



ELECTION WARS IN NIGERIA: THE CASE OF RIVERS STATE

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Abstract: *Elections are critical periods in Nigeria because they alter the power structure within a state, the Subnational and National levels where multiple actors seek to establish their claims to power. Rivers State is particularly noted as host spots for electoral violence and security breaches during elections. The perpetrators of violence are organized by a diverse group of interests and stakeholders with no constitutional provision or legislation legalizing their existence. However, because of their alignment with serving government officials either at federal or state level, are more formidable. Political candidates mobilize thugs to disrupt political meetings, intimidate, displace, and disenfranchise citizens suspected of being sympathetic to opponents. Under this circumstance, election becomes war because the aim of all actions in war is to disarm an enemy and remove his ability to resist, and victory in battle consists in nothing less than the physical and moral destruction of the enemy. If an organized resistance uses destructive techniques and are met with similar violent actions, then the confrontation may be conceived as warfare. Political parties must faithfully subscribe to rules and regulations intended to ensure free, fair and credible election. Failure to do so would have negative destabilizing spill over effects on the polity, and in the long run, constrict irredeemably the democratic space.*

Key words: Election violence, Rivers State, Credible elections, INEC, Democracy, Politics

Introduction

The conception of “free and fair” elections is among the most important aspects of the minimum requirements of formal democracy. The widespread disenchantment with the 2019 Presidential, National Assembly, Governorship and State House of Assembly elections resulting in deaths, with its failure as a mechanism for participation and accountability under conditions of “Choice less elections” after what appeared a better four years, acted out the ritualistic charade of voting without choosing, underscores the fact that a segment of the political class shows nothing but contempt for the electorate.

The history of elections in Rivers State in the recent past has been one characterized by electoral fraud associated with political tensions; crisis and violence perpetrated by some political actors, non-state armed groups, and unprofessional conduct of few staff of the election management Body – Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and state security forces. Indeed,

the National and Social media platforms were inundated with reports of compromise, subversion of the electoral process and overbearing use of state power by state security forces and non-state armed groups in Rivers State.

Under the prevailing violent electioneering conditions, there can neither be people-oriented democracy nor free, fair and credible elections. There is a pressing need therefore, to investigate the causes and dynamics of the problem and to seek answers and solutions to the questions and problems posed by this crisis of elections insecurity against the prevailing violent conducts of a potent fraction of the political elite. Although a segment of the political elite is generally guilty of an immoral and lawless approach to politics and the law, just as the majority of Rivers State residents stand accused, if not condemned for keeping quiet, refusing to raise alarm, appearing unconcerned, feigning seeming helplessness, in the face of continuing assault or threat of assault on

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peoples' liberties in the 2019 General Elections. I argue that under these circumstances, the Nigerian State cannot sustain a virile liberal political system because its rulers apparently condone through their silence and inaction, the desecration of the core principles that constitute the liberal democratic anchor by a segment of the political elite.

Violence and electoral fraud are deficits in Nigeria's democratic politics which have created a deepening distance between a faction of the overbearing political elite and the generality of Rivers State people and residents. I argue that the problem of electoral violence in the County and Rivers State in particular, is bound up with the character of the Nigerian state as one captured by political elites for contestations in furtherance of national relevance and their insatiable accumulative tendencies. There is an urgent need for citizens to say no and act same, against the general culture of impunity and the wanton abuse of the peoples' right to freely elect their leaders by those exercising administrative and political authorities in various facets of public life.

The Nigerian ruling class in contemporary time have dealt with popular protests, mass demonstrations and organized civil disobedience as "wars" because they seek to bring changes against the will of power holders, but with acts that are not destructive. Although the participants may renounce coercion as well as violence, and though they may intend their efforts as a pure attempt at persuasion, such protests are nevertheless interpreted as organized acts of force opposing official actions (Marsh, 1923, Bondurant, 1958). Walter (1972) argued that the resisters of course, interpret the official actions they are opposing as initial acts of force. Since the protesting citizen organizations are weaker than the group that exercises power, and because in a modern power system the citizen organizations do not usually have effective instruments of violence, reactions to resistance are more frequently violent than the acts of resistance. If organize resistance uses destructive techniques and are met with similar violent actions, then the confrontation may be defined as warfare, if it takes

place within a single political community, then it is civil war.

War according to the classic formulation by Clausewitz, is a duel on the extensive scale between armed combatants, each striving by physical violence to compel the other to submit to his will and each aiming to overthrow the adversary and to make him incapable of further resistance. War is political instrument, carrying out political transactions by violent means, and it is an act of violence practiced without limits (Walter, 1972). I argue, that since the deployment of Nigeria's military for subjugation of the electoral to achieve electoral victories by political incumbents and the resistance of State security forces by non-state armed groups procured by politicians also to secure electoral victories "at all cost" resulted humanitarian emergencies, then the political contestation process is a "war". Just as the aim of all actions in war is to disarm the enemy and remove his ability to resist, and victory in battle consists in nothing less than the physical and moral destruction of the enemy's armed forces; the deployment of State security forces and non-state armed groups in the 2019 General Elections by the political elites are designed to destroy the contending political groups to achieve electoral victories, elections then becomes "wars".

Although, it is a widely held belief that violence and other kinds of force are perennially associated with power, there is anything but agreement but agreement over the question of the proper (in both a technical and moral sense) relation between violent methods and the power system. Among the several ideas of political power in the vast literature on the subject, two prominent conceptions appear, superficially at least, to contradict each other. One considering violence as the failure of power, would exclude it from the definition; the other, considering violence as the specific property of political associations, makes it central to the definition of political power (Walter, 1972). The use of violence as the decisive instrument in conflict and decision had been regarded as the specific characteristic that distinguishes political structures from other kinds of social



organization (Radcliffe-Brown, 1961). In fact, for C. Wright Mills, “All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence (Mill, 1956). The paper contends that violence no matter its dimensions in the 2019 general elections in Rivers State, posed fundamental credibility problems because the elections are flawed, competitions unfair because of the use of militarized forces, executive power, and compromised electoral institutions.

The Problem

The 2019 elections did not prove very much, least of all, democratic consolidation possibilities of Nigeria. They were conducted under the auspices of a regime which had clear ideas about its continuity at the national level and in some states, its succession plan and the determination to make them stick at all cost. Against this backdrop, the more meaningful test for democracy in contemporary Nigeria came with the 2019 elections. The elections proved much less than the citizens thought about democratic consolidations. Perhaps, the significance of the elections is that it threatened the nation with the rude awakening to its urgent predicament. It may have brought to the fore the fact that the political system might disintegrate in orgy of political recrimination and violence because of deep-seated distrust and anxiety among contending groups for political power.

There is the alienation of leaders at national, state and local government levels from the masses arising from the unconscionable exploitation of generality of the citizens. There is the mutual alienation of ethnic groups as ethnic consciousness is manipulated to secure political and economic power. There is also the alienation arising from Nigeria’s hostile social environment and the peoples’ to survive to survive in it. Unfortunately, pervasive alienation has bred political intemperance because people are understandably wary of being subjected to the power of those from whom they alienated. Consequently, alienated groups struggle determinedly to gain power since they perceive their security to lie only in their direct control of power. This

has made the premium on political exceedingly high in Nigeria and encouraged extremism in the pursuit and use of power (Ake, 1982).

Critical to the to strengthening democracy in Nigeria is ensuring that the electoral process is free, fair and credible. Many Nigerians, including respectable civil society leaders consider fair, free and credible elections as if it starts and ends on the election day. This is wrong. The road to credible elections should focus should focus on the entire process, beginning with how political parties elect or select their candidates up to the declaration of results. This process involves different political and non-political actors each of which must be willing to deliver according to its constitutional and statutory mandate and the highest level of public ethics for election to be free, fair and credible. The most important component of a good electoral system is the credibility and independence of the electoral management body. Unfortunately, oftentimes the impression seems to be created that as if independence is just a matter of getting a credible person to chair the electoral management body. The 2019 General elections show that it is far more than that. The independence of the electoral management body is mostly determined by the mode of appointment. The process of recruitment of the Chairman and members of the election management body in Nigeria is made by the President rather than through a competitive recruitment exercise. Thus, those appointed rather than have a sense that they merited their positions, perceived themselves as beneficiaries of political patronage (Namani, 2019).

Political competition is organized around personalities and parochial appeals, typically pursued through the use of money, intimidation and compromise of election authorities. “Godfathers” frequently anoint candidates and furnish resources for capturing elections. In addition, the party system has evolved as a set of clusters among competing elites rather than a vehicle for voter preferences of political choice. Unfortunately, competitive electoral politics assumes a ruthless character in which it is assumed that “the winner wins



all, and the loser loses all”. This created the space for cultists, criminal gangs and state-sponsored violence capturing of election materials and attacks on political opponents which draw from the existence of a large reservoir of anger and resentments among youths.

The growth of vigilante groups, inter and intra cult and gang wars, and privatization of State Security Forces by the political class, speaks to the vacuum created by the weaknesses of state security institutions. In fact, one man’s “thug” is another’s informal provider. Consequently, in an era of intensely fragmented non-state armed groups, political thugs, militants cum ethnic militias, and cultists blurred into a continuum of coercive action. Analysis of actors in political violence in Rivers State is hampered by the politics of naming, leading to the proliferation of different activities and functions. Consequently, the terms militants, gunmen, cultists, oil thieves, vigilantes are used interchangeably, often without clear definition. In general, the activities of these non-state armed groups are characterised by the use of violence to achieve political and election management security goals. This broad conceptualization for our purpose, encompasses violent groups that operate outside legally sanctioned institutions. More important is the fact, that these groups are organized by a diverse group of interests and stakeholders including politically exposed persons with no constitutional provision or legislation legalizing their existence (Raleigh, 2016).

Although involvement of members of non-state armed groups in elections are politically motivated, they are overwhelmingly populated with those seeking employment and marginalized youths struggling for their share of patronage. These groups engage in electoral violence for a variety of reasons for the political elites. Those that aligned with political incumbents at the state or federal government level are more formidable and their actions widespread because of the cover provided by state security forces. Members of this group are both pragmatic and promiscuous in their choice of patron, and attempt to maximize their political benefits in pursuing their private agenda such as control of

governance of illicit business spaces (Joab-Peterside, 2007, Dube, 2019; Ebiri, 2019). The main functions of thugs, political gangs, non-state armed groups and other informal security providers in the political contestation processes are to alter the election landscape by threatening or forcing voters out before elections; provide security cover for snatching of ballot papers and other sensitive election materials such as election result sheets amongst others.

Some of the groups are rarely organized in a formal or rigid hierarchy, but are closely affiliated with a political patron or community elite who dictate the goals of violence. Membership of the groups is often based on ethnicity, locality, and other identity manifestations. They receive very little paramilitary training, though patrons may provide arms and other required supplies. However, groups also purchase their own arms with proceeds from supply of security for past elections, oil theft, drug trafficking and other illicit businesses. The overwhelming sense is that the rule of law is a chimera, and that many institutions purportedly designed to protect life and property, provide few protections, are ineffective and at worst, are responsible for a deep sense of personal and community insecurity.

To ensure hitch free election in the country, the Inspector General of Police(IGP), Mohamed Adamu, deployed seven Deputy Inspectors General of Police(DIGs) to the Six Geo-Political Zones of the country. Also deployed are 10 Assistant Inspectors General of Police(AIGs) to police Zonal Commands and 227 Commissioners of Police(CPs) to complement Commissioners in the 36 states Commands and the Federal Capital Territory(FCT), Abuja. With the deployments, each Command had additional three Commissioners of Police deployed to each Senatorial Districts in their respective states of assignments, which formed part of security management base for the command’s Commissioner of Police (Akinferwa and Umeh, 2019). Similarly, ahead of the Gubernatorial and State House of Assembly Elections, the Rivers State Police Command deployed 15, 544 officers and men that maned the 319 wards as



well as 4,432 electoral units across the state during the elections. The deployed officers and men were to complement 2000 other sister security agencies bringing the total number to 17,000 security personnel that participated in the elections to ensure free and fair elections in the State (Amadi, 2019). Officers and men of the military were also deployed for elections in the state. Yet, violence pervaded the political landscape of Rivers State as residents complained of the unprofessional conducts of the Police and other sister security agencies in the state during the recently concluded elections while non-state armed groups unleashed terror on the area.

The ruling political party (All Progressive Congress(APC) and the main opposition Party-Peoples Democratic Party(PDP) have undermined democracy, underdeveloped the political party system and ruined all the institutions of governance in the country (Olaja, 2020). In the countdown to the 2019 general elections, the All Progressive Congress(APC) tampered with its process for primaries either through delegate or open democratic processes. The obvious consequence was the adoption of a bifurcated approach, which allowed states to choose either of the two alternatives. could not organize a credible party congress to elect or select her flagbearers in Rivers State. This policy created intractable bitter in APC over who emerges the party's governorship flagbearer in the state. Two factions emerged in the party in Rivers State namely, Rotimi Amaechi and Magnus Abe factions. Rotimi Amaechi was a former Governor of Rivers State and Minister for Transport at the Federal level while Magnus Abe was a serving Senator. The disagreement generated controversy surrounding the disqualification of the APC from fielding any candidates at the elections based on the Judgement of the Supreme Court (Godwin, 2019; Atavti, 2019, Ebiri, 2018).

The judgement of the Supreme Court barring the All Progressive Congress(APC) from fielding any candidates in Rivers State for the 2019 General elections brought to the fore the contentious issue of internal

democracy of intra-party democracy in the democratization process in Nigeria. The apex court's ruling emanated from a dispute over the conduct of APC congresses and primaries, which held in the state while keeping out other members. The judgement of the apex court tugs fundamentally at the principles of party organization. Bickering over the issue of internal democracy divided the party and sapped its strength for electoral battles. Regardless of the fact that the parties have constitutions, these are subjected to changes at the whims of party stalwarts who are inclined to imposition of their preferred candidates. For three consecutive elections, results from Rivers State had always shown that the ballot boxes do not count. The current Minister of Transport from the State Rotimi Amaechi exhibit well that notion as reported in STV by an analyst on Nigerians Vote Programme. Fake results sheets could be made available to the presiding officer but the real result sheets could be found elsewhere. As returning officer you are just handed a result sheet to announce and so be it (Ariole, 2019). Furthermore, there were fears that the President's directive to State security forces to deal ruthlessly to anyone who constitutes a hindrance to the smooth conduct of the elections especially, ballot box snatchers and subsequent deployment of the military would exacerbate violence during the elections. The general opinion among citizens is that, the deployment of the military, particularly the army for elections is unconstitutional because elections as it were, are essentially a civil affair which does not require the intervention of the military. The constitutional duty of the military is to defend the country's territorial integrity and not meddle into political or election matters (Jimoh & Daka, 2019). There was therefore, palpable fear that the army will harass intimidated and suppress political opponents and INEC officials to do the biddings of some desperate politicians who see elections as a do-or-die affair. The extent to which the foregoing is real, is constitutive ingredients of the election wars is the object of the next section.



Prelude to the Wars

There is hunger and poverty in the land occasioned by the haphazard, unstable and visionless economic policies of government at different levels. Families can hardly afford to feed properly because staple food commodities are priced out of reach of commoners. For the workers, wagers are criminally out of tune with the economic and existential realities in the land, just as long term planning has long been abandoned for short fixes. In fact, Nigeria has slipped behind India as the center of poverty in the world. Security is virtually non-existent because lives are violated by criminals with impunity). The major political parties lacked ideological stand points or principles to confront the problems that confront the country. Many of the current gladiators lack character, that capacity to maintain the ideals when placed in a position of trust. They are men and women who practice prebendal politics and ignore the demands of the common good to lead. The revenue of the Nigerian state is cornered by few individuals who act above the law and plunder the treasury in order to acquire or remain in power. In fact, there have been too many scoundrels, men and women without an iota of honour in the corridors of power (The Guardian-Editorial, 2019).

Besides, the waves of unguarded and incendiary remarks that emanated from the country's political elite further enlivened the palpable tension and anxiety of both local and international electoral stakeholders. Aggressive languages and hateful speeches between and among political parties and supporters, rumours of politically motivated attacks, violent activities of politically-charged youths; drug abuse are usually the absurdity that prelude elections in Nigeria. Although, it is a widely held belief among comparative political scientists that violence is a major feature of political life around the world, the pervasive acceptance, intensity and dimension in Nigeria's political system is devastating and causing a great distortion to its structure. Voting in an election is more than a mere civic duty. It is the means by which a sacred bond of trust is forged between the citizens and their leaders in a democracy. The ballot box

and the ballot paper are the sacred instruments of this bond of trust. Unfortunately, the Rivers State experience shows that both the ballot box and the ballot paper are profaned in the mindless contest for power by the Nigerian ruling elite. Consequently, there was mounting fear of election violence throughout the country although some states such as Rivers State are more prone to violence than others.

No doubt, genuine efforts were made to stave off the nagging fear of violence before the commencement of the elections. One of such efforts was the National Peace Committee headed by the former head of state, General Abdulsalami Abubakar which persuaded the political parties and their presidential candidates to sign a peace accord few months to the elections in which they committed themselves and their parties to a peaceful conduct of the elections. The electioneering campaigns showed that none of them strictly adhered to the terms of the peace accord. In fact, the electioneering failed to live up to the billing as issue based. Just days to the Presidential election, the amount of abusive and inciting messages making the rounds by politicians, especially within the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) and the main opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was alarming. They made wild allegations against one another while security issues were politicized (Agbese, 2019, THIS DAY, February 14, 2019). The Minister of Transport, Rotimi Amaechi in the presence of the President at Presidential Campaign in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital declared war on the Rivers State Governor and his political party-the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The war dance apart from leaving Rivers State residents in a quandary, was an indication of an impending war and associated doom. It is the Minister's speech and dance that triggered subsequent violent reactions.

The halt in the stay of execution by the court of Appeal against a Federal High Court injunction restraining INEC from featuring APC National Assembly, State Assembly and Governorship candidates for the general elections shot sky-high the political temperature in the



state. The fear that the supporters of APC and PDP might resort to violence derives from the fact that the result of the Presidential and National Assembly election will, to a large extent, determine the outcome of March 2, 2019 gubernatorial election. The storming of the residence and arrest of Dr. Tamunosisi Gogo Jaja-Rivers State Commissioner for Education, his family and the State Coordinator of Arise Nigeria, Hon. Benjamin Diri by soldiers from the Nigerian Army 6 Division, Port Harcourt from his Government Reservation Area (GRA) Phase 3 by 2.00pm on Wednesday, March 6, 2019, and frequent visit of diplomats from the United States, Britain and European Union to Governor Wike of Rivers State and other stakeholders to implore people of the state to shun violence in order not to mar the election process was a pointer to the fact that the State was a major flash point for the elections (Ebiri, 2019).

The point being made here is that the role of political elites in orchestrating and inciting election violence is well profound in Nigeria's electoral landscape. In reality, they place high premium on electoral fraud rather than free and fair contest. In what follows in the next section, we will show that the flurry of crimes trailing the 2019 elections, we will show that members of the ruling elite are responsible for instigating the plethora of violence as well as their foot soldiers who undermine the electoral process by perpetrating these violent acts are never dragged before the law (Akinfenwa, 2019). The foregoing portends that mayhem has occupied a significant portion in Nigeria's electoral process. It should therefore, not be a surprise that in spite of the heavy presence of security personnel in the just concluded elections, the exercise was not devoid of searing hostility as well show that there were tenable cases of assaults and battering so much that security officers were indicted of intimidating voters. Such is the outright criminality that has for come to characterize Nigeria's politics.

Dynamics of the Wars

Political thugs used to be unarmed young men recruited by politicians at critical political moments. Their

weapons then were no more lethal than clubs used to injure the heads of political opponents of their paymasters. In contemporary time, political thuggery has become a profession that pays well. Consequently, these thugs have since graduated and moved up in importance. They no longer use clubs, they use sophisticated small arms, not merely to intimidate but to kill, if need be. Recent events in the political landscape have shown that they are not afraid of the police because they have the means to take on the police when the need arises. It also appears that they are not frightened by the military either (Agbese, 2019). Election is wholly a civic and civil affair and has nothing to do with the military. Curiously, the military involvement in the electoral process threw caution to the winds when the Service Chiefs graced the presidential flag-off of the incumbent and later took actions that created the impression that the institution they represent is partisan.

Although APC was banned from fielding a candidate for the Governorship election in the State due to internal crisis that emanated from complains of absence of internal party democracy. To bye-pass the consequences of the crisis, the Party hurriedly aligned with an unknown candidate of the African Action Congress (AAC), Engineer Biokpomabo Awara as its adopted candidate for the election. Since State Security forces were determined to return of AAC, the PDP in the area resorted to non-state armed group to defend her votes especially in polling units/areas where the party failed to arrive at a consensus on pattern of vote sharing between it and AAC (APC). For example, in some polling units the election in Abuah/Odual was cancelled by the Presiding Officers (PO) by 2.00pm on Election Day because the APC Party agents wanted a settlement situation whereby PDP will settle for Governorship slot and the APC through AAC will take the House of Assembly slot. Since PDP refused, the APC vowed that the election will not hold in the area. With the police and the army on the side of APC, the INEC officials could not deploy men and materials to the field because they



feared that their security will not be guaranteed the area is the hot bed of cult activities. Potent cult groups in the local government are Greenlanders, Icelanders and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta(MEND). These groups were also implicated in Kidnapping, gun running and illegal oil bunkering and other forms of criminal activities. In fact, the current trend in the criminal landscape of the area is the abduction and selling of children from five (5) years and above.

For ages, Abonnema, the Headquarters of Akuku-Toru Local Government Council has been considered an Island of serenity in the State. But the violence which led to the death of many during the Presidential and National Assembly Elections shattered the peace and tranquillity of the usually peaceful Abonnema (Ebiri, 2019). This is not to deny the fact that in Akukutoru Local Government Area, cult restiveness, deep-seated political frustration among the political elite, and political thuggery all prosper in the area. However, the level of violence associated with the 2019 General elections is unprecedented. In fact, there was high level of political intimidation in Abonnema community deriving from the politics of “winner takes all”. While those politicians in “power” at the Federal level appropriate State security forces for their political advantage, those in opposition rely on recruitment non-state armed groups and criminal gangs to enhance their competitive advantage. Those with support of the “Federal Security Forces” also engage the services of “non-State armed groups as a back-up fire support. Within this context, cult groups became a highly priced commodity in the political contestation market.

While residents were waiting for voting to commence by 8.00am when army men coming from Jack’s Compound axis saw one “Kalatubo” as he was about to cross to Bob Manuel’s compound, one of them shot him. Thinking he was dead, the army men abandoned him in the pool of his blood thinking he was dead. Sources at the disposal of the study stated that over twenty persons were killed during the disturbances between rival political thugs that

brought the Presidential and National Assembly to an abrupt end. A Community leaders claimed that a day after the Presidential and National Assembly poll was botched in the Local Government Area, the military who lost one of their colleague – a Lieutenant laid siege to Abonnema attacking and vandalising houses as scores of people were feared killed by the military. The insecurity situation was accentuated by another attack of gunmen who dressed in military camouflage approached an army check point and pretentiously stopped to exchange pleasantries with the unsuspecting military men on duty at Obonoma community. While exchanging compliments, some of the gun men opened fire and killed three on the spot before escaping to unknown destination (Ebiri, 2019). When the news got to Obonoma and Abonnema, an atmosphere of fear quickly pervaded the communities over fear of reprisal attacks by the military. The Amanyanabo of Abonnema, King Disrael Gbobo Bob-Manuel denounced the killing as a criminal act committed by persons not from his kingdom in the following words:

“Criminal elements attacked a military check point between Obonoma and Abonnema and killed soldiers. We are shocked about this news. We condemned it in its entirety. This is not the attitude of our people because we have leaved with the military for years. We are shocked about these attacks on the military. I am telling you that these people who killed the soldiers are not our people. They are criminals who invade our community from time to time for oil bunkering and stealing of other valuables” (Asinobi, 2019: 8)

The Nigerian Army in a press release available to the research team stated that troops of 6 Division killed six political thugs in Rivers during Saturday, February 23, 2019 Presidential and National Assembly Elections because they attacked the troops. Army spokesman, Col. Sagir Musa in the press statement explained that the “pre-planned attack occurred in between Charles Bob-



Manuel's compound in Abonnema Town about 1.00pm on 23rd February, 2019. It said preliminary investigation showed that the attack on the troops by the armed political thugs, was masterminded by one Rowland Sekibo-the Chairman, Akuku Toru LGA, Omodo-the CSO Akuku Toru LGA and Kenneth of Kula currently at large were the masterminds of the unexpected/unprovoked attack". The army headquarters apart from collaborating afore-stated statement provided detailed information on facts pertaining to the matter thus:

“information reaching Headquarters of Nigerian Army(NA) revealed that troops of 6 Division on legitimate duty protecting lives and properties of law abiding citizens and ensuring a conducive environment for peaceful conduct of 2019 General Elections in Abonnema, Akuku Toru Local Government Area(LGA) Rivers State were attacked by some hoodlums. The pre-planned attack occurred in between Charles and Bob-Manuel's compound's in Abonnema Town at about 1.00pm on the 23rd February 2019. The attackers barricaded a major road into the Town and laid an ambush in the adjoining built up areas from where they opened fire on our unsuspecting troops when they attempted to remove the barricade. The gallant troops fought their way through the siege and in the process killed six of the assailants. However, we lost a Lieutenant in the encounter. Preliminary investigation indicated that one Roland Sekibo, the Chairman, Akuku Toru LGA, Omodo-the CSO Akuku Toru LGA and Kenneth of Kula currently at large were the masterminds of the unexpected/unprovoked attack. To this end, the NA strongly hereby state that the

perpetrators of this ambush will be made to face the wrath of the law” (THE BEACON, 2019: 6).

The paramount ruler's plea for calm notwithstanding, many families evacuated both communities and moved into Degema, Buguma and Port Harcourt over fear of a possible military offensive. It is against this backdrop that the people of Abonnema were denied the right to exercise their franchise in the 2019 Presidential Election and National Assembly elections and the Gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections .Few days to the election, Mr. Rowland Sekibo, the Local Government Council Chairman was accused of sponsoring and recruiting the Icelanders Cult in Abonnema. In order to make assurance double shore and take a bone of faith he was accused of masterminding the arrest of the Greenlanders leader Osela Jack to provide a save ground for the Icelanders to work for PDP victory in the Local Government Area. Consequently, as early as 7.00am score of political thugs from an opposition political party armed with lethal weapons including guns and machetes stormed a Registration Area Centre(RAC) located in Abonnema Girls Secondary School where INEC ad-hoc staff, party agents and election observers were waiting for commencement of distribution of election materials and shot one person dead. As news of the incident filtered into the community, members of PDP were quickly mobilized for possible reprisal attack but before they arrived the scene military men deployed to Abonnema had moved into the area started shooting sporadically (Ebiri, 2019).

The intense shooting forced voters to scamper for safety and made it impossible for distribution of election materials and for voting to take place on schedule. It was under this circumstance that armed thugs snatched ballot boxes in Abonnema community as voters exercise their rights during Governorship and House of Assembly elections. This was the case in Ward 5, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 12. The situation sent panic across the coastal town. The politically motivated crisis resulted in the death of some



community people as well as security operatives. The shooting of late Mrs. Don Pedro- a National Youth Corps Member and one of the ad-hoc staff of the Independent National Electoral Commission(INEC) Staff and men of Nigerian Army created panic as resident scammed out of the community in fear of reprisal attack. The attack was believed to be masterminded by Kenneth Oposingi who is a major stakeholder in PDP from Kula. One week later, there was a confrontation between Kenneth Oposingi's group and another Ex-militant known as Christian Don-Pedro within the Kula Axis and a major stakeholder in APC in Kula community (Ebiri, 2019; THE BEACON, 2019). Two major dreaded cult groups exist in Abonnema namely, Icelanders and Green Landers. Greenlanders is led by Osela Jack while Icelanders is under the watch of Orolu Whyte. These groups are engaged in an unhealthy rivalry for occupation of illicit governance spaces especially political thuggery and oil theft spaces. The Greenlanders hold tenaciously to the belief that the present Chairman of the Local Government Council is the brain behind the arrest of their leader who is currently in prison.

In response to the insecurity associated with the 2019 General elections in Rivers State, Governor Nyesom Wike appointed a high powered committee headed by the Deputy Governor, Dr. Ipalibo Harry Banigo to (1) identify those killed during the February 23, 2019 Presidential and National Assembly elections in Abonnema, Akuku-Toru Local Government Area; (2) identify the soldiers who died during the Presidential and National Assembly Election and March 2, 2019 killings; (3) identify the bereaved families and (4) identify damaged property affected by the election crisis so that the Rivers State Government will offer the required assistance for their repair(THE TIDE, 2019). The Committee had since submitted her report on the basis of which the State Government released the sum of Four Hundred and Fifty Million Naira (N450 Million) to be disbursed for the afore-stated purpose. Similarly, in Bonny-the host Community of Nigeria LNG, limited

sporadic gun shuts rented the air for hours, making it impossible for election materials to be distributed till 2.00pm on Saturday, 23rd February, 2019. Consequently, could not take place in Bonny because of the disturbance (Ebiri, 2019).

At Ahoda West Local Government Area an APC party leader named Hon. Asita and a former Local Government Chairman, Hon. Awori Miller also a chieftain of APC, hijack the entire election materials and machinery on Friday 1st March, 2019 and taken to the residence of Hon. Asita for thumb printing. There thumb printed ballot papers were returned later to the Local Government Headquarters at Akinima on Saturday 2nd March 2019 in the full glare of the police, Army and officers of Department of State Services, and election observers. Fortunately, the Local Government Returning officer refused to cooperate with them and escaped to Port Harcourt. Some bandits allegedly sponsored by APC had sneaked into the INEC office through the Orashi River and planted a bomb in the office premises. However, before they could ignite and detonate the bottles, they were intercepted by the police and army on guard hence, they escaped through the back fence onto the river. The first victim of electoral violence in Rivers State was identified as Michale Adebiniho. He was shut dead at the Independent Electoral Commission's(INEC) office in Akinima, Ahoada Local Government Area in the early hours of Saturday, March 9, 2019 while resisting attempts by armed men to snatch electoral materials.

In Buguma, Asari-Toru Local Council, election had started peacefully on February, 23, 2019 when suddenly thugs stormed the community and carted away election materials for Ward 1, 7, 8, 9 and 10. At least four National Youth Service Corps members were hospitalized after gunmen invaded units 2,4, and 9 of Ward 8 in Ubima, in Ikwerre Local Council (home town of the Minister of Transportation, Chubuike Rotimi Amaechi, where they were posted as ad-hoc staff. Over twenty gunmen, armed with other dangerous weapons invaded the units shooting sporadically and cared away



ballot boxes and robbed INEC officials and voters. In Andoni Local Government Area, Mrs. Emilia Gilbert Nte, Special Adviser to Governor Nyesom Wike on Gender Matters was shot dead at Egendem on her way to her ward in Unyeada on Friday night 1st March 2019. Her vehicle was abandoned at the boundary between Engendem and Asarama communities. A mobile police officer attached to Ward 6 Unyeada in Andoni Local Government Area like, Mrs. Emilia Gilbert Nte, was also shot on the same night. He was rushed to an undisclosed clinic in Bori where he later died. Mowan Owoh Etete and his cousin, Ignatius Bara Ephriam were killed and beheaded by cultists loyal to Etengo and aligned to APC in their home town Ajakajak (Dube, 2019, Ebiri, 2019). In Obio/Akpor Local Government Area George Oma popularly known as Da-George was alleged to be Governor Wike's Boy had over three hundred able-bodied young men on his payroll was given the responsibility to deliver the Electoral Wards located in the ten communities that constituted Akpor Kingdom to PDP in the 2019 General elections. Consequently, on the eve of the Governorship election (Friday 2nd March 2019) there were sustained gun shots that spilled over to the morning of Saturday 3rd March, 2019 that prevented people to come out to vote, yet results were collated and PDP won overwhelmingly. There were also allegations of military interference in the election process in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. Three Chieftains of APC from the Area namely Mr. Chikodi Dike, Alex Wele and Dr. Lawrence Chuku alleged they abducted by hoodlums sponsored by Governor Wike at Obio/Akpor Collation Centre during the March 9, 2019. They stated that they were attacked because they acted as party agents of African Action Congress(AAC) after their party APC adopted the candidate of AAC for the elections. They claimed that they were whisked away by thugs after Governor Wike invaded the collation centre in company of thugs. Ar. Chukka alleged that electoral materials were also carried away by the hoodlums. Our respondents informed the research team that two military officers who were witnessed to the incident and were

wounded and Hospitalized-Captain Adams Salami and Copral Adesoun Adebayo could not be reached to confirm this information. Besides, operatives of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad(SARS) were accused of allegedly intimidating INEC staff as the Commission completes the collation of results (Ebiri, 2019).

To forestall a reoccurrence of the episodes of Saturday February 23, 2019 during March 9, 2019 Governorship and State Assembly elections in Okrika Local Government Area of Rivers State, a crucial community meeting was held at the Chiefs Unity Hall, Okrika on Saturday preceding the Governorship and the State Assembly election. Convoked at the instance of the Area's Council of Traditional Rulers, the meeting was attended by War Canoe Chiefs, political party leaders, National and State Assembly contestants, representatives of women and youth Groups and heads of Community Development Committees(CDCs). The Assembly frowned at the ugly occurrences during the Presidential and national Assembly elections on February 23, 2019 which resulted in the disenfranchisement of many and non-declaration of Okrika votes. The Assembly warned that sever penalties await any Okrika born politician who attempts to breach the peace or threatens the smooth running of the March 9, 2019 Governorship and State Assembly elections in Okrika Local Government of Rivers State will be dealt with according to Okrika Native Law and Custom (National Network, 2019)

The Okrika Assembly also described as provocative and grossly unjust, restrictions of movement into and from Okrika during the Presidential and National Assembly Elections as early as 3pm on Friday, instead of the earlier stipulated twelve (12) mid night and advised the various Security Agencies to be more professional in their dealings with people and handling of election issues The meeting finally agreed "that a Peace Pact, underscoring all the resolutions reached at the forum, will be signed by the contestants, Political Party Leaders and Heads of



the Central Community Development Committee(CDC), before the Okrika Divisional Council of Chiefs(ODCC) on Tuesday, March 5, 2019. Some of the stakeholders at the meeting were member House of Representatives, representing Okrika/Ogu/Bolo, Rt. Hon. Bright Gogo, top APC Chieftain and former Commissioner of Health, Dr. Tamunoyoriari Parker, State PDP Secretary-Hon Sam Okpoko, Chairman Okrika Local Government Council, Chief(hon.) Philemon Kingoli and State House of Assembly contestant- Hon.(Mrs) Linda Somiari-Stewart among others.

The general impression of indigenes and residents of Rivers State is that notwithstanding the numerous numbers of political parties in the State, there are two dominant political parties in the state namely Wike and Amaechi. To those who hold this view, APC and PDP is just a matter of platform. Hence in Rivers State, you are either a member of Wike's political party or you are for Amaechi's political party. If you make a list of all the political gladiators in Rivers State political contestation process, you will find that they are either of these "former friends"-turned enemies. This implies that the real battle is about how many people, you can pull to your side. In fact, both men have become more powerful than Rivers State itself (Ebiri, 2019). It was under this circumstance and with total disregard to the resolutions of the crucial Community meeting held at the Chiefs Unity Hall Okrika that the residence HRH Ateke Michael Tom was raided on Friday, March 8, 2019. No doubt, Okrika was the epicenter of unprecedented violence in contemporary history which cannot either be told or written without mentioning HRH Ateke Micheal Tom. It is also an undisputable fact that HRH continues to play a memorable role in the peace Okrika is experiencing now. It is in recognition of this fact that his kinsmen elected and installed him the King of Okochiri-Ama and presented him to Rivers State government for recognition.

The installation of Ateke Tom as King made him a "member of Wike's Party" therefore an enemy of Amaechi and "Amaechi Party" who must be put away

before the election. This explained the cracking gun fire by the military on the eve of the election in Okochiri that added to the unpalatable climate of insecurity in HRH's domain and Abam-Okrika. Apart from the invasion of the palace of the monarch of Okochiri, HRH, Ateke Michael Tom, by soldiers, the military also broke into people's homes and arresting them few days to the election. Soldiers also raided the home of an APC Chieftain in Okrika in search of missing electoral materials meant for four wards namely Ward 6,7,8 and 9 which were diverted before the materials got to Okrika Local Government secretariat by 3.00am on Saturday, February 23, 2019. Consequently, only a handful of voters turned up at the polling units despite repeated entreaties by "Town Criers" that it was safe for them to come out and cast their votes (Ebiri, 2019:2). One of the Ad-hoc staff of INEC Okrika Local Government Area who spoke to me on condition of anonymity "accused officers of the Nigerian Army of interfering with and disrupting collation of results and snatching of results at INEC office at Okrika thus:

"army invaded INEC office in Okrika and snatched results of the elections for the Council. Before the results were snatched, soldiers threatened the collation officers by shooting sporadically into the air. Consequently, electoral officials could not collate form EC 8a at the polling units. They have to come to INEC office at Okrika for solace and to continue filling form EC 8a. During collation at forward-level, a team of soldiers led by one Captain Inuwa ordered the suspension of collation and instructed his men to take away all electoral materials including results being collated by the collation officials".

On Wednesday, 6th March, 2019 preceding the election, military men stormed Ogu broke into houses and arrested Nathan Menabere, the Liaison officer of Governor Nyesom Wike, in Ogu and six other members of the Peoples' Democratic Party(PDP) in Ogu/Bolo Local Government Area were molested and taken away while some others ran into the mangrove forest to escape arrest. The following day being Thursday, 7th March, 2019



some military men intercepted RAC agents from different political parties who went to escort materials to the Council headquarters, taking eleven of them away. Compliant of the women to army resulted in the recovery of the hijacked electoral materials. Again, armed Nigerian soldiers were forced to abandon their mission to hijack ballot boxes during the March 9, 2019 Governorship/House of Assembly elections when the leader of the protesting women of Ogu/Bolo communities and Vice Chair of the Local Government Area, Barrister Christiana Tamunoberetonari out of desperation took off her heavily soaked menstrual pad, squeezed the blood and sprinkled it over Army patrol vehicles, and the driver could not start the vehicle. She had to poured a bottle of hot over the vehicle and uttered incantation before they started. Following this strange incident, the soldiers left aborting their mission to cart away ballot materials (Amaize, 2019, The Tide, 2019).

In Ogoni Area, cult groups were contracted by the two prominent political parties (APC and PDP) to enhance their political advantage and the partisan disposition of State Security Forces were the core reasons why the Governorship and House of Assembly elections became a warfare. Soldiers invaded all units in Ward 2 in Bodo and Nweol Biara Communities in Gokana Local Government Area and took all electoral materials away. Two men were shot dead in the early hours of Saturday, 9th March 2019 Luwaili community in Khana Local Government Area. Several vehicles conveying materials to communities in Khana were attacked by gunmen who hijacked election materials (Ebiri, 2019). An INEC Presiding Officer who pleaded anonymity for fear of being attacked reported that gunmen intercepted their vehicle at Wiyiakaara while they were on their way going to distribute materials meant for Ward 7-Bangha thus:

“We were on our way to Kono when another driver carrying election materials beckoned on us to turn back. Unfortunately, before the driver could reverse, a bus carrying more than ten gunmen intercepted us and

collected all our election materials, mainly non-sensitive. We were injured by the gunmen”

There were also sporadic shootings in ward 9 of Akpajo, ward 10, unit 11 in Eleme Local Government Council as political thugs hijacked ballot papers and other electoral materials. Similarly, in the 13 units in Ward 6 Apani, Ikwerre Local Government Area, security operatives snatched ballot and the Supervisory Presiding Office(SPO) had to escape to avoid being captured by soldiers. Facts at the disposal of this article proved that the 2019 elections were characterized by ballot snatching, extreme violence and interference by security agencies. It appears that the Nigerian men and women in uniform have allowed themselves and the integrity of their noble professional military training to be rubbished and enmeshed in the dust bin of discredit and infamy (Okeke, 2019). The point worthy of note is that elections will come and go but the army remains as a national institution.

Conclusion

Although the elections have been won and lost, no matter who won the blood-stained elections, it is really doubtful if it will resolve any of the fundamental problems of development plaguing Nigeria. Over two decades of ineptitude, greed and corruption by the governing political elite have wasted revenues derived from the country’s natural resources and turned the existential conditions of the oil rich state to a nightmare. In fact, Nigeria’s predatory capitalism has bred mass misery, turned politics into warfare and arrested the development of Rivers State. Worse still, the Nigerian governing class assaulted the masses with physical and psychological violence and thwarted their democratic aspirations to freely elect their political representatives.

The youths should henceforth, not allow politicians to use them to perpetrate any sort of nefarious activities at the risk of their lives while their own children relax in the comfort of their homes, because at the end of the day it is usually the gullible and unfortunate youths that end up in prisons or rest in the cemeteries therefore, unable to “enjoy” they were paid to purchase their conscience.



It is also important to stress that irrespective of the stranglehold of the governing elite on the military institutions, members of State Security Forces should endeavour to execute their assigned responsibilities diligently and professionally during and after the elections by nipping in the bud or curtailing any act that may result in the loss of lives and properties of the citizens. As officers of the State, your loyalty should be to the country and the citizenry rather than any particular political party or person(s) and ensure those who perpetrate electoral malpractice and violence must be made to face the full wrath of the law. This, to my mind, is the only way to sustain the country's fledgling democracy.

The paper implicated the Electoral Management Body (EMB)- the Independent National Electoral Commission(INEC) in the violence that characterised the elections. Consequently, it is important to stress that personnel of the Electoral Management Body (EMB)-the Independent National Electoral Commission(INEC) and their ad-hoc staff must ensure that they live above board in the conduct of future elections. As an unbiased umpire, the Commission is required by law to be neutral in the discharge of its functions rather than being used as an instrument to subvert the popular wish of the electorate.

We cannot divorce the election wars from the character and nature of the Nigerian State. Like its other Post-Colonial counterpart, is a specific modality of class domination with very limited autonomy. Consequently, alienated groups struggle to gain power while those in power are determined to kill to retain power. The Nigerian ruling elite discredited by its dismal performance, is very concerned about losing its grip on political power, hence its intent on going for broke, deploying the coercive apparatus of the state to impose its self on the citizens while those outside power, deploy private armies to wrestle power from positional incumbents.

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