The Management of Electoral Violence in the 2023 Presidential Election: A Case Study of Lagos State

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Abstract
The 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria was a significant milestone in the country's democratic journey. However, electoral violence, particularly in Lagos State, posed a major threat to the democratic process. This paper investigated the management of electoral violence during the election, analyzing its causes, key actors and factors, and the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies. Using a qualitative approach that included interviews and content analysis, the paper revealed that political tensions, misinformation, ethnic rivalry, and voter intimidation were the primary drivers of electoral violence. The research paper utilized the Race and Ethnicity theory in assessing the role of security agencies, political parties, and civil society in mitigating violence and proposes a framework for managing electoral violence in future elections. Its findings highlighted the need for security reforms, community engagement, social media regulation, and electoral reforms to promote a more peaceful democratic process in Nigeria.

Keywords: Electoral Violence, Ethnic Tension, Misinformation, Political Thuggery, Presidential Election, Violence Management Mechanism, Voter Suppression.

I.   Introduction
With Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, the West African nation experienced a pivotal moment in its political history (Saka, 2014). This transition followed a prolonged period of military rule from 1983 to 1999, during which corruption, economic instability, and authoritarian leadership were prevalent. The restoration of democracy was a significant achievement, reflecting the people's aspirations for a more inclusive and participatory political system. The 1999 elections marked the beginning of this transition, providing Nigerians the opportunity to reclaim their political rights and choose their leaders through a structured electoral process (Ogbulafor et al., 2018).

While the transition was a landmark event, the electoral process was not devoid of challenges. The 1999 elections, like subsequent ones, were marred by irregularities such as voter intimidation, ballot box stuffing, vote buying, and manipulation of results. Despite these setbacks, Nigerians remained eager to shape their political future and actively participated in the electoral process. The successful conduct of the elections led to the emergence of Olusegun Obasanjo as the nation's first democratically elected president in the Fourth Republic. His inauguration signified a renewed commitment to democratic principles, human rights, and good governance. The transition also revitalized democratic institutions, ensuring that the executive, judiciary, and legislature operated independently to provide checks and balances (Saka, 2014).

Following the return to democracy, Nigeria held subsequent elections in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and most recently, 2023. Each electoral cycle contributed to shaping the nation's political landscape. However, electoral malpractice, violence, voter suppression, and allegations of fraud remained persistent challenges. The 2023 presidential election was particularly notable for reports of electoral violence, with allegations implicating the ruling political elite (Ibrahim, 2023; Vanguard, 2023).

This paper evaluated the effectiveness of electoral violence management mechanisms in Lagos State, focusing on the 2023 presidential election and its implications for democratic stability in Nigeria. It identifies the key factors and actors responsible for electoral violence, assesses how these issues were managed to prevent full-scale ethnic conflict, analyzes conflict management strategies, and proposes a comprehensive framework for mitigating electoral violence.

Lagos State was chosen as the focal point of this study due to its political and economic significance. One of the presidential candidates in the 2023 election hails from Lagos, yet he did not secure the highest number of votes in the state—an unusual deviation from Nigeria's common electoral trend, where candidates typically win their home regions

due to local political influence. The causes and consequences of this electoral outcome make Lagos an intriguing case for examining political tensions and electoral violence. Furthermore, as Nigeria's economic hub, Lagos accounts for a substantial portion of the country's GDP, making it a strategic location for political interests and potential electoral disputes. Its diverse population and complex political landscape also enhance its suitability as a representative case for studying electoral violence in Nigeria, with findings that could be generalized to other states and contexts.

II.   Literature Review

Nigeria's national unity remains fragile due to its colonial amalgamation of diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. The 1914 amalgamation, aimed at administrative convenience, fostered ethnic rivalry, as groups prioritized ethnic loyalty over national identity. Colonial policies, such as regional governance and indirect rule, deepened divisions, influencing the formation of ethnically-based political parties that persist today (Nnoli, 2019).

Despite efforts to foster unity, secessionist movements—beginning with the Niger Delta Volunteering Force in 1966 and later the Biafra civil war—have continued to challenge national cohesion. Contemporary groups, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Oduduwa Republic movement, highlight ongoing dissatisfaction. Politicians further exploit ethnic and religious sentiments, fueling electoral violence that undermines democracy (Agbiboa, 2018).

Electoral violence, a recurring issue in Nigeria, was prominent in the 2023 elections, particularly in Lagos. Youth engagement in politics increased, with many seeking to unseat the ruling APC government due to economic and political instability. Although technological innovations like BVAS were introduced to ensure free and fair elections, the process was marred by violence, voter suppression, and intimidation, especially against the Igbo community. The gubernatorial elections saw further unrest, with allegations of ballot box snatching, hate speech, and the use of traditional rituals to suppress opposition (Wolfsfeld, 2004).

Lagos, as a key political and economic center, has historically been a hotspot for electoral violence. Political thugs ("Agberos") played a major role in disrupting elections, reflecting broader issues of vote commodification and elite dominance in politics. Despite peace accords signed by political parties, violence persisted, with over 200 recorded incidents and nearly 100 fatalities (Adenekan, 2018).

Ethnic and religious divisions also shaped the elections, as zoning disputes within parties, including the PDP's nomination of a northern candidate and APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket, deepened political polarization. The manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments exacerbated tensions, undermining democratic credibility and further fragmenting national unity (Adebayo, 2021).

The outcome of the 2023 presidential election played a crucial role in sparking electoral violence in Lagos State. Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) secured a surprising victory over APC's Bola Tinubu, a longtime political powerhouse in Lagos, with 582,454 votes to Tinubu's 572,606. This defeat was particularly significant as Lagos has historically been an APC stronghold, and Tinubu, a former governor of the state, was regarded as its political architect. The electoral shift was largely driven by youth mobilization, especially after the 2020 End SARS protests against police brutality. The Lekki Toll Gate massacre, allegedly involving security forces deployed by the APC government, fueled deep resentment, leading young voters to rally behind Obi under the "Obedient" movement. The election also saw a surge in voter registration, with youth making up the largest demographic, signaling a transformation in Nigeria's political landscape and a growing demand for accountability (Adebayo, 2023).

Ethnic politics played a critical role in shaping the election's outcome, reigniting debates over Lagos' identity and political ownership. The APC's loss in the state was perceived as an existential threat to its grip on Lagos' economic and political resources, leading to fears that an Obi presidency would shift power dynamics. Ethnic narratives framed Obi's candidacy as an "Igbo agenda" to take control of Lagos, intensifying political tensions. According to Gurr's relative deprivation theory, the perception of losing political and economic influence—even if unfounded—can lead to agitation and violence. This fear contributed to widespread voter suppression and intimidation, particularly targeting Igbo voters. Tinubu's rhetoric, including his claim of being Obi's "landlord," reinforced the notion of political entitlement and control over Lagos (Hassan, 2023).

Tinubu's influence in Nigerian politics extends beyond Lagos, having played a key role in APC's formation and Buhari's presidency. His governance style has been associated with prebendalism, where political office is used for personal enrichment, reinforcing Nigeria's patronage-based system. His role in shaping Lagos politics over the years, including handpicking

successors, highlights his deep entrenchment in the state's power structure. Allegations surrounding his financial dealings and control over tax revenues further contribute to public scrutiny. As Tinubu assumed the presidency, concerns remained about whether his leadership will mirror his governance approach in Lagos or if he will pursue reforms. His administration will be closely watched, especially by the youth and opposition, to determine whether he can address longstanding governance and economic challenges (Adebayo, 2023).

III.   Theoretical Framework

Race and Ethnicity Theory provided a useful framework for understanding electoral violence in Lagos State during the 2023 Presidential Election. This theory posits that ethnic identity and racial affiliations play a significant role in political behavior, social interactions, and conflict dynamics. The election in Lagos State was characterized by ethnic-based mobilization, where political actors leveraged ethnic sentiments to influence voter choices and justify acts of electoral violence.

Empirical studies, such as those by Horowitz (1985) and Chandra (2004), suggest that ethnic divisions in political competition can lead to electoral tensions and violence, particularly in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria. According to Akinyele (2023), ethnic polarization was a major factor in the 2023 elections in Lagos, as political parties and their supporters framed the election as an ethnic contest rather than a democratic process. This aligns with the Race and Ethnicity Theory, which argues that in deeply divided societies, political affiliation often aligns with ethnic identity, leading to heightened tensions and potential violence.

The theory also explains the role of ethnic stereotypes and historical grievances in electoral violence. Studies by Nwosu (2023) and Okon (2023) found that in Lagos State, inflammatory rhetoric and historical suspicions between different ethnic groups fueled pre-election hostilities. Hate speech on social media, analyzed by Hassan (2023), further reinforced ethnic divisions, creating an environment conducive to electoral violence.

The application of Race and Ethnicity Theory to electoral violence management suggests that strategies should focus on reducing ethnic-based political mobilization and promoting inclusive governance. Empirical evidence from community-based conflict resolution programs, such as those highlighted by Uche (2023), shows that fostering inter-ethnic dialogue and civic education can help de-escalate tensions and prevent violence. Additionally, adopting policies that ensure equitable political representation and economic opportunities across ethnic groups can mitigate the perception of political marginalization that often drives electoral violence.

In all, Race and Ethnicity Theory provides a valuable lens for analyzing the factors and actors that instigated electoral violence in Lagos State, assessing how these factors were managed, and evaluating the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies. Understanding the ethnic dimensions of electoral violence is crucial in designing a comprehensive framework for sustainable electoral peace and stability in Lagos State and Nigeria at large.

IV.   Factors Contributing that Contributed to Electoral Violence In Lagos State during the 2023 Presidential Elections

The field study revealed that several interrelated factors contributed to the electoral violence in Lagos during the 2023 election. These include political rivalry, ethnic tensions, misinformation, and the use of political thugs to intimidate voters and disrupt the electoral process. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing targeted interventions to address the root causes of electoral violence.

1.   Political Rivalry and Ethnic Tensions**:** Nigeria's political landscape is often characterized by intense competition between political parties, with ethnic affiliations playing a significant role in shaping voting patterns. In Lagos, the 2023 election saw major political parties—especially the All-Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP)—mobilizing support along ethnic lines. Lagos, with its large Yoruba population, also became a battleground for ethnic dominance, with political leaders leveraging ethnic sentiments to rally support. This created an "us versus them" mentality, further polarizing communities and contributing to electoral violence. Political rallies and campaigns were frequently marked by ethnic slogans and divisive rhetoric, leading to violent clashes between rival groups (Akinyele (2023).

2.   Misinformation and the Role of social media**:** The rapid spread of misinformation and fake news through social media platforms exacerbated the situation in Lagos. False reports about the manipulation of election results, threats of violence, and targeted attacks against particular ethnic groups incited fear and panic among the population. Misinformation fueled suspicions, leading to the formation of mobs, protests, and retaliatory violence. Social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook were instrumental in spreading false narratives, which quickly gained traction and contributed to the breakdown of law and order

(Nwosu, 2023). The role of media in shaping perceptions during electoral crises has been well-documented, with the unregulated nature of digital platforms making it easier for violent ideologies to spread.

3.   Political Thuggery and Electoral Manipulation: One of the most persistent factors contributing to electoral violence in Lagos was the use of political thugs by party leaders to intimidate voters, disrupt polling stations, and intimidate electoral officers. These hired operatives, known as "area boys," were often deployed to suppress opposition parties and manipulate election results in favor of their sponsors. The strategic use of thuggery as a tool for electoral success has been a longstanding issue in Nigerian politics, as political actors seek to gain an upper hand through coercive means (Hassan, 2023). Reports indicated that thugs were often stationed at polling booths, engaging in violence and voter suppression to influence election outcomes, particularly in areas with significant opposition support.

4.   Voter Intimidation, Vote Buying, and Suppression: Voter intimidation and vote-buying were prevalent in many parts of Lagos during the 2023 election. Supporters of certain political candidates were coerced into casting their ballots under threat of violence or denied their right to vote altogether. Voter suppression, particularly among opposition groups, was rampant, with reports of voters being intimidated by political actors seeking to control the outcome of the election. Moreover, vote-buying became a tool for securing votes in exchange for cash or material goods, further distorting the integrity of the electoral process (Okon, 2023).

V.   Assessing the Mechanisms for Managing Electoral Violence during the 2023 President Elections in Lagos State

In response to the growing threat of electoral violence, several measures were implemented by various stakeholders, including the government, security agencies, civil society organizations, and the media. These measures ranged from pre-election preparedness to post-election reconciliation, but their effectiveness varied across different regions of Lagos.

1.   Deployment of Security Forces and Law Enforcement: Ahead of the election, the Nigerian Police Force and the Nigerian Army were mobilized to provide security at polling stations and prevent outbreaks of violence. Security forces were stationed in high-risk areas, with particular attention paid to urban centers like Lagos where electoral violence had been more pronounced in previous elections. The government also established a rapid response unit to address emerging threats of violence.

While the presence of security forces deterred some acts of violence, it was not always effective in preventing confrontations. In some areas, there were complaints of biased law enforcement, with certain ethnic groups perceiving the security response as favoring particular political parties. Delays in response time, as well as the selective deployment of forces, led to frustrations and, in some cases, escalated the violence (Hassan, 2023).

2.   Community Engagement and Mediation: Community leaders, religious organizations, and traditional institutions played a critical role in mediating tensions and fostering peace during the election. Various civil society organizations organized town hall meetings and peacebuilding dialogues to address ethnic tensions and prevent violent confrontations. These forums allowed communities to voice their concerns and helped to build trust among ethnic groups, reducing the likelihood of violence. The involvement of local leaders in peacebuilding was especially effective in areas where ethnic tensions were high, as they were viewed as neutral parties capable of bringing opposing groups together (Okon, 2023).

3.   Media Campaigns for Peace and Non-Violence: In addition to the community-based approaches, media campaigns were launched to promote peaceful electoral participation. These campaigns, which included televised ads, radio broadcasts, and social media posts, sought to counter misinformation, provide accurate electoral information, and encourage non-violent behavior among voters. Political and religious leaders also used their platforms to advocate for peace and unity, urging their followers to participate peacefully in the election. However, the impact of media campaigns was undermined by widespread distrust in media outlets, as many citizens believed the media to be biased towards certain political parties or candidates (Nwosu, 2023).

4.   Post-Election Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution: Following the election, efforts were made to heal the divisions caused by the violence. Conflict resolution programs aimed at reconciling communities affected by electoral violence were implemented by various NGOs and community groups. These programs focused on rebuilding trust among ethnic groups and promoting long-term peace and political stability. However, the success of these initiatives was hindered by lingering distrust and resentment, especially in areas where violence had been most severe (Akinyele (2023).

VI. The Limiting Factors to the Effectiveness of the Mechanism Employed to Manage Electoral Violence During the 2023 Presidential Elections in Lagos State.

While the measures taken to manage electoral violence in Lagos State were significant, several challenges limited their effectiveness. These limitations highlight the gaps in Nigeria's electoral security framework and underscore the need for a more comprehensive approach to preventing and managing electoral violence.

1. **Inconsistent and Reactive Security Deployment:** While security forces were present in some high-risk areas, their response time was frequently slow, allowing violent incidents to escalate before intervention. In several cases, security personnel arrived after acts of violence had already occurred, making their role more about damage control rather than prevention. Additionally, reports of partiality among security agents, who were sometimes accused of favoring certain political actors, further eroded public trust. This perceived bias discouraged victims from reporting incidents and emboldened political thugs who believed they would not be held accountable. A lack of coordination between various security agencies also resulted in fragmented responses, reducing the overall effectiveness of violence prevention strategies. A notable example occurred at Surulere on February 25, 2023, when armed men disrupted voting at polling units, snatching ballot boxes while security personnel failed to intervene promptly (Premium Times, 2023). Similarly, in Elegushi, Lekki, voters were physically assaulted and chased away by thugs in broad daylight, yet police presence remained ineffective (Arise News, 2023).

2. **Limited Community Engagement and Grassroots Mobilization:** While community engagement efforts were a crucial component of electoral violence management, they were not comprehensive enough to cover all segments of the population. Many of the outreach programs focused on elite community leaders and formal organizations, overlooking informal grassroots networks where political thuggery and voter intimidation were most prevalent. In highly polarized neighborhoods, some residents were either unaware of or unwilling to participate in peace-building initiatives due to fear of political repercussions. Additionally, in communities where political allegiance was strongly tied to ethnic identity, engagement efforts struggled to foster neutrality and trust among opposing groups. The absence of sustained, year-round peace-building initiatives further weakened the impact of community-based conflict resolution mechanisms. For instance, during the February 25, 2023, presidential election in Aguda, Surulere, a community-based peace initiative failed to prevent attacks as thugs intimidated voters and forced them to leave (Channels TV, 2023). This demonstrated the ineffectiveness of grassroots engagement in mitigating electoral violence in politically charged areas.

3. **Challenges in Controlling Misinformation and Hate Speech:** Although media campaigns played a role in countering electoral misinformation, they faced several obstacles. Many voters continued to rely on informal and often biased sources of information, including partisan social media pages, local influencers, and word-of-mouth networks. The spread of misinformation and hate speech was particularly rampant on social media platforms, where regulatory oversight was weak. Efforts to fact-check and counter misleading narratives were often too slow to prevent their widespread acceptance. Additionally, some media outlets were themselves politically aligned, making it difficult to establish a truly neutral and effective media-driven electoral violence management strategy.

A major instance occurred on February 24, 2023, when false information spread on Twitter alleging that a specific ethnic group planned to rig elections in Lagos, leading to heightened tensions and pre-election violence in Ojodu Berger (The Guardian Nigeria, 2023). The delayed response from fact-checking organizations allowed the falsehoods to gain traction before they were debunked.

4. **Weak Legal Enforcement and Accountability:** Another major limitation was the weak enforcement of electoral laws and the lack of accountability for perpetrators of violence. Political thugs and their sponsors often acted with impunity, as few arrests were made, and prosecutions were rare. Even when cases of electoral violence were documented, delays in the legal process meant that offenders were seldom held accountable in a timely manner. This lack of consequences further encouraged electoral violence, as political actors saw it as a low-risk strategy for influencing election outcomes. Moreover, the reluctance of victims and witnesses to come forward—due to fear of retaliation—hindered investigations and prosecution efforts. A clear example of this failure occurred in Okota, Lagos on February 25, 2023, where thugs attacked voters and destroyed ballot materials, yet no significant arrests or legal actions followed despite extensive media coverage (Sahara Reporters, 2023).

5.   **Institutional and Structural Barriers:** Nigeria's broader political and institutional challenges also affected the effectiveness of electoral violence management strategies. Corruption within electoral bodies, security agencies, and political institutions often undermined efforts to ensure free and fair elections. Some politicians continued to exploit ethnic and religious divisions for electoral gain, making violence prevention difficult. Electoral violence in Lagos State was not merely a security issue but also a symptom of deeper structural problems, including economic inequality, political exclusion, and weak governance. Without addressing these underlying causes, any efforts to manage electoral violence will remain limited in their long-term effectiveness. The presidential elections in Lagos on February 25, 2023, saw widespread voter suppression, with reports of political thugs violently preventing opposition supporters from voting, especially in areas like Oshodi-Isolo and Mile 12 (Daily Trust, 2023). This systemic suppression reflects broader institutional failings that enable electoral violence to persist.

These examples highlight the multifaceted challenges that limited the effectiveness of mechanisms employed to manage electoral violence during the 2023 presidential elections in Lagos State. Addressing these issues requires not just security measures but also legal, structural, and community-based reforms to ensure free, fair, and violence-free elections in the future.

VII.   Conclusion

The 2023 Presidential election in Lagos State highlighted the challenges of managing electoral violence in a politically volatile environment. While several measures were implemented to mitigate violence, their success was mixed, and much work remains to ensure a peaceful electoral process in future elections. By adopting a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that addresses the root causes of electoral violence, Nigeria can move closer to achieving peaceful and democratic elections. The findings of this case study provide valuable insights for both policymakers and practitioners working to improve electoral violence management in Nigeria and similar democracies.

In sum, the limitations in electoral violence management during the 2023 elections in Lagos State underscore the need for a more proactive, inclusive, and institutionalized approach. Addressing these challenges requires stronger security coordination, greater community involvement, stricter enforcement of electoral laws, improved media regulation, and structural reforms to reduce political and economic inequalities. By tackling these issues, future elections in Nigeria can be made more peaceful, credible, and democratic. In order to improve on the electoral violence management in Lagoa State in the future elections, this paper recommended that:

1.   Proactive and Inclusive Security Deployment**:** A more proactive approach to security deployment is essential. The **Nigeria Police Force and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)** should coordinate to deploy security forces strategically, focusing on high-risk areas before violence occurs. **The National Security Adviser (NSA)** must ensure intelligence-led security operations by working closely with community leaders, election monitors, and civil society organizations. Security personnel should receive **training from human rights groups** to enhance neutrality and professionalism.

2.   Institutionalizing Conflict Mediation**:** Conflict mediation should not be a short-term measure limited to election periods. Bodies such as the **National Orientation Agency (NOA)**, **traditional rulers**, and **religious leaders** should facilitate continuous dialogue involving political parties, ethnic groups, and youth organizations. The **Lagos State Ministry of Civic Engagement** should establish permanent platforms for political mediation and peacebuilding beyond election periods.

3.   Strengthening Media Regulations and Civic Education**:** The role of misinformation and hate speech in fueling electoral violence cannot be overstated. Strengthening media regulations, particularly on social media, is crucial to curbing the spread of incendiary rhetoric and political propaganda. Government agencies such as the **National Broadcasting Commission (NBC)** and **Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC)** should collaborate with social media platforms to regulate hate speech and misinformation while upholding free speech. **The Ministry of Education** and **civil society organizations** should expand digital literacy and voter education programs to help citizens critically assess political information.

4.   Electoral Reform and Legal Accountability: Addressing structural weaknesses in the electoral process is key to preventing violence. Electoral reforms should focus on reducing voter suppression, ensuring greater transparency in the electoral process, and eliminating systemic vulnerabilities that allow for vote manipulation. **The Nigerian Bar Association (NBA)** and **the judiciary** must ensure strict enforcement of electoral laws, with **INEC** implementing transparent electoral processes. **The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)** should crack down on vote-buying, while

election tribunals must expedite hearings on election-related offenses to deter future violence. By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can move toward a more secure and credible electoral process, fostering democratic stability and reducing the incidence of electoral violence in future elections.

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