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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL THUGGERY AND ELECTION IN A MULTI-RELIGIOUS NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This study delves into the pervasive prevalence of political thuggery and its impact on the electoral process within the complex socio-religious landscape of Nigeria. The multi-religious nature of Nigerian society introduces unique challenges to the democratic process, as political actors often exploit religious sentiments to mobilize and manipulate the electorate. This study is qualitative and uses discourse analysis. Data was obtained from relevant academic literature, periodicals and gazettes. Emphasis is placed on understanding the multi-religious nature of Nigeria, the symbiotic relationship between political actors and thuggery, and the influence of religious affiliations in Nigeria's elections. The study also investigates the socio-economic factors that contribute to the recruitment and sustenance of political thugs, shedding light on the underlying conditions that perpetuate this phenomenon. Furthermore, the analysis investigates some cases of political thuggery during the electoral process and its impact, examining how the presence of armed groups disrupts the democratic ideals of free and fair elections. In proposing potential solutions, the research advocates for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to address the root causes of political thuggery. This includes reforms in the electoral system, socioeconomic interventions, and initiatives to promote inter-religious dialogue and understanding. By fostering an environment that prioritizes good governance and social justice, the study contends that it is possible to mitigate the influence of political thuggery and create a more resilient and equitable democratic process in Nigeria.

Keywords: Election; Political thuggery; Religion; Violence; Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria, a country known for its multi-religious nature, diverse cultural heritage and intricate history, has been navigating the complex terrain of democratic governance in Nigeria. However, since independence, this democratic journey has been notably marred by the persistent challenge of political thuggery, a phenomenon deeply intertwined with the fabric of Nigerian politics (Agba, Coker, & Ogbaboh et al., 2010; Idakwoji & Paul, 2014). This phenomenon, characterized by the use of violence and intimidation by political actors, poses a serious threat to the integrity of the electoral process. Political thuggery refers to the use of violence, intimidation, or other coercive tactics by individuals or groups against a political opponent to influence the outcome of an election or to achieve political objectives (Ogbonna, Ajayi, & Bello, 2022). The roots of political thuggery in Nigeria can be traced back to pre-independence struggles and have evolved over time, becoming deeply embedded in the political landscape (Agba, Coker, & Ogaboh, 2010). It manifests in various forms, ranging from electoral violence to the manipulation of religious sentiments for political gain. Against this backdrop, the multi-religious nature of Nigerian society adds a layer of complexity to the dynamics of politics and elections.

Given the historical relevance and efficacy of religion in Nigeria, with the majority of its population practising Islam, Christianity, and indigenous belief systems, the coexistence of these religions introduces unique challenges to the democratic process, as

political actors often exploit religious sentiments to mobilize and manipulate the electorate (Onapoja, 2012; Umeanolue, 2019). This intersection of religion and politics has profound implications on the nature of political campaigns, the formation of alliances, and the overall conduct of elections. Particularly, Nigerian politicians use religion in such a way that religious identity not only serves as a diving tool but also deepens religious sentiment and triggers violence. They capitalize on the socio-economic barriers of the people caused by high rates of unemployment, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities to recruit and exploit vulnerable youth as political thugs.

Moreover, the consequences of political thuggery extend beyond immediate electoral outcomes, impacting the legitimacy of elected representatives and eroding public trust in the democratic process. According to Kwasua and Mohammed (2022), the presence of political thuggery in the electoral process leads to increased apathy towards voting. There is no doubts the electorates who have witnessed or experienced intimidation, harassment and maiming from political thugs will participate in another election. It also leads to the loss of life, the destruction of election and electoral material, and the emergence of a candidate that is not the people's choice (Kwasua & Mohammed, 2022; Oluwagbohunmi, 2017).

This critical analysis aims to examine the pervasive prevalence of political thuggery and its impact on the electoral process within the complex socio-religious landscape of Nigeria. By exploring the socioeconomic factors that contribute to the recruitment and sustenance of political thugs, as well as the intricate interplay between religious affiliations and political manoeuvring, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges posed by political thuggery in Nigeria's multi-religious society. In doing so, it aspires to contribute valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and the wider public to inform efforts towards fostering a more transparent, inclusive, and resilient democratic process in Nigeria.

Understanding Nigeria's Multi-Religious Nature and its Influence on Nigerian Politics

Nigeria, with its diverse religious makeup of Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion, is a prime example of a multi-religious society. The religious affiliations of its citizens play a significant role in shaping their identities, beliefs, and political allegiances. Religion serves as a guiding force in the daily lives of Nigerians, impacting their interactions, choices, and even politics (Chiluwa & Odebunmi, 2016). Thus, in Nigeria, religion is not just a personal belief system but also a source of collective identity and social cohesion. In such a multi-religious society, the influence of religion on politics becomes inevitable and can have both positive and negative effects. With the way religion is used in Nigeria, it is not surprising that it has also become a tool for political manipulation and thuggery. For instance, during election periods, politicians often exploit the religious division in society to gain support from their respective religious communities (Afolabi & Avasiloae, 2015; Ugwuanyi, 2015). They resolve to visit religious worship centres and make promises that align with the religious sentiments of the worshippers. This exploitation of religion in politics has led to a deepening of religious fault lines and an increase in inter-ethnic tensions, particularly during election periods (Nwabughio, 2015). As a result, the divisive nature of this approach has led to a greater sense of polarisation within the society, making it increasingly difficult to achieve unity and sustainable development. Religious manipulation in Nigerian politics goes beyond leveraging the sentiments of religious



communities during elections. It has historical roots deeply embedded in the country's social and political fabric. The historical connection between religion and political parties, especially in the northern and southern regions, highlights the pivotal role that religious affiliation plays in shaping the country's political landscape. The convergence of religion and politics has not only impacted party formation and leadership but has also extended to the voting behaviours of the electorate.

The influence of religion in Nigerian politics is underlined by instances where political leaders exploit the doctrines and teachings of religious institutions to bolster their political agendas (Ajayi, 2009). They use religious rhetoric to mobilize support and manipulate public opinion, often at the expense of genuine socio-political and economic development. This manipulation of religion by politicians has led to a culture of thuggery and violence in Nigerian politics. Political thuggery, which involves the use of violence, intimidation, and coercion to achieve political goals, has become a common feature of Nigerian elections. Political thugs, often affiliated with political parties or politicians themselves, are deployed during election periods to disrupt opposing campaigns, intimidate voters, and rig elections in favour of their sponsors (Rasak, 2017; Odusi, 2017). This practice further exacerbates the already existing divisions along religious lines and fosters a culture of violence and lawlessness in the political sphere. Religious thuggery not only undermines the democratic principles of free and fair elections but also threatens national unity and social cohesion. Furthermore, the intertwining of religion and politics in Nigeria has hindered the country's progress towards sustainable political development. The over-reliance on religious affiliations in political decision-making overlooks the importance of merit and competence in leadership. This has resulted in the election of leaders based on their religious beliefs rather than their ability to effectively govern and address the needs of the country. This practice perpetuates a cycle of corruption and inefficiency in governance, as leaders prioritize religious interests over the welfare of the people.

Socioeconomic Factors that Contribute to the Recruitment and Sustenance of Political Thugs

The socioeconomic factor that contributes to the recruitment and sustenance of political thugs in Nigeria is a result of the existence of socioeconomic disparities and inequalities. These socioeconomic disparities and inequalities are often referred to as the unequal allocation of resources within society in a way that creates a wide gap between the rich and the poor (Makinde, 2022). These disparities create a breeding ground for frustration and discontent among marginalized groups, making them more susceptible to being manipulated and recruited by political actors.

Furthermore, weak governance structures and widespread corruption exacerbate these disparities, as resources meant for development are siphoned off by the political elite (Ezeudu, 2023; Ngwoke, 2021). This further deepens the socioeconomic divide, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and desperation that fuels the recruitment and retention of political thugs. For instance, the high poverty rates, unemployment, and a dearth of opportunities affecting groups of people make them vulnerable and easy to use by politicians (Orhero, 2019). Thus, politicians entice them with financial rewards and protection, seeking their allegiance and involvement in acts of thuggery in return. The lure of financial gain and promises of improved living conditions can entice individuals from impoverished backgrounds to engage in political thuggery. This creates a vicious cycle

where socioeconomic disparities and inequalities fuel political thuggery, which in turn perpetuates the very conditions that contribute to these disparities. In Nigeria today, the high unemployment rate, particularly among the youth, exacerbates socioeconomic disparities and creates a pool of vulnerable individuals who can be easily manipulated and recruited as political thugs (Mbah, Obiagu, Nwangwu, Iwuamadi, & Udeh, 2023). This recruitment of political thugs based on socioeconomic disparities and inequalities has significant social and religious implications in a multi-religious Nigeria. For instance, most unemployed youths from marginalized regions may feel disillusioned and frustrated with the existing socioeconomic system, leading to a loss of trust in the government and other institutions (Hussain & Kumar, 2023; Saidu, Zakuan, & Yusoff, 2019). The loss of trust can further deepen existing divisions along religious and ethnic lines, as individuals may seek alliances and support from politicians who offer them Jobs of political thuggery with fat financial rewards. Thus, the political thugs become bound to do whatever their master instructs them to do and, in most cases, train them with religious extremist indoctrination. The indoctrination and manipulation of unemployed and marginalized youths into political thuggery breeds insecurity in society (Chibuike & Eme, 2019). The frustration and disillusionment stemming from the lack of gainful employment have created an enabling ground for political exploitation, exacerbating existing socioeconomic disparities. The unequal distribution of public resources, coupled with the inability of the government to implement effective poverty alleviation programs, has perpetuated a cycle of poverty and desperation, especially in the marginalized regions of Nigeria (Eze, 2021).

Cases of Political Thuggery in Nigeria's Elections

The cases of political thuggery in Nigeria's elections in recent times are too numerous to outline and analyse in one study. Some instances involve the use of weapons by political thugs, escalating violence during election periods. They use harmful tools such as firearms, machetes, and other weapons to carry out their attack. Their activities include violence and intimidation, voter suppression and maiming, candidate/party intimidation, and ballot box snatching, among others. Thus, this article highlights some of the cases of the political thuggery that occurred in the 2015, 2019 and 2023 Nigerian elections.

Table 1: Cases of Political Thuggery in Nigerian Elections

S/N	The incident of political thuggery in the election	Source
1.	Suspected political thugs snatched ballot boxes and voting materials at Oredo Ward 4 unit 42 on Butcher Street in Edo state during the February 25, 2023 presidential election.	Vanguard (2023)
2.	In Kuje Area Council, Abuja, thugs disrupted electoral activities at the Kayarda polling Centre of Kuje Area Council and destroyed sensitive materials in polling units 026, 003, and 004 during the February 25, 2023 presidential election.	Vanguard (2023)
3.	Political thugs invaded the venue of the Ogun State Governorship Election Petition Tribunal On Monday, June 5, disrupting the Election Petition Tribunal peace.	Ogunnaike (2023)
4.	Thugs invaded the polling unit in Ayegbami, Ogun State, snatched the ball box and destroyed it during the February 25, 2023 presidential election.	Lambo (2023)

5.	Political thugs in Kano state invaded the house of a chieftain of the All Progressives Congress, Dauda Rarara, destroying valuables and setting the house ablaze after the announcement of the gubernatorial election results by INEC.	Vanguard (2023)
6.	Thugs snatched and made away with sensitive and non-sensitive materials in Ukpum Ete Ward 1, Ikot Abasi Local Government. No fewer than six people were killed, while eight were injured in Nsit Ibom and Nsit Atai Local Government Areas of the state.	Ebonugwo, Onoyume, Nkwopara, Kumolu & Okutu (2015)
7.	On April 12 2015, a day after the elections, political thugs attacked the central primary school in Alkali Local Government in Bauchi State, a place which is used as the election collation centre.	Omede, & Ngwube, (2022)
8.	Political thugs invaded several polling units in Rivers State on April 11 2015, carting away election materials and running into the bush.	Nnochiri (2015)
9.	Political thugs attacked over 16 Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) ad-hoc staff and destroyed electoral materials, including ballot boxes, on Saturday, March 18 2023, at Odoakpu Ward 7 Onitsha South Local Government Area Anambra State during the House of Assembly Election.	Nwaiwu (2023)
10.	In Oshimili LGA of Delta State, thugs attacked a polling unit and two BVAS machines were lost in the process. Also, in the Safana LGA of Katsina State, thugs attacked one of the voting locations and snatched 6 BVAS machines.	Habib (2023)

Source: Compiled by Authors

Impact of Political Thuggery on Elections in Nigeria

Political thuggery has had a significant impact on elections in Nigeria, undermining the integrity and legitimacy of the electoral process (Isma'ila & Othman, 2015; Okafor & Okafor, 2018). The recruitment and arming of thugs by politicians to intimidate political opponents and their supporters have created an environment of fear and violence during election campaigns (Odisu, 2017). This not only discourages voter turnout but also compromises the fairness and transparency of elections. Additionally, the involvement of political thugs in rigging, voter suppression, and ballot box snatching further distorts the will of the people and undermines the principles of democracy. Furthermore, political thuggery perpetuates a culture of violence and lawlessness in Nigerian politics (Rasak, 2017). This undermines the rule of law and creates a breeding ground for social unrest and instability in the country's election.

The use of thugs in elections is a direct violation of the electorates' right to freely choose their preferred candidate without coercion or intimidation. It creates a system where the outcome of elections is determined not by the will of the people but by those with the most resources and power to deploy thuggery. For instance, during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, there were numerous reports of violence and intimidation carried out by political thugs, leading to a series of disruptions of elections in some pooling units,

destruction of the election materials, and eventual loss of lives. This is evidenced in the report of Human Rights Watch (2023) that revealed some incidents from Rivers and Kano states where political thugs and security officials attacked electoral officials, voters, journalists, and other observers in both states. This pattern of political thuggery undermines not only the democratic process but also the potential for genuine political participation and engagement. This ultimately hinders the country's progress towards sustainable political development.

The multi-religious nature of Nigerian society further complicates the issues of political thuggery and its impacts on elections as politicians and their thugs try to use religion or religious sentiments to justify their actions. This manipulation of religion further divides the electorates along religious lines and deepens existing tension, creating a volatile atmosphere during election periods. The manipulation of religion by politicians and their affiliated thugs exacerbates existing religious tensions, creating an atmosphere of volatility that further divides the electorate. This division hinders the potential for genuine political participation and engagement, ultimately impeding the country's progress toward sustainable political development. Political thuggery has caused serious consequences for Nigerian society, stifling the growth and development of democracy and perpetuating a culture of violence and fear (Okafor & Okafor, 2018).

Additionally, the implications of political thuggery and violence in Nigerian elections extend beyond the immediate disruptions and fear. They also have long-term effects on the overall political and social fabric of the country. According to Rasak (2017), Nigerian politicians depend on a political practice involving the recruitment of political thugs for election purposes. These individuals are deployed to voting locations with the objective of dominating the officially appointed electoral officers. Consequently, these hired individuals often incite turmoil and violence at the voting sites, coercing unsuspecting individuals to cast their votes contrary to their true preferences (Rasak, 2017). Furthermore, the activities of political thugs, which go beyond violence but are also used in carrying out rigging, voter suppression, and ballot box snatching, distort the will of the people and undermine the principles of democracy. Political thuggery and the culture of violence it perpetuates not only impact immediate election processes but also have far-reaching implications for the long-term stability and development of Nigeria.

Possible Solutions to Political Thuggery in Nigerian Election

Addressing political thuggery in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach that involves various stakeholders and strategies. Here are some potential solutions:

1. There is a need to strengthen law enforcement, which will enhance the capacity and effectiveness of law enforcement agencies to promptly respond to incidents of political thuggery. Furthermore, stricter penalties should be implemented for those involved in political violence to deter potential perpetrators.
2. The judiciary needs to be independent of other arms of government. This will ensure that the judiciary remains impartial and independent in order to guarantee fair and swift justice for those involved in political thuggery. Special courts could also be established to handle cases related to political violence, ensuring expedited and transparent legal proceedings.
3. The importance of political reforms must be emphasized. It will address the root causes of political thuggery, such as corruption and lack of internal democracy within political

parties. It will also encourage transparency in campaign financing to reduce the influence of illicit funds on the political process.

4. Youth empowerment through education, skill development, and job creation is needed to provide alternative paths for young individuals who might otherwise engage in thuggery. This can entail sustainable civic education to raise awareness about the negative consequences of political violence on the democratic process.
5. Public and community engagement is needed to foster community-based initiatives that discourage the tolerance of political thuggery. This will encourage community leaders to play a proactive role in preventing and reporting incidents of violence.

Conclusion

Political thuggery and violence pose significant challenges to democratic governance in Nigeria, with youths often manipulated as tools by politicians. The root causes identified include poor governance, unemployment, poverty, corruption, excessive remuneration, ignorance, and a lack of political education. These issues hinder the emergence of credible candidates and foster the theft of legitimate mandates. Moreover, they result in the destruction of lives and properties, along with widespread disruptions to socioeconomic activities. To address this problem, it is recommended that effective civic education be introduced. Such an approach would enable students to cultivate democratic values, foster positive attitudes, and acquire the necessary skills and knowledge for active participation in political affairs and electoral processes.

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