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ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA: EVIDENCE FROM THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

Electoral violence remains one of the most persistent threats to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Although successive electoral reforms, including the Electoral Act 2022 and the deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV), were intended to strengthen electoral integrity, the 2023 presidential election exposed continuing weaknesses in electoral administration, political competition, citizen participation and electoral security. This article examines the relationship between electoral violence and democratic consolidation, focusing on the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State. The study adopts a qualitative documentary case-study design and draws on official electoral reports, election-observation reports, human-rights documentation, policy reports, scholarly literature and credible contemporary accounts. Data were subjected to thematic content analysis around four analytical categories: drivers of electoral violence, forms and patterns of violence, effects on voter participation and public confidence, and implications for democratic consolidation. The analysis indicates that electoral violence in Anambra was embedded in a

broader security environment characterized by attacks on state and electoral institutions, political intimidation, fear of participation and weaknesses in electoral administration. The destruction of electoral materials at the Idemili South INEC office before the election demonstrated the vulnerability of electoral infrastructure, while the relatively low voter turnout in the state and incomplete uploading of presidential polling-unit results to IReV illustrate the wider challenges of participation and electoral confidence. The article argues that electoral technology alone cannot consolidate democracy where political incentives, institutional weaknesses, insecurity and weak accountability remain unresolved. It concludes that democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires an integrated approach combining credible electoral administration, protection of electoral actors, prosecution of electoral offences, political-party reform, civic engagement and institutional accountability.

Keywords: electoral violence; democratic consolidation; Nigeria; Anambra State; 2023 presidential election; voter participation; electoral integrity; BVAS; IReV; prebendalism

1. Introduction

Elections constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which citizens exercise political choice, confer legitimacy on governments and hold political office holders accountable. In representative democracies, elections are expected to provide institutionalized and peaceful mechanisms for political competition and alternation in power. Their democratic value, however, depends not merely on the periodic organization of polls but on the extent to which citizens can participate freely, political actors can compete under reasonably fair conditions, electoral institutions operate independently and election outcomes enjoy sufficient legitimacy.

This distinction is particularly important in Nigeria, where the restoration of civilian government in 1999 has been accompanied by repeated electoral reforms but also recurrent allegations of electoral malpractice, intimidation, political violence, vote buying and institutional weakness. Democratic continuity has therefore not automatically eeeeeeeeeeeeeetranslated into democratic consolidation. Diamond (1999) conceptualizes democratic consolidation as a process through which democratic institutions become legitimate, effective and resilient, while political actors and citizens increasingly accept democratic rules as the appropriate framework for political competition. From this perspective, the quality of elections is central to democratic consolidation.

The 2023 presidential election represented an important test of Nigeria's democratic trajectory. The election followed the enactment of the Electoral Act 2022 and the introduction of important technological reforms, particularly BVAS and IReV. These innovations were expected to strengthen voter accreditation, reduce impersonation and improve transparency in the transmission and public viewing of polling-unit results. However, the election was affected by logistical problems, violence, insecurity, disputes concerning the application of electoral technology and declining voter participation. The European Union Election Observation Mission concluded that the 2023 elections exposed enduring systemic weaknesses and that shortcomings in electoral law and administration damaged public trust in the electoral process.

Anambra State provides a particularly important subnational setting for examining these issues. The state is politically significant within the South-East and experienced serious security concerns in the period preceding the 2023 election. Crisis Group reported that insecurity had deteriorated significantly in the South-East, particularly in Anambra and Imo, with attacks affecting security institutions, police stations, court buildings and INEC facilities.

A major illustration was the attack on the INEC office in Idemili South Local Government Area in February 2023. INEC reported that the attack destroyed 729 ballot boxes, 243 voting cubicles, 256 election bags, 11 megaphones and other election-related materials. The Commission also reported that the attack occurred in the context of a simultaneous attack on a police facility in Nnobi. Such attacks had implications beyond the immediate destruction of property because they threatened electoral preparedness and contributed to a climate of insecurity surrounding political participation.

The electoral environment must also be considered against the background of low participation. Yiaga Africa's analysis of official electoral data indicates that turnout in Anambra during the 2023 presidential election was 23.51%, compared with 26.16% in 2019. Low turnout does not, by itself, establish that violence caused voter abstention. However, in combination with insecurity, logistical challenges and distrust, it provides an important indicator of the difficulty of translating formal electoral rights into meaningful political participation.

The central argument of this article is that electoral violence should not be understood solely as isolated physical attacks occurring on election day. It is better understood as part of a wider electoral-security environment in which coercion, intimidation, destruction of electoral infrastructure, political competition, institutional weakness and citizen fear interact. Such conditions can undermine the foundations of democratic consolidation by restricting participation,

weakening institutional legitimacy and reducing citizens' confidence that electoral competition provides a credible mechanism for determining political authority.

The article therefore examines three questions:

1. What factors contributed to electoral violence surrounding the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State?
2. What forms and patterns of electoral violence were evident in the election period?
3. How did electoral insecurity and violence affect voter participation and public confidence, and what were the implications for democratic consolidation?

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Electoral Violence

Electoral violence encompasses coercive actions or threats directed at electoral actors, institutions or processes with the purpose or effect of influencing political participation or electoral outcomes. It can occur before, during or after an election and may target voters, candidates, party supporters, electoral officials, journalists, election observers or electoral infrastructure.

Birch and Muchlinski (2018) emphasize that elections can become sites of coercion when political actors seek to distort electoral competition through force or intimidation. Importantly, electoral violence is not limited to fatalities. It can include threats, physical assaults, destruction of electoral materials, attacks on electoral offices, intimidation of voters and other actions that restrict the ability of citizens to participate freely.

For analytical purposes, electoral violence in this study is divided into three interrelated dimensions:

Physical violence: attacks on persons, electoral facilities and property, including destruction of election materials.

Psychological violence: threats, intimidation and fear that discourage citizens or electoral personnel from participating.

Institutional or structural violence: practices or institutional failures that systematically restrict political participation or weaken the integrity of electoral competition.

This multidimensional understanding is important because violence may influence elections without necessarily producing large numbers of deaths. An attack that destroys electoral materials, for example, can affect the electoral process even when no person is killed.

2.2 Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation refers to the process through which democracy becomes sufficiently institutionalized, legitimate and resilient that political actors and citizens regard democratic rules as the accepted framework for political competition.

Diamond (1999) associates consolidation with deeper democracy, stronger institutions, accountability, political competition, participation and respect for rights. Democratic consolidation therefore cannot be measured simply by the number of elections held since 1999. It also requires elections that are sufficiently credible to generate political legitimacy and citizen confidence.

In this study, democratic consolidation is operationalized through four indicators:

1. meaningful citizen participation;
2. credible and transparent electoral administration;
3. public confidence in electoral institutions; and
4. peaceful acceptance and management of political competition and electoral disputes.

Electoral violence threatens each of these dimensions.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Elite Theory

Elite Theory, associated with scholars such as Pareto, Mosca and Michels, assumes that political power tends to be concentrated among relatively small and organized groups. The theory is useful for analysing electoral violence because it directs attention to the incentives of political elites and the structures through which they mobilize resources and supporters.

In competitive political environments where access to public office provides substantial economic and political benefits, elections may be perceived by elites as high-stakes contests. Political

competition can consequently become less about policy alternatives and more about control of political institutions and state resources.

Applied to the Nigerian context, Elite Theory suggests that electoral violence can be understood partly as a strategy used by politically influential actors to weaken opponents, influence voter behaviour, control political spaces or protect established interests.

The theory does not imply that citizens are passive or that every violent incident is ordered by political elites. Rather, it provides an analytical framework for examining the political incentives behind the mobilization of coercion.

3.2 Prebendalism

Richard Joseph's concept of prebendalism provides a complementary framework. Joseph (1987) argues that Nigerian political office has historically been treated by competing actors as a source of access to public resources and patronage. In a prebendal political system, struggles over public office can therefore become struggles over access to material benefits, contracts, appointments and political networks.

This perspective is relevant to electoral violence because the perceived value of political office can increase the incentives for political actors to deploy extraordinary resources to win elections. Where political defeat is interpreted as the loss of access to patronage networks, electoral competition can become highly confrontational.

Prebendalism also helps explain the relationship between elite competition and institutional weakness. If political actors perceive public institutions as resources to be captured rather than neutral mechanisms to be respected, electoral institutions may be exposed to pressure, manipulation and interference.

The two theories therefore complement one another. Elite Theory explains **who benefits from and mobilizes political power**, while Prebendalism helps explain **why control of public office can become an exceptionally high-stakes political struggle**.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative documentary case-study design. Anambra State constitutes the case, while the 2023 presidential election provides the temporal and substantive focus.

The documentary approach is appropriate because the study examines a completed electoral event and seeks to synthesize evidence from multiple independent sources rather than manipulate variables experimentally.

The original project description referred to the design as "ex-post facto." For journal publication, the more precise description is **qualitative documentary case study**, because the principal analytical activity is systematic interpretation of documentary evidence rather than statistical ex-post-facto estimation.

4.2 Sources of Data

Data were drawn from five broad categories:

- official reports and publications of the Independent National Electoral Commission;
- election-observation reports, particularly the European Union Election Observation Mission and Yiaga Africa;
- reports by human-rights and conflict-monitoring organizations;
- peer-reviewed academic literature and scholarly books; and
- credible contemporary news reports used primarily to document specific incidents.

The use of multiple categories of sources enables triangulation and reduces dependence on any single institutional or political perspective.

INEC's official 2023 General Election Report is particularly important because it provides administrative data on the conduct and reporting of the election. According to the report, Anambra had 5,720 polling units, of which 4,776 presidential-election polling-unit results had been uploaded to IReV, representing 83.50%.

4.3 Data Analysis

The documents were subjected to thematic content analysis. Four major themes guided the analysis:

1. **Drivers of electoral violence**
2. **Forms and patterns of electoral violence**
3. **Consequences for participation and electoral confidence**
4. **Implications for democratic consolidation**

Evidence was compared across sources to identify convergence, disagreement and gaps.

4.4 Reliability and Validity

Reliability was strengthened through source triangulation. Claims concerning electoral administration were prioritized from official INEC records, while claims concerning violence and human-rights risks were compared with independent observation and human-rights reports.

The study also distinguishes between:

- verified institutional facts;
- independently reported incidents;
- allegations made by political actors; and
- interpretations made by the researcher.

This distinction is essential in politically sensitive research because allegations concerning electoral manipulation or responsibility for violence should not automatically be treated as established facts.

5. Findings

5.1 Security Deterioration as a Pre-election Driver

The evidence indicates that the security environment surrounding the 2023 election constituted an important background condition for electoral insecurity in Anambra State.

Crisis Group documented a deterioration of security in the South-East before the election and reported attacks affecting security and state institutions, including INEC facilities. Human Rights Watch similarly warned before the election that widespread insecurity and the lack of accountability for previous election-related abuses threatened the safe conduct of the 2023 elections.

The significance of this environment is that electoral violence did not emerge in a political vacuum. It occurred within a broader context of insecurity in which citizens, political actors and electoral officials faced uncertainty about their physical safety.

This supports the argument that electoral violence should be analysed as an interaction between political competition and the wider security environment.

5.2 Attacks on Electoral Infrastructure

One of the clearest documented manifestations of electoral insecurity in Anambra was the attack on the INEC office in Idemili South.

According to INEC's account reported contemporaneously, the attack destroyed 729 ballot boxes, 243 voting cubicles, 256 election bags and other election materials. The Commission stated that contingency arrangements would be made to replace the destroyed materials and that the election would proceed as scheduled.

The incident demonstrates that electoral violence can occur before election day and target the administrative infrastructure required for voting.

Its significance extends beyond the material loss. Electoral institutions require public confidence, operational preparedness and physical security. An attack on an INEC facility can therefore produce psychological consequences among electoral personnel and voters even where replacement materials are subsequently provided.

5.3 Electoral Administration and Technological Vulnerability

The introduction of BVAS and IReV represented an important attempt to strengthen electoral integrity. Nevertheless, technology could not independently resolve deeper institutional and political problems.

INEC's post-election report records that 4,776 of Anambra's 5,720 polling units had presidential results uploaded to IReV, equivalent to 83.50%.

This figure is important because it illustrates both the progress and limitations of technological electoral reform. Digital transmission created a new mechanism for public scrutiny, but incomplete uploads demonstrated that technological innovation remained dependent on administrative capacity, infrastructure, personnel and compliance.

The European Union Election Observation Mission similarly concluded that shortcomings in electoral law and administration damaged confidence in INEC and recommended further legal and operational reforms.

The evidence therefore challenges the assumption that electoral technology automatically produces credible elections. Technology can improve transparency, but only when embedded within reliable institutions and protected from operational disruption.

5.4 Voter Participation and Electoral Fear

A significant consequence of electoral insecurity was its potential to discourage participation.

Yiaga Africa's analysis of official data records a presidential-election turnout of 23.51% in Anambra in 2023, compared with 26.16% in 2019.

The decline should not be attributed exclusively to violence. Voter turnout is affected by multiple factors, including political interest, registration and PVC collection, logistical problems, economic circumstances, weather, perceptions of electoral competitiveness and confidence in electoral institutions.

Nevertheless, the literature and observation evidence support the proposition that insecurity can become a deterrent to participation. Human Rights Watch reported that the 2023 election environment included violence and threats that exposed voters to significant risks.

Thus, electoral violence affects democracy not only when voters are physically attacked but also when fear changes their decision about whether to participate.

5.5 Political Competition and the Strategic Character of Violence

The documentary evidence suggests that electoral violence should not be interpreted simply as spontaneous disorder.

The high political stakes surrounding presidential competition, combined with localized insecurity and institutional vulnerabilities, created opportunities for coercive strategies. This is consistent with the logic of Elite Theory: where political competition determines access to valuable political resources, organized political actors may have incentives to weaken rivals.

The Prebendalism perspective provides an additional explanation. If public office is perceived as a major route to access state resources and patronage, electoral defeat can carry substantial material consequences. Such incentives can increase the attractiveness of coercion, patronage and clientelism.

However, the evidence does not justify attributing every violent incident in Anambra to political elites. Some insecurity involved armed groups and broader separatist or criminal dynamics that cannot be reduced to party competition. The more defensible conclusion is that political competition interacted with pre-existing insecurity to increase electoral vulnerability.

5.6 Public Confidence and Democratic Legitimacy

Electoral violence creates a legitimacy problem because democratic government depends not only on formal procedures but also on citizens' perception that those procedures are meaningful.

The European Union Election Observation Mission concluded that the 2023 elections exposed systemic weaknesses and that shortcomings in electoral administration damaged trust in INEC. Human Rights Watch likewise reported that the elections were affected by logistical failures, violence and difficulties with real-time transmission of results.

This creates a potentially self-reinforcing cycle:

insecurity → fear and disruption → lower participation → reduced confidence → contested legitimacy → further distrust in democratic institutions.

This cycle is particularly problematic for democratic consolidation because citizens may begin to perceive elections as incapable of producing meaningful political change.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that electoral violence and democratic consolidation are closely connected through three principal mechanisms: participation, institutional legitimacy and political accountability.

First, violence restricts participation. Democracy assumes that citizens are able to exercise political rights without coercion. When insecurity discourages voters from attending polling units or forces electoral officials to operate under threat, formal electoral rights become less meaningful.

Second, electoral violence undermines institutional legitimacy. Electoral management bodies depend on public confidence. Where election facilities are attacked, electoral technology fails, results are not uploaded as expected or administrative procedures are inconsistently implemented, citizens may interpret these problems as evidence that electoral institutions are incapable of protecting their choices.

Third, violence weakens accountability. Elections are expected to provide citizens with the opportunity to reward or sanction political leaders. If participation is suppressed or electoral outcomes are widely perceived as unreliable, the accountability mechanism becomes weaker.

The Anambra case also demonstrates the limitations of treating electoral violence exclusively as a security problem. Security deployments may be necessary to protect voters and electoral officials, but excessive or partisan security arrangements can themselves undermine public confidence. Electoral security must therefore be impartial, proportionate and rights-based.

The case further demonstrates the limits of technological solutions. BVAS and IReV can address specific forms of electoral malpractice, but they cannot independently resolve political patronage, elite competition, insecurity, weak prosecution of electoral offences or declining public trust.

This finding is consistent with broader scholarship on democratic consolidation. Diamond (1999) argues that consolidation requires more than the persistence of electoral institutions; it requires deeper legitimacy, stronger institutions, accountability and citizen participation. The Nigerian experience illustrates this distinction: the country has maintained electoral continuity since 1999, but the quality and credibility of electoral competition remain central challenges.

The findings also support Birch and Muchlinski's (2018) argument that electoral violence is a problem requiring institutional and preventive responses rather than merely reactive security interventions. Their work emphasizes that electoral violence can distort democratic competition even when the violence does not reach the scale of armed conflict.

7. Implications for Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

The evidence from Anambra suggests that electoral violence undermines democratic consolidation through at least five pathways.

7.1 Reduced political participation

Fear and insecurity can discourage citizens from voting. The low turnout recorded in Anambra in 2023 illustrates the broader participation challenge.

7.2 Declining institutional trust

Failures in electoral administration, combined with violence and inadequate communication, can weaken citizens' confidence in INEC.

7.3 Weakening of electoral legitimacy

Where citizens perceive elections as unsafe or poorly administered, the legitimacy of electoral outcomes may become contested even where formal legal procedures have been followed.

7.4 Reinforcement of elite dominance

Where political competition is highly unequal and political resources are concentrated among elites, violence can become a mechanism for protecting political advantage.

7.5 Normalization of political coercion

Repeated exposure to electoral intimidation risks normalizing coercion as part of political competition. This is especially damaging to democratic consolidation because democratic institutions depend on the internalization of peaceful rules of competition.

8. Policy and Institutional Implications

The findings suggest that reducing electoral violence in Nigeria requires reforms beyond election-day security.

8.1 Strengthen electoral infrastructure

INEC facilities, sensitive and non-sensitive electoral materials, digital platforms and personnel should receive systematic risk assessments before elections, particularly in areas with documented security threats.

8.2 Establish stronger electoral-security coordination

Security agencies, INEC and civil-society organizations should develop localized electoral-security plans based on early-warning information rather than relying primarily on emergency responses.

8.3 Improve accountability for electoral violence

Investigations into attacks on electoral institutions and political actors should lead to timely prosecution where sufficient evidence exists. Human Rights Watch has repeatedly identified impunity as a major weakness in Nigeria's response to election-related abuses.

8.4 Protect electoral technology

BVAS and IReV should be supported by adequate power, connectivity, technical personnel, contingency procedures and transparent communication protocols. Technological failure should not automatically become a source of political suspicion.

8.5 Reform political-party practices

Political parties should strengthen internal democracy, reduce the monetization of nominations and improve mechanisms for resolving intra-party disputes.

8.6 Expand voter education

Voter education should extend beyond explaining how to vote. Citizens should understand the role of BVAS, result-upload procedures, complaint mechanisms, electoral offences and lawful channels for challenging results.

8.7 Strengthen civic monitoring

Civil-society organizations should continue systematic election observation and publish disaggregated evidence on violence, participation and electoral administration. Initiatives such as Yiaga Africa's Watching the Vote demonstrate the value of citizen-based electoral monitoring.

9. Conclusion

This study examined electoral violence and democratic consolidation in Nigeria through the case of the 2023 presidential election in Anambra State. The documentary evidence demonstrates that electoral insecurity in the state was not confined to isolated incidents on election day. It emerged from the interaction of broader insecurity, attacks on electoral infrastructure, political competition, institutional vulnerabilities and declining public confidence.

The destruction of electoral materials at the Idemili South INEC office demonstrated the vulnerability of electoral infrastructure before polling commenced. The relatively low voter turnout recorded in Anambra and the incomplete upload of presidential polling-unit results to IReV further demonstrate the challenges of translating electoral reforms into effective citizen participation and institutional trust.

The analysis does not support the conclusion that every irregularity or security incident was deliberately orchestrated by a political party or elite group. Such claims require specific evidence and should not be generalized from individual incidents. Rather, the evidence indicates that political competition occurred within a security environment and institutional structure that created opportunities for coercion, disruption and distrust.

Elite Theory and Prebendalism provide useful complementary explanations. Elite Theory draws attention to the role of organized political actors and competition for power, while Prebendalism highlights the material significance attached to political office and the patronage structures surrounding it. Together, they help explain why electoral competition can become unusually intense and why democratic institutions may be vulnerable to elite capture.

Ultimately, Nigeria's democratic consolidation cannot be achieved simply through the regular organization of elections or the introduction of electoral technology. Consolidation requires elections that citizens regard as safe, credible, transparent and meaningful. The experience of Anambra in 2023 therefore demonstrates that electoral technology must be accompanied by

institutional reform, political accountability, effective electoral security, civic participation and credible enforcement of electoral laws.

The central policy lesson is straightforward: protecting the ballot requires protecting not only polling units and electoral technology but also the institutions, citizens and democratic norms upon which electoral legitimacy depends.

10. Limitations of the Study

This study has three principal limitations. First, it relies on documentary evidence rather than original survey or interview data. Consequently, the analysis cannot establish individual-level causal relationships between exposure to violence and decisions not to vote.

Second, reports of electoral violence may differ across institutions, observers, media organizations and political actors. The study therefore relies on triangulation and gives greater evidentiary weight to official records and independently corroborated observations.

Third, the study focuses specifically on Anambra State and the 2023 presidential election. Its findings should therefore not be generalized mechanically to all Nigerian states or all electoral contests.

Future research should combine documentary evidence with household surveys, interviews with voters and electoral officials, geospatial mapping of violent incidents and polling-unit-level electoral data. Such mixed-method research would provide stronger evidence concerning the causal relationship between electoral violence, voter participation and democratic trust.

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