Electoral Process, Peace Accords and National Security in Nigeria: A Comparative Review of the 2011 And 2015 General Elections

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Abstract
Free and fair elections are widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic governance and a determinant of a state's internal security, yet in Nigeria the conduct of general elections has repeatedly been accompanied by violence, mistrust and instability. This paper is a conceptual and literature-based review of the relationship between the electoral process and national security in Nigeria, drawing a comparison between the 2011 and 2015 general elections. The review clarifies the concepts of election, electoral violence and peace accord, and traces how the widespread post-election violence of 2011, in which several hundred lives were lost and which contributed to the emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency, shaped the security arrangements put in place ahead of the 2015 polls. Particular attention is paid to the Abuja Peace Accord of January 2015, in which the leading presidential candidates and their parties publicly committed to issue-based campaigning and to the rejection of violence, and to the role played by the National Peace Committee, led by General Abdulsalami Abubakar, in mediating between the candidates before, during and after the elections. The review also considers the literature on the security challenges of election management in Nigeria, including the roles attributed to security agencies, the military and political parties in securing the electoral process. The paper argues that while the 2011 elections were marred by severe post-election violence, the 2015 elections, though also contested in a tense political environment, benefited from the deliberate, accord-based peace architecture that had been absent in 2011, and that this difference offers useful lessons for safeguarding national security in future Nigerian elections. The paper concludes that sustaining peace accords, strengthening the independence of the electoral management body, and improving the coordination of security agencies and political parties remain central to reducing the security risks associated with the electoral process in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Electoral process; National security; Peace accord; Nigeria; 2011 general elections; 2015 general elections*

1.0 Introduction

Election is an integral part of the democratic process. It enables the citizenry to determine, fairly and freely, who should lead them at every level of government, and it affords them the power to pass judgment on, and where necessary replace, those who hold office. Without

election, there can be no representative government, since election remains the most reliable means through which a government and its representatives can be made accountable to the people who elect them. In Nigeria, however, the conduct of elections has frequently been marred by violence and by a heightened sense of national insecurity, often fuelled by ethnic and religious sentiment. The country's electoral history has, since independence, been punctuated by serious irregularities, controversy and, on occasion, the collapse of entire democratic experiments, as occurred in 1966 and again in 1983.

Nigeria's 2015 general elections, the fifth to be held since the return to civil rule in 1999, were originally scheduled for February 2015 but were shifted to 28 March and 11 April 2015 respectively. All thirty-six states held presidential, federal and state assembly elections, while gubernatorial polls were held in twenty-nine states. The elections also marked the first occasion on which an opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), unseated a sitting ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), through the ballot box since the country's transition to civil rule. This outcome followed four years in which Nigeria had experienced a particularly violent electoral cycle in 2011, and it is this contrast between the two election cycles that motivates the present review.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The legitimacy of an election victory is determined, in large part, by the extent to which the process that produced it is free and fair. Where an election is not well managed, it can open the way to deeper ethnic and regional divisions, loss of legitimacy by elected authorities, protest, violent contestation and, ultimately, a threat to institutional stability; poor management of elections is accordingly a real and prolific source of conflict, violence, insecurity and instability (Hounkpe & Gueye, 2010). The reduced voter turnout recorded in the 2015 elections compared with 2011 has itself been attributed to a combination of factors, including a heightened sense of insecurity linked to the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, apprehension over whether an incumbent would accept an unfavourable outcome, the effects of the postponement of the elections, and a lingering public perception that electoral outcomes are pre-determined by a small political elite. It is against this background that the present review examines the electoral process and national security in Nigeria, comparing the experience of the 2011 and 2015 general elections.

1.2 Objectives of the Review

This review pursues the following objectives:

i. To examine the relationship between the electoral process and national security in Nigeria.
ii. To compare the 2011 and 2015 general elections with respect to the security challenges that attended them.
iii. To identify the factors that promote national security in the course of an electoral process.
iv. To examine the role of security agencies and the military in the electoral process.
v. To examine the role of political parties in election security.

1.3 Scope of the Review

This review is concerned with the electoral process and national security in Nigeria, with particular focus on a comparison between the 2011 and 2015 general elections. It draws on the published literature on election management, electoral violence, peace accords and the security challenges of elections in Nigeria, and does not present new empirical survey data of its own.

1.4 Significance of the Review

The review is intended to contribute to the body of literature on the relationship between electoral process and national security in Nigeria, and to inform the general public and policy

makers on the differences and similarities between the security arrangements of the 2011 and 2015 general elections, thereby constituting a resource for future research in the subject area.

2.0 Literature Review

Nigeria returned to the comity of democratic states on 29 May 1999 after almost two decades of military rule, an experiment that has since been termed the Fourth Republic because it represents the country's fourth attempt at entrenching democratic governance since independence in 1960. One of the major reasons for the collapse of the country's earlier democratic experiments can be traced to the violence that pervaded the electoral cycle on each occasion. It is against this backdrop that the concepts of election, electoral violence and peace accord, and the comparative experience of the 2011 and 2015 general elections, are reviewed below.

2.1 Clarification of Concepts

Election is one of the pillars of democratic governance. It is a process by which the electorate, or part of it, choose the people who hold public office and exercise control over elected officials, and it is, in a strict sense, impossible to conceive of democracy without it. Election is not confined to the activities of election day alone; it encompasses the legal and constitutional framework within which parties are registered and campaign, the conduct of the print and electronic media, the financing of political parties, the activities of security agencies, and the integrity of the voters' register. Through the mechanism of election, citizens seek to hold government accountable to the task of providing for basic societal needs, and properly conducted elections thereby function as a development asset for any given country.

Electoral violence may be understood as any act or threat, organised or otherwise, intended to intimidate, harass or injure a political stakeholder, or to damage or destroy property, in an attempt to determine, delay or otherwise influence the outcome of an electoral process. Such violence may occur before, during or after the conduct of an election, and may take the form of the disruption of political gatherings, thuggery, the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters, abduction, arson, or the destruction of electoral materials. In Nigeria, electoral violence has repeatedly been a source of political instability: the Western Region electoral crisis of 1965, for example, culminated in the military coup of January 1966, and the Fourth Republic has, in turn, witnessed some of the worst electoral violence in the country's history, most notably in the aftermath of the 2011 presidential election.

A peace accord, by contrast, is the process through which such violence may be forestalled or transformed. Peace accords are formal agreements aimed at ending violent conflict and creating the conditions for durable peace; they may take the form of ceasefire agreements, interim or preliminary agreements, comprehensive and framework agreements, or implementation agreements (www.gsdrc.org). Peace accords are typically directed at bringing hostile or potentially hostile parties together around a shared commitment to peaceful conduct, and it was precisely such an instrument, the Abuja Peace Accord, that was deployed ahead of the 2015 Nigerian general elections in an attempt to avert a recurrence of the violence that had followed the 2011 polls.

2.2 The 2011 General Elections

The 2011 general elections constituted an important test of the country's democratic institutions and of their capacity, after more than a decade of civilian rule, to conduct a free and fair transition from one administration to another. The elections took place against a backdrop of public concern over the independence of the electoral body, which was then headed by Professor Maurice Iwu, under whom the 2007 general elections, widely regarded as the worst in the country's electoral history, had been conducted. Acknowledging that the 2007 elections

had been flawed, the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua instituted a panel under Justice Uwais to recommend reforms to the electoral process; it fell to his successor, President Goodluck Jonathan, to act on that report, and Professor Maurice Iwu was in due course relieved of his position as INEC chairman and replaced by Professor Attahiru Jega.

Under Professor Jega's leadership, the 2011 elections introduced greater openness in the counting of votes and the display of results at polling centres, a departure from the previous practice of announcing results only in Abuja. A number of political parties, among them the PDP, ANPP, ACN, CPC, Labour Party, APGA and NCP, contested at different levels, with the PDP winning the presidency and a majority of seats in the National Assembly. The elections were, on the whole, considered by local and international observers to represent an improvement on previous electoral cycles. However, the announcement of the presidential result was followed by widespread post-election violence, particularly in parts of northern Nigeria, in which several hundred lives were lost. This period of violence coincided with, and is widely associated with, the emergence of the militant group Boko Haram, whose subsequent activities contributed further to a sense of insecurity within the country and to concern, internationally, over Nigeria's image and stability.

2.3 The 2015 General Elections and the Abuja Peace Accord

The violence that followed the 2011 presidential election, together with the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency in the years that followed, meant that the 2015 general elections were approached with considerable apprehension. The divisive campaigns that preceded the election further polarised the country along ethnic, religious and regional lines, with President Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP and General Muhammadu Buhari of the APC emerging as the leading candidates amid hate messaging from their respective supporters. These developments prompted Professor Bolaji Akinyemi, a former Minister of External Affairs, to issue an open appeal to the leading candidates for a truce (Eniola, 2014).

On 14 January 2015, following a workshop organised with the support of the Office of the National Security Adviser, the Special Adviser to the President on Inter-Party Affairs, and international donor partners including the United Nations Development Programme and the European Union, the fourteen presidential candidates and their party chairmen signed what has become known as the Abuja Peace Accord. The signatories committed themselves to running issue-based campaigns free of religious or ethnic profiling, to refraining from any public statement capable of inciting violence, to speaking out publicly against provocative utterances and acts of violence whether committed by their own supporters or by their opponents, and to submitting to the monitoring of a national peace committee drawn from respected statesmen, traditional rulers and religious leaders. The accord additionally called on all government institutions, including the electoral body and the security agencies, to act, and to be seen to act, with impartiality. A National Peace Committee, chaired by former Head of State General Abdulsalami Abubakar, was subsequently inaugurated to oversee the implementation of the accord. The Committee engaged directly with the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Professor Attahiru Jega, and with the heads of the security agencies, to assess their state of preparedness, and it played a mediating role between the two leading candidates both before and after the elections. On 26 March 2015, two days before the presidential poll, the Committee persuaded General Buhari and President Jonathan to renew their commitment to the accord. Following the conclusion of voting, this engagement culminated in President Jonathan's concession of defeat to General Buhari before the result from every state had been formally declared, a gesture widely described as a demonstration of statesmanship and as the first occasion on which an incumbent Nigerian president conceded defeat directly to a rival (Adetayo, 2015; Gordon, 2015).

The influence of the peace accord was not confined to the national level. In the weeks that followed the signing of the Abuja Peace Accord, a number of states, including Lagos, Ogun, Imo, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Oyo and Niger, held their own peace accord ceremonies ahead of the gubernatorial elections of 11 April 2015, typically witnessed by resident electoral officials, security chiefs and religious and traditional leaders. At the conclusion of the gubernatorial elections, a number of defeated candidates publicly congratulated their opponents, a development that was unusual in the country's political history and that was, again, widely attributed to the spirit of the peace accords signed in the respective states. Taken together, the overall conduct of the 2015 general elections was assessed by election observer groups, including the Economic Community of West African States, the European Union, the African Union and the Commonwealth, as representing an improvement on the elections of 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 (Adamu, 2015).

2.4 Security Challenges and the Role of the Military and Political Parties in Election Security

Beyond the specific experience of 2011 and 2015, a broader literature addresses the security challenges associated with the management of elections in Nigeria, much of it published in the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's volumes on security challenges of election management (Olurode & Jega, 2011; Adekanye & Iyanda, 2011; Jinadu, 2011; Maitambari, 2011; Olurode, 2013; Olurode, 2014). This literature situates the deployment of security agencies, including the police and, in some election cycles, the armed forces, as a central feature of Nigerian election management, charged with the protection of electoral officials, materials and voters, and with the maintenance of public order at polling units, even as the same literature cautions that the visible presence of security personnel can itself heighten tension where it is perceived as partisan (Arase & Iwuafor, 2007; Igini, 2013).

Political parties, for their part, are treated in this literature less as passive subjects of security provision than as active participants whose conduct substantially determines the security climate of an election: campaign rhetoric, the sponsorship of party agents and supporters, and the willingness or otherwise of candidates to accept adverse results are repeatedly identified as factors that either mitigate or aggravate the risk of electoral violence. International guidance on electoral security has, in a similar vein, emphasised the importance of coordination between electoral management bodies, security agencies, political parties and civil society as a means of pre-empting violence before it occurs, rather than merely responding to it once it has begun (USAID, 2013). The Abuja Peace Accord, reviewed above, may be read as a practical, Nigeria-specific instance of this coordinated approach, in which political parties were brought directly into the security architecture of the election rather than being treated solely as a source of risk to be managed by the state.

2.5 Comparative Reflections on the 2011 and 2015 Elections

A comparison of the two election cycles reviewed above suggests that the principal difference between them lay less in the underlying sources of tension, which were broadly similar in both years, than in the existence, in 2015, of a deliberate and visible peace architecture that had been absent in 2011. In 2011, the leading candidates faced each other without any comparable public commitment to non-violence, and the result was a presidential election followed by the worst post-election violence of the Fourth Republic. In 2015, by contrast, the same underlying ethnic, religious and regional cleavages were present, and the campaign period was, if anything, more bitterly contested, yet the existence of the Abuja Peace Accord, and of a credible mediating body in the National Peace Committee, appears to have provided a channel through which tension could be managed and through which the eventual transfer of power could be accepted by the losing side. This comparison is consistent with the broader proposition, advanced in the

literature on election security reviewed above, that the security outcome of an election is shaped not only by the deployment of security agencies but by the extent to which political parties and candidates are drawn into an explicit, shared commitment to peaceful conduct.

3.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This review has examined the relationship between the electoral process and national security in Nigeria through a comparison of the 2011 and 2015 general elections. It has shown that the 2011 elections, despite improvements in the transparency of vote counting under the leadership of Professor Attahiru Jega, were followed by severe post-election violence that is widely associated with the subsequent emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency, while the 2015 elections, conducted in an equally tense political atmosphere, were comparatively less violent, a difference that the literature reviewed here substantially attributes to the existence of the Abuja Peace Accord and the mediating role played by the National Peace Committee.

On the basis of this review, it is recommended that peace accords of the kind signed in January 2015 be institutionalised as a standard feature of the run-up to future general elections in Nigeria, rather than treated as an ad hoc response to a particular cycle of tension. Political parties and candidates should continue to be encouraged to avoid inflammatory rhetoric, to publicly denounce violence, and to pursue electoral grievances through lawful and constitutional channels, including adherence to the Code of Conduct for Political Parties. Political parties should, in turn, respect their own constitutions and allow for democratic candidate selection processes, since internal party disputes have themselves been identified as a source of electoral tension. Finally, the independence and logistical capacity of the electoral management body should continue to be strengthened, and security agencies should be deployed in a manner that is, and is seen to be, impartial, so as to avoid becoming, themselves, a source of the insecurity they are deployed to prevent.

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