

STOPPING ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN THE NIGER DELTA WHO WINS AND WHAT WORKED

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines electoral violence and democracy in the Niger Delta with focus on what worked and who wins. The study adopts content analysis and secondary data, using observations, journal articles, reports from NGOs etc. The study was anchored on two theoretical foundations; the frustration – aggression and relative deprivation theory in explaining the rational for engaging in electoral violence. A latitude of factors were identified as responsible for electoral violence. The study picked on the activities of Ogu/Bolo women and Okrika women in Rivers State on electoral irregularities and draws a conclusion that there is hope for collectivities in the region to fight electoral violence. The study recommended 100% electronic voting; violators of the electoral laws should be penalized and rotational governorship in Rivers State.

Keyword: Electoral violence, Democracy, Relative deprivation, Frustration, aggression, Politicians, Women

INTRODUCTION

Election in Niger Delta is mostly branded with continual political violence and violation of human rights leading to snatches of ballot boxes, politically motivated killings, and loss of properties among others. In most cases, pockets of polling units and wards where elections are concealed point to the significant two over bearing factor of electoral violence and irregularity. Who wins is the central thrust of analyzing and seeking ways of reducing violence, particularly, election related violence in the Niger Delta during the 2019 general elections. However, the need to change the narrative and redirect energy towards better ways of seeking redress for the deprivation suffered by the Niger Delta region is the rationale for asking who wins?

The youths cannot be said to have won because they die in numbers. This is exemplified on inauguration days and election days, in the later; thugs and bodyguards are all over the politician but on their swearing –in-day, you see them with their families. Again, what worked

will be anchored on some action taken by some groups to stop electoral violence in the 2019 elections, especially the Okrika women and Ogu/Bolo uprising.

Cancellation of elections also takes its toll on the national budget in cases where elections are inconclusive. The feeders to the underlying chaos stated above are greedy hearted politicians whose interest is to control the electoral process to work in their favour. The major techniques used is the recruitment of vulnerable individual and groups (youths at risk) who are either practicing cultism or belonging to popular community group and association. Politician entice them with persuasive incentives received in cash or allocation of revenue blocks – ticket units, political appointment, and donation of military hardware as a piece of ensuring equipment for effective facilitation of a particular agenda without measures for demobilizing the military hardware.

Computation of the statistical body in Nigeria reveals that an aggregate of 61.6% of youth is unemployed (NBS, 2017 report). Desperate politicians have realized how vulnerable these set of citizens are to resist being captivated as pieces of machinery, saw the opportunity as a market of exchange for mutual gains, therefore, undermining the consequences as to how their actions contribute to pre and post election conflict.

Statement of the Problem

Nigerian democracy faces the danger of being swallowed by election violence and how the situation has degenerated from election to election in the Niger Delta is a case in point. The winners are the politicians while the losers are the youth who lost their lives in numbers.

Drawing from the foregoing, Peterside (2018) noted that “votes” no longer count and elections are (greeted) with a plethora of litigations. He further identified the problem of election violence, leadership and development on weak institutions, poverty in the region despite the enormous wealth, proliferation of arms market, drug abuse, conspiracy by security agencies, political godfatherism, over monetization of the election process and unguarded statements as some of the factors that lead to election violence.

Collaborating the above position is Ekine, (2018) who posited that though there are noticeable legal loopholes in the constitution and the electoral act, there are laws good enough to check cases of election violence. He however, agreed that what is lacking is the political will to implement the laws. Weak institutions, godfatherism and a corrupt judiciary, also contribute to difficulty in the application of the law.

In the same vein, Naagbantun (2018) on incentivizing violence in the Niger Delta, political office as booty; noted that the difference between politicians in the western world and those in Nigeria is that there are regulations in western countries which do not spare offenders of the law.

According to him, impunity thrives in Nigerian politics as a result of weak judicial system. The intense struggle for power in the Niger Delta region is fundamentally to gain control over the massive wealth in the states. One major factor that contribute to crisis in the Niger Delta is the culture of celebrating criminals and violence entrepreneurs. He further identified unemployment, poverty, presence of small and light weapons, drugs, increasing population, as being factors responsible for the continued violence in the region.

Kalu and Gberebie (2018) identified lack of internal democracy within political parties, inefficiency of the electoral commissions, inadequate security personnel. From the works of

Ajayi (1998); Bamgbose (2011); Balogun (2003) and Ikyase and Egberi (2015) it is quite clear that electoral violence has affected Nigeria's democratic sustainability and achievement of good governance. But the twist in this paper however, is to go beyond identifying factors that causes electoral violence and its attendant effect on democracy. Election is one of the fundamental duties of citizens in a democratic setting. Elections have been the medium through which contemporary representative democracy has functioned. Election enables people to choose the politicians they want to represent their interest in the government, which generated violence especially in the Niger Delta our study locale. What has the people done to put a stop or better still, bring it to a minimum? This paper therefore portend to look at an artificial stop gap measure that will control and reduce electoral violence in the Niger Delta. So many non – governmental organizations have done sensitization and build structure in the Niger Delta. Notable among them is the Academic Associates Peace Works, Foundation for Partnership Initiative in the Niger Delta (PIND) and European Union, EU. Our analysis in this paper will be predicated on outcomes of these programs in the Niger Delta.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The paper succinctly combines the frustration aggression theory and the theory of relative deprivation to buttress the violent political dimension in our democracy.

The original formulation on the frustration aggression hypothesis by Dollard et al (1939) concentrated on the limited interference with an expected attainment of a desired goal on hostile (emotional) aggression. Development since then have shown that the frustration – aggression hypothesis is intended to suggest to the student of human nature that when he sees aggression he should turn a suspicious eye on possibilities that the organism or group is confronted with frustration, and that when he views interference with individual or group habits, he should be on the look-out for, among other things, aggression (Green, 1941).

Given the emphasis of election violence in Nigeria and the contest for political power in a democratic environment, frustration aggression reflects the reasons for electoral violence because men who want to live beyond their social means do not accept their limitations in defeat this results into violence as the last resort in order to live beyond their social means. Frustration and aggression theory addresses the pre-election and post – election violence. In cases of pre-election violence, frustration and aggression comes to play when certain aspirants is power-hungry and possibly realizes the indications that he/she may possibly lose to the rival, thereby adopting violence for their own personal gains, Kalu & Gberebie (2018). In post election violence, person who feel cheated on election outcomes, isolated or disadvantaged by the injustice of the electoral practice are likely out of frustration transfer aggression on other individuals through violence acts.

This theory helps in understanding the psychological behaviour of persons in the use of violence to achieve selfish interest. Electoral candidates adopt violence when they fail in their bid to win elections. Some even having upper hands in the process, sees violence as a means to achieving electoral victory.

Similarly, relative deprivation theory is the experience of being deprived of something to which one believes oneself to be entitled to have (Walker and Smith, 2011). Relative deprivation refers to the discontent people feel when they compare their positions to those of similarly

situated and find that they have less than their peers. It is a condition that is measured by comparing one's group's situation to the situations of those who are more advantaged (Bayert, 1999). Schaefer (2008) explains it as the conscious experience of a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and present actualities while Bayertz (1999) ascribes it to the social sciences for describing feelings or measures of economic political or social deprivation that are relative rather than absolute. The concept of relative deprivation has important consequences for both behaviour and attitudes and participation of collective action. The case of Rivers State gubernatorial elections is very instructive. There is a feeling of resentment in Ogoni ethnic nationality of Rivers State that after the creation of the state in 1967, no Ogoni man has manned the helms of affair of the exalted sit of the Governor. It formed the point of argument and led to the non inclusion of the dominant political party in Nigeria on the ballot of Rivers State national /state and governorship elections. Using this theoretical framework in explicating Runciman (1966) four pre-conditions of relative deprivation (of object X by person A). A does not have X

- A knows of other persons that have X
- A wants to have X
- A believes obtaining X is realistic

An attempt to apply Runciman's 1966 model to the Ogoni scenario is depicted below.

- The Ogoni does / and have not been governor in Rivers State
- The Ogoni knows other ethnic groups in Rivers State has been Governor more than once with its attendant benefits.
- The Ogoni wants to be Governor to show that sense of belonging to a Rivers State
- The Ogoni believes that obtaining governorship is realistic.

From the above, one will tend to predict that in 2023, these conditions should be taken into consideration to reduce electoral violence.

According to Kendall (2005) relative deprivation may also be temporal; that is a group that experiences economic growth or an expansion of rights, followed by stagnation or recession of these processes may experience "relative deprivation". Such phenomena are also known as unfulfilled rising expectations.

CONCEPTUALIZING WHAT WORKED: The Okrika /Ogu Bolo Resistance

A positive development has been the mobilization of women to counter elections irregularities facilitated by the Non-governmental Organization; Academic Associate Peace works in Rivers State. From the narratives of Ibiwari lyama, coordinator of Female Youths, Okrika Local Government Area, explained how the female youth body mobilized the women to resist electoral malpractice.

Mobilization techniques for Okrika Women.

- We identify 12 wards leaders
- The 12 ward leaders were directed to supervise 151 units.
- We enrolled them so we could keep track of their membership and commitment.
- We engaged individuals who are not exposed to politics.

Following some irregularities that trailed the presidential and house of assembly elections, the female youths embarked on peaceful protests to various relevant authorities i.e the traditional rulers, police divisional office, INEC, DSS, to avoid a repeat in the governorship and state house of assembly elections.

The women took several bold steps including sitting in, to resist the military from gaining access to the electoral materials. The women spent days and nights at the LGA secretariat and the INEC office to ensure that the material gets to the various wards and units. They stayed in a community centre and waited till Sunday morning



Ogu/Bolo Women

Barr. Christiana Tamunobere, one of the Gallant 5 (G5), noted that the militarization of the elections in Ogu/Bolo is evident on visual electronic generated medium. She explained that the presidential and house of assembly elections held without any record of violence. However, when the Ogu/Bolo women got hints of possible threat to hijack electoral materials from their sister local government -Okirika, they raised their voices to alert everyone.

- Started with a circle of friends called G5 -Christiana T. Tammy Ibiofora, Dorcas Asibere, Blessing Derefaka and Rachael Walter, long before the elections came.
- Identified female existing groups in the local government
- Capacity building for women- recognizing their self-worth.
- We familiarized our vision with the girls
- We called on other female groups in Ogu/Bolo when we perceived that a lady from a particular party was coming with the aid of the military to hijack results already collated
- Women quickly responded to the call to prevent the military from hijacking the process irrespective of the political party they belong
- We stayed to watch over the materials and thereafter, the results for three days without bathing
- We formed a chain and locked ourselves in front of the gate so military could have no access into the secretariat.
- The G5 raised funds to the women before the older women from communities across started bringing in food.

The motivating factor was to stop a repeat of election violence -houses burnt, loss of lives and other valuable assets that occurred in previous elections. The women waited at the council gate until the results were collated. They had agreed with the community leadership of political parties that the women will escort the results to the collation centers as it were on the day of the presidential, Senate, and the federal house of assembly elections.

Three days before the governorship elections, the military came into the community with the assistance of a particular party to arrest some boys and whisked them away to an unknown destination. Quickly, the women protested to the District Police Officer (DPO) to lodge complain about the unlawful arrest of the young men. He confirmed seeing the men and how he made efforts to stop the operation. The DSS office and the JTF were briefed of what had transpired. The protest ended at the altar of an old Anglican church in Ogu/Bolo where all the community heads have sworn that there will be no forms of violence in Ogu/Bolo ever again

On the Thursday preceding the elections, we have this REC agent from different political parties who escort election materials from the INEC office to Ogu community. We were still expecting the materials when we heard that the REC agents have been arrested by the army. The resident army officer was not happy with the development so he ordered the residence officers not to allow the external army to cart away with the materials. Whether life or death, they should make sure the materials get to the Council headquarters. They succeeded in arresting the REC agents but the resident army officers were able to bring the election materials to INEC office in Ogu. On a Thursday, we spent all day protecting election materials till night, we got the information that the fence of INEC office in Ogu was under attack we raised alarm some persons went there to protect the wall. We continued vigil from Thursday-Friday without bathing. On Saturday morning the girls dispersed to their various polling unit to cast their vote and wait to secure their vote. After the announcement of result escort the result to the appropriate quarters. There was no fighting during the election. At the conclusion of the election, we perceived that ward 7, 8, 9, and 10 were been collated but military personnels hijacked the results. We calculated out of the 12 wards they have taken away 4 so we will not allow a repeat.



Okochiri women during the protest

Source: same as above

We call on the girls again to secure the remaining results to know the outcome of it. Our consideration in this movement was to prevent our sons, brothers, and husband from having confrontation leading to loss of life. Information got to us that 7 vans of army personnel were coming. Our male youths assisted in bringing tables, chairs, and trees to block the main entrance to the community and stay away. When the military came they forcefully wanted to enter the local government to cart away with the result but we resisted.

We formed a chain and blocked the gate to the local government, they attempted to run the car on us we now sat on the floor. At that point we started singing, we also got a call from inside the council that the military wants to go away with the result. Some of the army officers who came to carry the results were telling us not to allow them to gain entrance. That also stepped our courage we stayed up late till Saturday night. One of the army officers Pulled the protector from the fence and wanted to jump over, we now held him. We started, women removed their cloths especially the advanced ladies who have reached the age of menopause. And we were still singing, we no go gree o! We no go gree!!.

We spotted the military man whom we pulled down limping due to the previous incidents that occurred. On Sunday morning our Amanayabo rang the town crier to appreciate all the women. The attendees were more about 800 women, the women also cooked and fed the military men breakfast and lunch and that was how the Ogu/Bolo Women became victorious. The people who brought the military men abandoned them. It is important to say that the Ogu/Bolo women were not sponsored by any political party, we still provide information to other female groups to date.

Source: same as above

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Many of the causes of election violence are well known and were mentioned repeatedly. These commonalities include the huge benefits of elected office and the resulting incentivization of violence to achieve such offices; a high level of unemployment of youths, making easy money from political thuggery, ready availability of small arms and light weapons, lack of punishment or prosecution of election violence offenders, godfatherism and lack of internal democracy in political parties, and ready availability of drugs that both make users feel invulnerable and reduce their decision making powers.

There are also, structural issues that lead to election violence. These include an unjust judicial systems, an inefficient elections body at all levels; sparse and badly trained security forces that are under the control of certain groups of politicians. (Nkpah and Nduonofit (2012) One set of factors not always recognized is the breakdown of social norms and values, and general erosion of the social fabric. The traditional belief system, which all across Nigeria gave respect to elders, integrity, honesty etc has been replaced by one that values money over all else. Studies conducted by AA peaceworks in 2005, 2006 and 2016 in five states of the Niger Delta, showed that a large majority of young men in cults and militant groups came from broken homes where very importantly there was no positive mother role model. This has also led to negative social practices such as dropping out of school, have use of drugs and alcohol and absence of family authority figures.

Instructively, women in the Niger Delta hold a special status, especially if they are wives and mothers, hence, demonstrating women are mostly untouchable rendering the security

services impotent. Their special status and the cultural norms at play recall the Black Sash du



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- cross party lines, now in villages, meeting
- of demobilization process of small and
- elections.
- living in fears and immediate mopping of

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Consistent engagement of youth at risk
- The political leader should be assigned to the Electoral College because they do not play according to the rules.
- Every organization, group and platform should begin to advocate for 100% electronic voting.
- For sustainable peace in the Niger Delta during elections, violators of the electoral laws should be penalized for their activities.
- The quill a seeming intending balkanization in political party violence, rotational governorship amongst ethnic groups in Rivers State is advised.

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