannot deliver meaningful results without safe polling conditions (Norris 2014) Balakot's devastation of electoral materials also upsets the administrative expenses and causes cancellation or rerun of the elections which also diminishes public trust in the electoral management institutions. Political assassination and targeted killings can be considered as an extreme manifestation of electoral violence in Nigeria. The killings tend often to be associated with-party tension, contestation for party positions and political offices. It is noted that Nigeria's political violence is not only inter-party but also intra party with members of the same party carrying out violent elimination strategies (Albert, 2012; Ifesinachi & Aniche, 2014). Elaborate attacks on politically motivated killings were noted before the 2023 elections by International Crisis Group (2023), which cited prominent instances of such attacks in Imo, Kogi and Anambra states. When approached from a partisan perspective, political killings open a space of fear limiting the involvement and credibility of any political contenders and strengthening the concentration of power by the elites. This violence "can affect democratic erosion by decreasing competition among the political parties, and enhancing the dominance of the political elites," Adigbuo (2018) noted.
The second growing dimension is hating speech, political incitement which has gained in importance greatly due to the development of the digital communication platforms. In Nigeria, hate speech is frequently based on ethnic, religious, and regional ethnicities to mobilise behind ones side and denigrate opponents in the course of elections. Researchers have established that politically charged talk can drastically inflate the chances of intergroup violence in divided societies, as evidenced by empirical studies (Claassen, 2016). The Electoral Act and monitoring organisations have on numerous occasions raised alarm on the use of inflammatory political messages during the electoral campaigns in Nigeria In etc. (2023). In the 2023 elections, there have been vast amounts of misinformation and hate speech spread on social media, which has heightened political polarization (Ogbette & Orga, 2021). The function of digital media in electoral violence resonates with the global patterns found in the literature, which suggest that Internet-based political communication has a potential for aggravating offline political violence in fragile democracies (Guess et al., 2020). Another salient aspect of electoral violence in Nigeria is the use of violence by security force officers. Domestic security agencies have their duty of providing electoral order, but several instances of illegal use of force in elections have been reported. Amnesty International (2019) noted the use of live ammunition against security operatives who were causing disturbance at elections in some states, causing losses of lives. This poses a risk to professionalism, accountability and neutrality in security institutions. Empirical research reveals that electoral violence is more likely to grow than diminish when state security actors are seen as partisan (Daxecker, 2012).

Recorded Cases of Election Violence Across Election Cycles and Regional Distribution of Election Violence in Nigeria

Looking back at the history of the Nigerian electoral processes from 1999 to 2023, a clear trend of electoral insecurity has been observed that is entrenched in the system and has affected democratic consolidation. The available evidence provided by the various election monitoring organisations, civil society election data and international election observation missions to date suggests that election violence in Nigeria is not episodic but repetitive, getting more intense during e-arthing and easing slightly between elections. Over the several election rounds, data on violence reveals that Nigeria's electoral procedure has always been susceptible to coercion, intimidation and peace

disruption by political actors. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2019) recorded hundreds of violent incidents only during the 2019 elections, and the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) indicated that election-related violence has been instrumental in displacing and maiming individuals and disrupting electoral processes in all election years since 1999 (ACLED, 2023). The analysis of these patterns show that electoral violence incidents in Nigeria are not only recurrent but also adaptive, mutating in nature and intensity with the changes of political competition, institutional capacity and the security responses.

Looking at the process from end to end, there is no doubt that both 2003 and 2007 were the start of episodic massive electoral violence in the Fourth Republic of which the 2007 elections are to be considered as one of the most violent and blood-soaked electoral events in the historical history of the country under a democratic dispensation. The Human Rights Watch (2007) noted the pervasive practice of killings, political intimidation, and systemic manipulation of electoral processes, and total count of more than 300 victims of electoral period killings. Weak electoral commission institutional independence and high executive interference in the Electoral process allowed the use of political violence as a weapon of electoral competition during this period. The bottom line is that, the elections of 2011 were some of the more seemingly credible in procedural terms, yet they spurred one of the deadliest post-election crises in Nigeria's history. Human Rights Watch (2011) reported that more than 800 people were murdered and about 65,000 displaced after their displeasure over the results of elections, especially in the northern regions of Nigeria, were linked to the presidential elections. This shows that electoral violence does not simply decrease as electoral administration improves if there are socio-political grievances to be addressed.

While polarisation-reduction measures have improved the 2015 election cycle was a relatively peaceful process compared to those of 2007 and 2011, localized incidents involving ballot box snatching, attacks on party supporters and intimidation occurred. Data collected and compiled by either the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM, 2015) or other election observation bodies showed that the election was mostly peaceful at the national level, with pockets of violence emerging in states with political competition. In 2019 however the electoral violence was characterized by a return of electoral violence, covering killings, abductions and general disruptions of electoral processes recorded by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2019) as exceeding 600 incidents. Likewise, the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (2019) made reports that in some states such as Rivers, Lagos and Kano, there was a high level of political competition which was cluttered with electoral disturbances. Despite technological advancements on the electoral front aimed at promoting transparency, election-related violence continued in the elections held in 2023. In addition, more than 100 election-related deaths were reported in the pre-election and election period only, by civil society monitoring groups (CDD, 2023); and the EU Election Observation Mission (2023) has observed that several regions continued to suffer from threats and acts of violence that undermined the credibility of the electoral process, particularly during the collation period.

The fact that electoral violence has continued to happen through these cycles suggests a politics of violence in Nigeria's electoral system, in which elections are seen as a competitive battle for power and access to state resources, not as a representative democracy. Bratton (2008) theorises that political office is the main source of economic power in such contexts, which means that political competition will involve body language, and in turn become violent. This is clearly the case in Nigeria, and it is there that informal armed groups, politicians' thugs, and youth militias are mobilized in the lead-up to elections. Chains of continuity in both election cycles and vote-types

indicate that electoral reforms have not changed the incentives for political violence in a major way, in terms of either technological innovations or institutional designs.

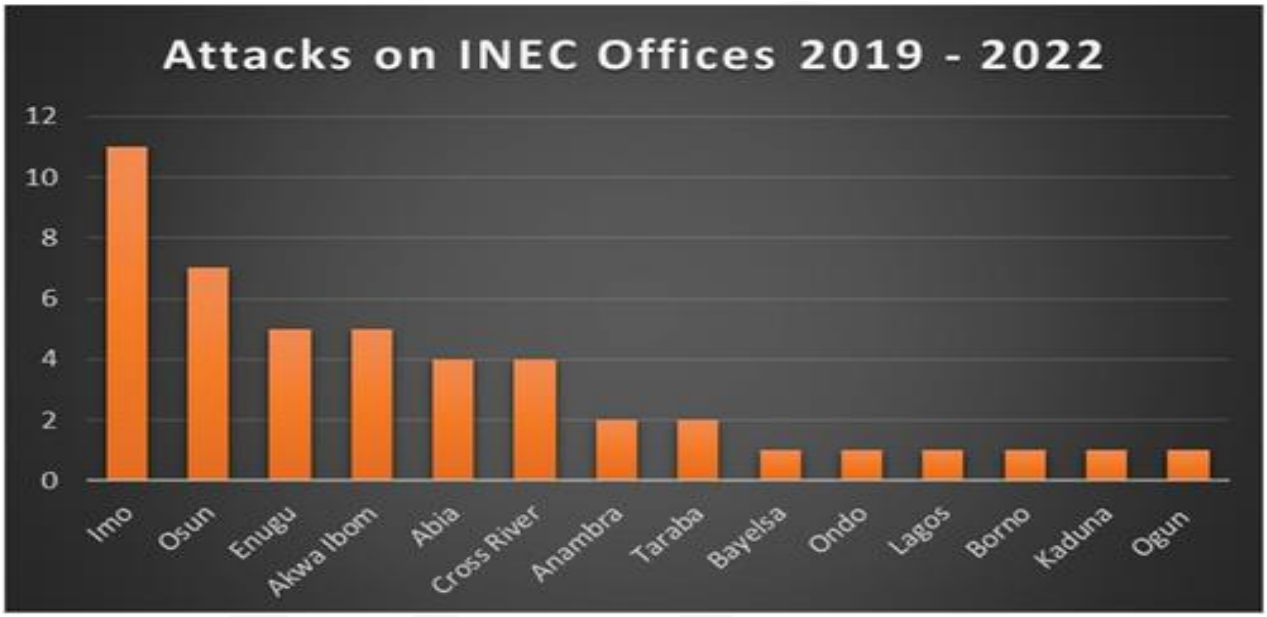
Electoral violence in Nigeria has a very uneven geographical distribution, which is influenced by political competition, historical grievances, socio-economic inequalities and security situation. Available statistics show that all the six geopolitical zones have electoral violence but with South-South, North-West and South-East recording the highest levels of intensity and frequency. A combination of oil politics, militancy and patronage nexus has historically led to high levels of electoral violence in the South-South region, mainly in the Delta States and Rivers. In the Niger Delta, Ikelegbe (2013) contends that the politicization of militarization has become so ingrained that the activity of the various armed groups are now part and parcel of election proceedings to the extent that election becomes easily disrupted. Anotherkok further reveals that Rivers State has consistently been one of the most violent electoral hotspots in the country on a substantial scale in various election cycles (Anotherkok, 2023).

The North-West, particularly the states of Kano, Kaduna and Katsina state, has also had high level of electoral violence, usually related to heightened political competition, religious polarization, and historical contexts of electoral contestation. Ibrahim and Egwu (2019) found that contestation and mobilisation of the youth population in these regions have often been a cause of electoral violence in the country. The region has experienced some of the worst post-election violence in 2011, due to the perceived electoral injustice and painstaking political grievances (Human Rights Watch, 2011). In the same vein, the North-Central has also been a place of perennial electoral violence tied up with ethno-religious conflicts and farmer–herder conflicts in which the two conflicts are occasionally intertwined with electoral mobilisation.

There has been an increasing pattern of electoral violence reported in the South-East region in the past few elections, with the 2019 and 2023 elections being the most recent examples. This exacerbation has been linked to the problem of separatist tensions, political marginalization narratives and greater assaults on electoral infrastructure. According to INEC reports, some polling units were publicized or canceled in flooded areas of both Imo and Anambra States on security grounds and due to electoral officials' targeted attacks (INEC Report, 2023). Furthermore, as highlighted by International Crisis Group (2023), this region has been witnessing to growing political unrest that is also directly impacting electoral participation and security.

But the South-West is less volatile, but characterized by elections that are just not free from some contestations in some very competitive states like Lagos and Oyo. In this part of the country, electoral violence is frequently linked with high contestation and violence along party lines, particularly between the dominant opposition.Racial, party, and even violent party competition are often correlated with electoral violence in this region of the country and violent percussion between rival party supporters. EU EOM (2019), which placed the state among the 11 adversely rated states, confirmed that voter intimidation, violence at polling units as well as disruption during vote collation is occurring. The pattern of the spatial distribution of electoral violence suggests that Nigeria's electoral violence is not arbitrarily dispersed but rather is influenced by structural inequalities, the intensity of political competition, and the structure of security infrastructures. Geography of electoral violence in politically significant areas undermines electoral integrity by skewing representation and voters' confidence, as emphasised in Norris (2014). The geographical focus of electoral violence in Nigeria implies a “weaponization” of political contestation on the part of political actors – as they play the game with violence in ways that politically meet their objectives and are economically advantageous.

A cross cycle and regional analysis is also found to be important as it demonstrates how electoral violence in Nigeria is closely associated with socio-economic deprivation and youth unemployment. The higher jobless rate among the youth (NBS, 2020) suggests a vast cohort of vulnerable individuals for mobilisation by the political class. It lines up with a study carried out by Uddin and Ukoji (2017) who believe that lack of state capacity and economic desperation make people let into unemployment into electoral violence networks. Moreover, Collier and Vicente (2014) show that the likelihood of a voter's abstaining from an election and of disengagement from political violence are negatively related. This is consistent with what happened in recent elections in Nigeria, where voter turnout has declined, and there has been a rise of electoral disengagement.



Source: (Babajide & Ashindorbe, 2025).

Figure 1: Attacks on INEC Offices 2029 – 2022

The distribution of attack on offices of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in selected Nigerian states (2019-2022) is shown in figure 1. From the figure, the highest number of attacks (around 11) were recorded in Imo State, trailed by Osun (7 attacks) and Enugu State (5 attacks), and Akwa Ibom recorded the least (5 attacks). About 8 other states, including Abia, Cross River, Anambra and Taraba, suffered from several onslaughts, albeit not as devastating as in Rivers. Others reported fewer attacks but the incidents are also a reminder of escalating insecurity of electoral administration in Nigeria, such as in Bayelsa, Ondo, Lagos, Borno, Kaduna and Ogun. The high rate of attacks in the South East states (Imo, Enugu, Abia and Anambra states) shows an increased insecurity and threat to electoral institutions in the "volatile" states.

Table 1: Political Fatalities in Nigeria, October 2022–May 2023

Month	Number of Political Fatalities
October 2022	631
November 2022	882
December 2022	1,020
January 2023	691
February 2023	778
March 2023	719
April 2023	842
May 2023	534
Total	**6,097**

Source: (ACLED, 2023)

Table 1 shows the trend of political death in Nigeria from October 2022 to June 2023, as reported by Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). As illustrated in the table, the political violence incidence during the pre and post elections situation in 2023 has been highly variable but largely high. Increases in fatalities were recorded from 631 deaths in October 2022 to 882 in November, with activity peaking in December 2022 at 1020 fatalities. There were no significant decreases in violence during or after the elections, though no one was killed in January 2023, another spike in death tolls did occur in February and April. High death tolls recorded over the last few days point to political violence spiralling significantly in the run up to and midst the election season, as political contests grew stronger; insecurity higher and electoral tensions greater in all corners of the country. The table further indicates that votes-related violence in Nigeria is closely related to the general security circumstances of armed banditry, insurgency, general communal conflict and political thuggery. Some of the increased fatalities prior to and during elections are proof of the fact that election time is when a violent campaign is often a violent trend that political players, armed groups, and criminal networks readily use. The decrease measured during May 2023 could be due to the gradual fading of electoral tensions following the hold-up of the electoral process.

Table 2: Electoral Violence Fatalities Per Election Cycle and by Violence Type in Nigeria (1999–2019)

Election Year	Pre-Election Violence Fatalities	Polling Violence Fatalities	Post-Election Violence Fatalities	Total Fatalities	Percentage (%)
1999	35	45	15	100	1%
2003	270	100	30	300	4%
2007	150	120	80	450	9%
2011	588	212	800	1,600	24%
2015	1,090	130	30	1,250	19%
2019	2,381	209	160	2,750	43%
Total	**4,514**	**816**	**1,116**	**6,450**	**100%**

Source: (Compiled by the Researcher in 2026 as adapted from EUEOM, 2019; World Bank, 2022; NBS, 2022; Alao, 2021; HRW, 2019; Azuka, 2021; ICG, 2014; Ani & Ajakorotu, 2022).

The escalating scale of electoral violence-related deaths by election cycle in Nigeria (1999–2019) is presented in Table 2. As can be seen in Table 2, the incidences of electoral violence fatalities have been worsening by election cycle in Nigeria between 1999 and 2019. The elections-related fatalities charted on the table clearly shows that the more competitive and involved the elections became over time, the more people lost their lives. The 1999 elections had the lowest number of deaths, possibly due to a transition period from military rule, which included relatively low levels of political polarization. From 2003, however, there was a significant rise after which political power-players gradually started using violence to gain electoral success. One of the most alarming to the most dangerous post-election violence period in Nigeria democratic history was experienced in the 2011 elections leaving behind lose lives of approximately 800 people who died as a result of the post-election violence and communalism throughout Nigeria particularly in the northern part of the country. In 2019, the highest number of electoral violence related deaths recorded were 43 per cent of the total in the 20-year span of 1999 to 2019. This is an indication of the increasing militarization of politics, rising numbers of armed political groups and increased resort to violence before, during and after the elections.

Table 3: Summary and Breakdown of Electoral Violence Fatalities by Election Violence Type in Nigeria (1999–2019)

S/N	Types of Electoral Violence	Cumulative Fatalities	APEV	APV	APPV	ATEV	CATV	CAAV	Percentage (%)
1	Pre-Election Violence Fatalities	4,514	511	136	186	451	2,150	645	70%
2	Polling Violence Fatalities	816	511	136	186	136	2,150	645	13%
3	Post-Election Violence Fatalities	1,116	511	136	186	186	2,150	645	17%
Total		**6,450**	**1,533**	**408**	**558**	**793**	**6,450**	**1,935**	**100%**

Source: (Compiled by the Researcher in 2026 as adapted from EUEOM, 2019; World Bank, 2022; NBS, 2022; Alao, 2021; HRW, 2019; Azuka, 2021; ICG, 2014; Ani & Ajakorotu, 2022).

The figures of electoral violence-related deaths in Nigeria are summarised cumulatively according to the various stages of electoral disputes from 1999 to 2019 (Table 3). The table reveals that pre-election violence caused the majority of all fatalities during the studied period as it constitutes c. 70 per cent of the total. This indicates that electoral conflict occurs heavily clustered at the pre-, during, during/after party primaries, political mobilization actions and strategic actions by the political actors to weaken and/or intimidate rivals prior to the elections. Nigeria's political system is characterised by high stakes for political power and the fatalities surrogates for pre-election violence are related to this.

Table 4: Forms and Types of Election Violence by Election Year (1999–2023)

Election Year	Physical Assault	Assassination	Ballot Box Snatching	Arson	Voter Intimidation	Kidnapping/Abduction	Attacks on INEC Facilities
1999	High	Low	Moderate	Low	High	Nil	Nil
2003	High	Moderate	High	Moderate	High	Low	Nil
2007	Very High	High	Very High	High	Very High	Moderate	Low
2011	Very High	Moderate	High	Very High	High	Moderate	Low
2015	High	Moderate	High	Moderate	Very High	Moderate	Low
2019	Very High	High	High	High	Very High	High	Moderate
2023	Very High	High	Moderate	Very High	Very High	Very High	Very High

Source: Nigeria Election Violence Tracker 2023;, ACLED, 2023; CLEEN Foundation, 2023)

Table 4 depicts election violence's form and pattern as it has evolved and been experienced in Nigeria over the years. The table shows that, however violent an election in Nigeria can be, particular categories of violence such as voter intimidation and physical attacks have been constant. During the more democratic era, violence primarily took the form of snatching ballots and ballot boxes, and open intimidation as well as violent altercations between groups of supporters. As political competition grew, so did the sophistication and the lethal character of

election violence – today, there are more frequent cases of assassination, arson, kidnapping, and even coordinated attacks on electoral institutions.

The table also indicates that the attacks on the INEC premises and Electoral Infrastructure increased in patterns over the years, major on the 2023 electoral cycle. This is a sign of >a transition from individual attacks on voters to a greater attempt to disrupt the entire electoral process, or what has been termed a party turning against the party system. Later elections too saw kidnapping and armed kidnapping as things became more frequent, as the linkage between electoral violence and overall crime insecurity in Nigeria increased. The situation described in the table highlights the changing nature of election violence from being merely some disturbances at polling units to complex security challenges involving organized armed elements, political elements and institutional sabotage. National elections and election-related violence along the lines of time

The temporal trend of Election Violence in Nigeria shows three major trends, namely intensification of state of violence, innovation in the nature of violence, and re-distribution of violence geographically. The overall increase in the intensity of violence indicates a dramatic escalation (1999 until 2011) and then a fewer but high level of violence (2015 to 2023). Violence at elections is far from unusual and has been a continuing presence in Nigeria's electoral democracy; they reached their high point in 2011 and did not decline in subsequent elections, according to data from ACLED (2023). Moreover, electoral violence has evolved in diversity of forms over time. In the early election cycles 1999-2007 the trend was towards ballot box snatching, voter intimidation and post-election violence. More recently, however (from 2019 to 2023), the trend has been towards specific assassinations of politicians, attacks on electoral institutions, digital misinformation and pre-election violence (International Crisis Group, 2023). The use of social media in recent years has also added another layer to electoral conflict – the hateful language and misinformation campaigns, which increase or fuel political divisions and may indirectly lead to violent confrontations (Ogbette & Orga, 2021). Third, the geographical spatiotemporal shift of electoral violence is evident. Recent cycles do, however, highlight the presence of more concentrated levels of violence in southern states like Rivers, Lagos, Imo, and Anambra; though today's cycles were more of the northern Nigerian variety, especially the 2011 one. More complex competition patterns and decentralisation of electoral contestation are all part of this change. It also reflects that electoral violence is no longer confined to particular regions, but is multi-locusally spread across competitive political spaces all over the nation. In recent years, while electoral reforms have been introduced, including the electronic accreditation (card reader system in 2015 and BVAS in 2023), there has been no significant reduction in attacks. According to EU EOM (2023) technological changes have facilitated the procedural transparency but had not substantially changed incentives to violence. This implies that the reason for electoral violence in Nigeria is attributed largely to factors in the political economy of electoral process rather than technical inefficiencies in electoral process (Norris, 2014).

Table 5: Electoral Violence Incidents by Election Type in Nigeria (1999–2019)

Election Year	Pre-Polling Incidents of Violence	Polling Violence Incidents	Post-Election Incidents of Violence	Total Incidences	Percentage (%)
1999	60	40	46	146	11%
2003	110	60	30	200	15%
2007	189	70	10	269	20%
2011	115	85	200	400	29%
2015	65	40	16	121	9%
2019	90	73	61	220	16%
Total	629	368	363	1,360	100%

Source: (Compiled by the Researcher in 2026 as adapted from EUEOM, 2019; World Bank, 2022; NBS, 2022).

Table 5 shows the distribution of Electoral Violence incidences by election phases in Nigeria (1999-2019). The table indicates that the incidents occurring before polling, (pre polling violence) was the highest, suggesting that election conflicts in Nigeria often start before the actual polling day. In this stage, violent political campaigns are typically featured, political party supporters meet in conflict, opponents are threatened, political campaign property is destroyed, and political campaign activity and political mobilization may occur including attacks against the processes of party primaries. In 2011, the presidential elections resulted in a high number of overall cases of violence with 400 reported cases, mainly as a result of post-election violence and communal clashes that followed the declaration of the election results. The data also show that while there were consistently high levels of polling day violence, there were sharp increases in violence post-election in some election cycles, particularly in 2011 and 2019.

The electoral casualty, electoral disaster and displacement in all the regions is a sinister aspect of Nigeria's electoral process that can't be overlooked. Studies reveal that election-related violence in Nigeria leaves people dead, injured, displaced, property damaged and institutions harmed. HRW reported more than 800 casualties during the 2011 post-election crisis in northern Nigeria alone, and thousands of households displaced throughout. This is the worst case of humanitarian impact of election in the Fourth Republic, showcasing the potential for large-scale communal violence rising from election disputes.

Conclusion

Election violence is a feature of the democratic experience in Nigeria, underscoring the fact that while political democracy can be sustained through electoral tweaks, the political context behind elections remains a problem. The election history of Nigeria since 1999 reveals the evolution of democratic practice within a subculture of forced representation where violence becomes an integral part of the political dynamic of contestation and transition of power. Nigeria is a stunted democratic consolidation because the politics of contestation which would advance the evolution of democracy is circumscribed by the prevailing political culture that makes access to State power the main route towards economic and political survival. High stakes are maintained in this context in which electoral competition is seen as a zero-sum game as opposed to a democratic process that gives way to democratic norms. Of course, it is also clear that structural inequalities and less socioeconomic protection create circumstances where it is more feasible to mobilize politically by force than to engage in civic actions. This is part of a broader governance problem of having a democratic system in the midst of persistent deprivation and constrained opportunities for swathes of the population. Recent violence strongly suggests that there is a disconnect in the practice of politics and institutional design. There are formal institutions for elections and conflict management but their effectiveness is limited in the absence of a sense of autonomy, consistency and independence from the powerful political incentives.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations were drawn.

1) The political leadership should take responsibility for incidents of electoral violence. Mechanisms to investigate and prosecute elites who sponsor or facilitate electoral violence should be reinforced by INEC, security agencies and judiciary. This will limit elite manipulation and enhance democratic accountability.
2) Electoral reforms especially BVAS and IReV should be backed by transparent processes and effective monitoring mechanisms. This will decrease the possibilities for rigging of electoral processes by political elites and increase public confidence.
3) The security agencies ought to have political neutrality during elections. Clear ways to avoid selective enforcement, intimidation, and the use of security institutions to serve the interests of the elite political will have to be put in place to prevent it.