

## **YOUTH VIOLENCE AND 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: THE RIVERS STATE EXPERIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

*Elections are democratic means of changing governments all over the world. Successful conduct of periodic elections engenders legitimacy to the government and reduces tensions and political tsunamis. Once elections are flawed, delivery of good governance becomes truncated and pseudo political brouhahas erupt like wild inferno that may stair-up centripetal conflicts in the polity. Nigeria in the past had had histories of flawed elections, with hydra-headed violence erupting before, during and after elections. Electoral violence is most often perpetrated by the youths recruited and armed by the political elite. Therefore, this paper argues that the political class in Nigeria, Rivers State in particular engaged a number of youths as thugs and assassins, among others, to maim, kill and destroy their perceived opponents with the aim of winning elections. There is no doubt that youth involvement in electioneering process in Rivers State had had consequential effects on the outcome of the 2015 general elections. The paper, however, identified dislocated and poor parental background, poor education, unemployment and under employment, moral decadence and political manipulations as key factors to youth violence during the 2015 general elections in Rivers State. The study was purely qualitative as it relied on secondary data. This paper adopted Hobbes' social contract theory as it argued that the youth violence in the 2015 general elections in Rivers State was the result of the failure of the Nigerian state in living up to its social contract with the people against the prescriptions of Hobbes in his famous 'Leviathan' for an ideal state. The paper, however, recommended, among others, youth employment and empowerment as well as the setting-up of election offences tribunals as major steps in checking youth violence in the electoral process in Nigeria, particularly in Rivers State.*

**Keywords:** Youth Violence, 2015 General Elections & Rivers State

### **Introduction**

“Nigerians are dissatisfied by democracy on offer and are seeking ways and means to improve it. Their efforts need to be assisted by a good understanding of the historical character of democracy, particularly the forces that have shaped it and others that have constrained it” Nnoli (2011, p.1). Elections are key to democracy.

Nigeria's democratic experience is said to have dated back to the colonial era, when the Clifford's Constitution of 1922 guaranteed elective principle.

The first recorded electoral violence in post colonial Nigeria occurred in 1964. Each of the Regional parties in the election openly intimidated its opponents in the campaigns. When it became clear that the neutrality of the Federal Electoral Commission could not be guaranteed, calls were made for the army to supervise the elections (Egobueze & Ojirika, unpublished). Since then, successive elections in Nigeria have lacked credibility, therefore, fallen short of meeting the essential ingredients of a democratic electoral process. There has been general lack of transparency during elections, particularly those that were held under the current 4<sup>th</sup> Republic (1999-2015) in Rivers State in particular and Nigeria in general. Commenting on why elections in Nigeria became a torn in the flesh of Nigerians any time they were conducted, Abdullahi (2013) posits: "the answer is not farfetched, because of the nature of the Nigerian state which encourages primitive accumulation of wealth by few elites to the detriment of the majority". According to Etannibi (2004) as cited in Abdullahi (2013, p.2), elections in Nigeria were characterised by:

manipulation of the decisions and activities at the various stages of electoral process by the governments and politicians, corruption of officials and electorates, violence during campaigns, polling and collection of results, rigging through the stuffing of ballots, snatching and destruction of ballot boxes and falsification of results, and ineffective electoral dispute resolution Mechanism

In Nigeria, a major setback to democratic stability is the selection process of political office holders. The electioneering process has been marred by corruption which is now pandemic. The country has been unable to hold elections which arguably could be considered free, fair and credible. All the elections conducted since the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic which began in 1999, reveal overwhelming dominance of the then ruling party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). This, to a reasonable extent almost, made the nation to drift into an infamous hegemonic one party state. However, the coming together of the *legacy parties* to form the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the merger of a faction of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led by Five Governors and prominent members of the National Assembly from that party extraction kick-started the process of change that culminated in the victory of the APC in 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The current President, Muhammadu Buhari of APC won the incumbent President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP, in an election that towed the path of dishonour like the previous elections that predated it. Accordingly, it is significant to state that, the elections were 'disastrous' with even more rigging and violence than during the previous presidential elections in 1999. The run-up to the elections witnessed assassinations, kidnaps and maiming of some political gladiators by hired thugs.

Rivers State has been described to have witnessed the worst electoral loot in 2015 general elections. The elections were said to have been highly compromised.

Ms. Lynne Jennifer, the Executive Director of Contact Project, one of the International Observers that monitored the 2015 general elections in Rivers State, while speaking to Channel Television on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2015 stated as follows: "Some of our international community members have reported ballot boxes that were broken. We have seen violence and intimidation recorded as well at some polling areas" (Retrieved 2015 from [www.channelstv.com/2015/03/30/rivers-election-compromised](http://www.channelstv.com/2015/03/30/rivers-election-compromised)). The Rivers State Resident Electoral Commissioner, Gecilla Khan, had been severally accused of having aided the election crises in Rivers State by her actions and inactions which run contrary to media and observers' reports before, during and after the elections.

The presumed victory of whichever party in Rivers State in particular and Nigeria in general was gained through electoral rigging and thuggery sponsored by key political elites in all the political divides, anchored by the youths and supported by the security forces.

Ehinmore & Ehiabhi (2015, p.1) posit:

election rigging in Nigerian politics is worrisome and has a negative impact on the quality of leaders produced. This development often produces leaders who cannot harness and manage the resources of the nation as well as build up a solid democratic foundation and virile governance. For instance, in 2011 elections, about 117 cases of ballot box snatching were reported in Delta State. The result of these ugly trends is the myriad of post-election protests in all the states of the federation in recent times.

Thuggery is defined to mean a violent behaviour in which people fight and attack others (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2003). It is any act of intimidation, violence, hooliganism, brutality or gangsterism, whether leading to death or not, calculated to pose a threat or scare political opponent or perceived political opponents before, during or after elections and aimed at achieving an undue political result or advantage.

Shankyula (2011, p.3) has opined that widespread poverty and unemployment deliberately unattended to by successive governments is responsible for the spate of youth violence during elections. He further posits that:

It is common knowledge that the youth who readily submit themselves to perpetrate these acts of thuggery are unemployed and wallowing in poverty. The moments of electioneering campaigns is a moment that many put in whatever they can in the expectation of what they hope to benefit when the person they are supporting wins. For many of the thugs, some good promises are made relating to job expectations or contract awards.

This paper, therefore, is basically to ex-ray the fundamental factors that led the youth violence in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, particularly Rivers State,

which was a major flashpoint with a view to proffering solutions to the recurring scourge in the electoral process.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **Elections**

Election is the formal process of selecting a person for public or of accepting or rejecting a political proposition. Webster's Encyclopaedic Dictionary (2006) defines election as: "the act or process of organizing systematic election (permitting mass participation and method of choosing) a person or persons by vote for a public office position in which state authority is exercised". Omotola, (2007, p.4) defines election as: "A method for the selection of persons to fill certain offices through choices made by an electorate; those (citizens who are qualified to vote under the rules and procedures of the electoral system". In this context therefore, elections are organized channels of popular expressions through the instrumentality of the transparency and sanctity of the ballot box.

#### **General Elections**

A general election is an election in which all or most members of a given political body are chosen (Wikipedia, 2015). In presidential system, the term refers to a regularly scheduled election where both the President, and either "a class" of or all members of the national legislature are elected at the same time or period. In Nigeria, it is a time the Chief Executives at the National and State levels as well as the Members of the Legislature are elected through a universal adult suffrage. In this context, general elections refer to those involving the President, National Assembly, State Governors and their Assemblies. They may be held same day or different days as the case may be.

#### **Violence**

The word violence has been viewed from different angles by different scholars from distinctive standpoints. Thus, for the purpose of this discourse, we are looking at violence in terms of both violation of human rights and social injustice. According to Gilula& Daniels, (1969) as cited in Wikipedia (2015), violence is 'destructive aggression'. This conceptualization of violence implies the use of physical force to injure persons or property; and this is the core of most definitions of violence.

#### **Youth**

A youth is a budding man, full of potent and latent energy. Youths are considered as future leaders Obi,(2006, p.6). Broadly, youths are generally defined as meaningful, youthful persons under various laws, conventions and culture, who are within the ages of 13 and 44 years of age.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretical thrust of this paper is mainly anchored on Hobbes' social contract theory. The choice of this theory may not be unconnected to the fact that the political crises and electoral violence perpetrated by the youths in Nigeria and Rivers State in particular during the 2015 general elections can be better explained within the context of the failure of the Nigerian state whose citizens surrendered their inalienable rights to govern them through elections contrary to Hobbes' prescriptions for society against what obtained in the state of nature. The fact remains that what played out in Nigeria's 2015 general elections especially in Rivers State can only be clearly analysed from the failure of Nigerian state and its actors whose constitutional obligations remain the protection of lives and property of the citizens including the provision of welfare services. Against the prescriptions of Hobbes for human society which gave rise to his social contract theory, the Nigerian state in collaboration with its actors in power failed to live up to what gave rise to Hobbes' social contract theory in the state of nature, hence the malfeasance of political brouhaha and electoral violence that were experienced during the 2015 general elections in Rivers State.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), a very famous English Philosopher, lived in the period of the Civil War (1642-51) and this significantly accounted for the nature of his political thought towards absolutism (Appadorai, 1968). Hobbes clearly stated, in his famous book, 'Leviathan', written in 1651 that life outside organised society is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". Hobbes major preoccupation was the nature of human beings and the absolute necessity for governments and societies. He was said to have rated humans low, like Machiavelli in *The Prince*. For him, humans were selfish and driven by fear of death and the hope of personal gains (Yalbooksblog.com cited in Nweke, 2017).

Hobbes absolutely maintained that it is only the rule of law and the use of sanctions for offenders of the law that keep human society in clear check. For him, except this happened, men were likely to quarrel, fight and kill each other. Hobbes created a scenario of the state of nature where it was only the strongest that lorded it over the weakest, and might became right, a resultant effect of the absence of a superior power to check the excesses of man (Nweke, 2017). Hobbes, however, submitted that as this lasted, men thought to be reasonable to avoid the disastrous calamity that had befallen them. And this ultimately led them to willingly surrender some of these dangerous freedoms to some of their own who wielded political power and authority on everyone's behalf. There became the absolute need to elect people or parliaments with substantial powers to be in charge of the affairs of men to avoid the recurring decimal of wanton maiming and killings experienced during the state of nature (Nweke, 2017). Individual rights, as the case may be, were clearly surrendered to those they had absolute trust would rule them not in violation of their wishes and aspirations because doing so attracted punitive consequences. Nweke (2017) asserted that Hobbes was of the view that individuals in the state of nature entered into a social contract with a view to giving up some of their very dangerous freedoms or rights in the spirit of safety for all. Nweke (2017, p.1) further expressed Hobbes' belief in his social contract theory when he said that "entering into a social contract

was the sure way to achieving a peaceful, just and egalitarian society where the 'sovereign' entrusted with political power and authority would address the crises that had engulfed human society without development". Nweke (2017, p.2) concluded that "from Hobbes' prescriptions derived the modern state that has become an albatross around the collective will of the people to abdicate their dangerous freedoms or rights in dire search of a better living". Unfortunately, their hopes in this direction seemed to have been dashed.

Against the prescriptions of Hobbes' social contract theory, rather than the 'sovereign' addressing the basic needs that gave birth to the social contract, the Nigerian state and its actors collaborated to abdicate their constitutional responsibilities of protecting lives and property including the provision of the 'good life' to the citizens. These clearly explain the inherent contradictions that gave rise to the upsurge and nature of political crises and electoral violence that engulfed Rivers State during the 2015 general elections. The resultant effect of the failure of the Nigerian state and its actors in living up to their statutory responsibilities to the people in line with Hobbes prescriptions for an ideal state, such as Nigeria, is the gamut of political crises and electoral violence that characterised the Rivers State 2015 general elections. According to Nweke (2017, p.2), this development "is contrary to Hobbes major concerns at finding an enduring solution to the experiences of human society under the state of nature".

The Nigerian state and its collaborators in power obviously obliterated the social contract they willingly entered into with the people through elections thereby giving rise to the use of the youths to perpetrate political crises and electoral violence on the people of Rivers State for their selfish desire to perpetuate themselves in power. Abdicating their statutory responsibilities for politics of exclusion and violence against the people by the Nigerian state and its actors by the use of the youths in feathering their own political nests is a clear negation of Hobbes' social contract theory for an ideal state such as Nigeria. What took place in Rivers State in the 2015 general elections can only be described as a reversal of the postulations of Hobbes for a peaceful and egalitarian society against what obtained in the state of nature. The Rivers State general elections experience is likened to what obtained during the state of nature where might was right. Small arms proliferation and light weapons by youths became common without those responsible containing the happy-trigger youths. This was due largely to the use of the youths for political killings and maiming that prevailed lavishly in Rivers State under the absolute watch of the Nigerian state and its actors in power, a perpetuation of the kind of violence that predated modern state during the state of nature. Perhaps, it may be imperative to unequivocally state that all these were carried out in absolute negation of Hobbes' social contract theory.

There is no gainsaying therefore that Hobbes' social contract theory is quite apt here and can only explain the politics, gamut and malfeasance of youth violence that characterised Nigeria's 2015 general elections in Rivers State in particular resulting from the obliterated social contract by the Nigerian state and its actors against the thinking of Hobbes for an ideal state.

### **Youths and Conduct of Elections in Nigeria**

On 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015, Nigeria celebrated sixteen years of uninterrupted democratic rule. The democratic license to propagate the will of the people was not received on a platter of gold, but through resilient struggles and undaunted patriotic commitments of Nigerians, particularly the youths. Other key contributors were the virile Press, Civil Society Organizations, Organized Labour and pro-democracy movements like NADECO, G-25 amongst others. The efforts of these groups, culminated in sending the military back to the barracks.

Nigerian Youths have been the engine of democratic flavours and struggles that made moments of democratic victories aptly recorded during previous change in Governments from the colonial era up to the Independence in 1960 and even till date. The survival of every political system especially in the third world has been dependent on the role of youths in democracy. The impacts of the involvements of the youths in the democratic process, especially in the Fourth Republic have been nostalgic.

Youths have been identified as catalyst for electoral violence in Nigeria. Youths openly serve as political thugs to key political figures and *godfathers*. In a rational society, it will be a taboo to publicly be declared as a political thug or a merchant of violence. However, incongruously, this is not the case in contemporary Nigerian. The elite in power who see themselves as *godfathers* wish to retain political power at all cost. The political power is used as a means of achieving economic wealth. To achieve their inordinate interests, these politicians and political power house manipulate the youths to seeing them as their means of survival. These elites pauperize the youths, apply the carrot diplomacy and arm-twist them to seeing acclaimed *godfathers* as only means of succour and survival. In a survivalist mission, the youths ingloriously yield to their pressure. The youths are then, armed with dangerous weapons to prosecute the elections in their favour.

For those already in governments, they use the men of the Nigeria Police to chase their opponents and protect them in order to use the youths to unleash mayhem against their perceived enemies. These youths are hardly arrested nor detained for the havoc they may have rocked. The youths therefore, are at the heart of most violent conflicts in the country. A recent study clearly shows that the youths execute about 90-95% of violent conflicts in Nigeria (Omeje, 2007). Commenting on the forgoing, Human Rights Watch, (2007, p.12) notes that many of Nigeria's ostensibly elected leaders obtained their positions by demonstrating an ability to use corruption and political violence to prevail in sham elections. In violent and brazenly rigged polls, government officials have denied millions of Nigerians any real voice in selecting their political leaders. In place of democratic competition, struggles for political offices have often been waged violently in the streets by gangs of thugs – youths, recruited by politicians to help them seize control of power.

### **Youths and Electoral Violence in the 2015 General Elections in Rivers State**

Rivers State is one of Nigeria's thirty six states and was created on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1967 by a military decree of the Gowon administration, 1966-1975, (Egobueze,

2013). With its capital in Port Harcourt, the state is bounded in the south by the Atlantic Ocean, to the north by Imo and Abia States, to the east by Akwa-Ibom State and to the west by Bayelsa and Delta States. The State has a population of about five million people (NPC 2006 Census). In contemporary Nigeria, Rivers State has acquired the unofficial reputation as the capital of Nigeria's energy industry. Unfortunately, the wealth of the state has heightened the stakes for political competition with dire consequences for the people of Rivers in general.

Evidence from the 2015 general elections in Rivers State reveals how the All Progressives Congress (APC) led by the then Governor of the State, His Excellency Rt. Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi, *CON* and the Peoples Democratic Party led by the then Hon. Minister for State and Co-ordinating Minister for Education and now the Governor of Rivers State, His Excellency, Chief Barr. Nyesom Ezenwo Wike, supported by the then Presidency, subverted the popular will of the people. The duo, used violence as a strategy for electoral fraud. They recruited youths as basic tools for this fiasco, arming them with dangerous weapons, in order to unleash terror and mayhem on each of the divides. The ultimate aim was to control the political apparatus of the State which is a lee way to the control of common wealth of the State. However, the PDP had upper hand in the electoral violence due to its federal might advantage over the APC.

The Rivers State debacle was a survivalist battle fought by the then Abuja led PDP government and the State government which originally was PDP but later defected to APC. The electoral violence in Rivers State within the period under review therefore, would be better discussed from a tripod strings; namely, pre, during and after the general elections in 2015.

### **Youths and the Pre-Election Crisis in Rivers State**

The remote cause of the electoral crisis in Rivers State could be traced to decision of the then Governor, His Excellency Rt. Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi to run a re-election to the office of the Chairman of the Nigerian Governors' Forum. This re-election bid was not supported by the then President, His Excellency Dr. Goodluck Jonathan and caused ripples in Nigeria. It further drew Mr. Amaechi, Presidency and PDP into a dagger point. Unfortunately for Mr. President, Mr. Amaechi defeated his rival, the then His Excellency Governor Jonah Jang of Plateau State. This defeat spurred up division in the forum. As a punishment to his disloyalty, Mr. President refused to recognise Governor Amaechi as the Chairman of the Forum, and recognized Governor Jang. This led to a split and two factions of the Forum emerged with Amaechi leading the largest number of Governors.

Furthermore, the Presidency arm-twisted the judiciary to infamously sack Chief Godspower Ake and Adokiye Oruwari as the Chairman and Secretary of the PDP in Rivers State and declare Brother Felix Obua as the validly elected Chairman of the party. This action was aimed at snatching away the party structure away from Governor Amaechi. Angered by the dictatorial tendencies of the Presidency and the PDP, Governor Amaechi, some of its once sturdy members - 26 state legislators, nine federal lawmakers, 22 local government council chairmen and their councilors —



drifted away to the APC. As a pay back, the Governor, through the Assembly suspended the democratically elected Obio–Akpor Local Government Council, the perceived conduit for the support of the PDP activities in the State. Aggrieved by this, the Presidency, acting through the Minister for State – Education, the PDP and five Members of the House loyal to the Minister, then attempted to impeach the House Leadership. The attempted removal of the Speaker Rt. Hon. Otelemaba Daniel Amachree and the House Officers was rumoured as a precursor for the impeachment of the Governor. But this civilian coup in a democratic government failed, despite several embers that fanned the attempt.

The spate of violence went to a point of crescendo during the campaigns for the general elections, the duo – APC and PDP criminally confronted each other openly in their campaign rallies. Commenting on the spate of violence unleashed on the APC while in a rally in Okrika, Semenitari (2015, p.1), the Director of Communications of the Greater Together Campaign Organization of APC Governorship candidate, states inter alia:

We condemn PDP for this visit of violence on Okrika people. We ask: is that the electioneering programme PDP has for the area? Must PDP shed blood of men and women for the sake of a vote? Why would Okrika land and people not be allowed by the PDP to enjoy peace and development? Why must the youths be used as vehicles for violence? This act is evil, satanic and shameful. Okrika people should stand up against this violent-breather called PDP. Kirikise sons and daughters need not be told to turn their back on this vampire on February 14 and 28. If PDP had made life this miserable, burdensome and over-bearing on Okrika people, what would they not do if for any reason they are not voted into office?

Furthermore, she continues:

We sympathize with our supporters who suffered various bullet and machete injuries in the hands of PDP gunmen. Our prayers flow before the Throne of grace for their quickest recovery. We would equally commend APC supporters, especially the youths, who yielded to the counsel of the candidate and party elders not to take retaliatory measures. But, our fear is that, we might not be too successful again in restraining the ounded and hunted from self-defence and maybe, retaliatory attack on anything PDP.

Corroborating the above position on the state of things before the general elections in Rivers State, Anucha (2015, p.5) observes that a feel of what was to be expected during the elections was demonstrated in the shootings at various campaign rallies, including the one at the All Progressives Congress (APC) rally in Okrika on Tuesday, February 17, 2015, which was likened to a civil war, ... the shocking aspect was that the political thugs were shooting without counter-attack resistance from the armed security men.

There was clear indication from the above that there was huge compromise of the security forces in the entire political violence in Rivers State. It was alleged that the wife of the former President, Dame Patience Jonathan used the state apparatuses (the Police, DSS, the Army etc) in collaboration with armed youths to prosecute Rivers State elections as she had vowed during PDP campaign rallies of taking over Rivers State from Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi led All Progressives Congress.

However, the media aide to the PDP Chairman Rivers State, Jerry Needam, said accusations against the PDP were not only baseless, but also laughable as he denied his party's involvement in the Okrika dastardly attack. He alleged that those who bombed the venue of the rally were hoodlums engaged by the APC to watch over the venue who later disagreed on how to share the money paid them. In a press release, Needam (2015a, p.1) states thus:

APC very well understand that it is being plagued by internal crises and we urge them to look inward with a view to settling the internal wrangling over the imposition of Dakuku Peterside as its governorship candidate. APC should not drag the esteemed name of the First Lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the PDP into an attack on a supposed venue, as the PDP and Her Excellency, the First Lady know nothing about the attack on the venue by the youths. The PDP wishes to inform the APC and indeed Nigerians, that as a peace crusading party, we abhor violence and cannot be part of violence. We are founded on the principles of peace, equity and justice and cannot engage in any act that would promote or engender violence.

Ebiri(2015, p.1), a Guardian Port Harcourt Bureau Correspondence reporting on the electoral violence in Rivers State states that:

Penultimate Wednesday night, gunmen stormed the secretariat of the APC in Omoku, the headquarters of Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, and vandalized the party's office. The gunmen who operated in the community unchallenged for over four hours, riddled the two-storey building with bullets and damaged virtually all the glass window. The gunmen also went to the residents of an APC lawmaker representing Ogba/ Egbema/ Ndoni constituency in the Rivers State House of Assembly, Gift Wokocha and torched his property. Wokocha explained that the gunmen who invaded his residence, were heard screaming, "no APC in Omoku. APC members must be killed." Another chieftain of the party, Okey Okire, the Special assistant to Governor Amaechi on Statistics matter, had his building damaged and vandalized. APC governorship campaign manager in Omoku, Mr. Sunny Ogidi, said the attack was aimed at thwarting the party's governorship rally, which held penultimate Thursday. According to him, the resort to violence and intimidation of people with contrary political views remains antithetical to the tenets of democracy.

Based on the wanton attacks on the APC, the APC set up of the committee to review its programmes, during the inauguration of the Committee, the State Chairman, Dr. DaviesIkanya, according to (Nwaorgu, 2015, p.4)opined that:

It has become the trend to attack our members and destroy APC's campaign billboards, posters and banners, particularly those of our party's standard bearer, Dr. Dakuku Peterside, whenever the party is to go out for campaign in any particular locality. In any local government area where Chief Nyesom Wike, the PDP leader and gubernatorial candidate, is going to campaign, PDP thugs move round overnight and remove APC's billboards, posters and banners to create the impression that Wike is fully on the ground in the area while he knows that he is not on ground in any part of Rivers State. We can no longer fold our arms and watch while we are being viciously attacked and slaughtered by people, whose mission and vision in politics is to spread violence as their own way of grabbing power, having seen that they have been overwhelmingly rejected by the electorate. What makes the situation more pathetic is that security agencies in Rivers State, including the Police and the Department of State Security (DSS), have failed to make any arrest or call the PDP leadership to order simply because they are controlled by the PDP-led Federal Government, which is desperate to take over Rivers State at all cost.

The PDP campaign train was also not spared of attacks from gun men. The campaign train was attacked by some armed youths at Ulakwo-Etche, Bakana-Degema and Abuaby youths suspected to be supporters of the APC. The State PDP Chairman, Bro. Felix Obuah in a statement signed by his Special Adviser on Media, Jerry Needam said "gunmen suspected to be members of the All Progressives Congress (APC) shot sporadically at Wike's convoy at Ulakwo-Etche and described the attack as provocative and one too many" (Needam, 2015a; Obuah, 2015b).

In attempts to restore peace in the State, peace accords were signed by the three front line candidates in the governorship race. It would be recalled that the first peace pact which was initiated by the United States Government was signed on January 22, 2015 by the three governorship candidates in the State -NyesomWike (PDP), DakukuPeterside (APC) and TonyePrincewill (Labour Party).

Despite the peace accord signed by the political parties and their candidates in Rivers State with a promise to carry out their political campaigns responsibly and in a non-violent manner as well as ensure that their supporters maintain peace before, during and after the elections. Regrettably, in spite of the agreements and the warnings by the Nigerian Police authority in-charge of the zone, political violence continued unabated in the state.

To forestall peace and order, the second agreement was signed on February 6, 2015, by all the governorship candidates of the political parties in the State under the supervision of the Assistant Inspector General of Police, Zone 6, TundeOgunsakin.

These accords did not stem the tide of hostility in the State. The most brazen of the attacks happened in the early hours of the flag off of the APC Presidential

campaign rally in Port Harcourt, where two sets of gunmen mostly youths respectively attacked buses conveying the party supporters from different parts of the State on their way to Port Harcourt.

Between January 10 and 24, several persons including royal fathers, women, and youths were reportedly attacked in their homes and at meeting halls in the local councils. While some lost their lives in the process, others sustained severe injuries. On February 5, 2015, in separate attacks, three persons were killed by gunmen in two Local Government Areas of the State. Two of the victims were shot dead and scores of others were wounded at a youth gathering in Onne, Eleme Local Government Area. The gunmen it was gathered stormed the youth event and shot sporadically at the people directly, which saw one person dead on the spot and another on their way to the hospital.

The Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), Rivers State chapter lamenting the series of attacks on its supporters, particularly on the convoy of its governorship candidate, NyesomWike, in a statement signed by the Special Adviser (Media) to the state party chairman, Jerry Needam, condemned the attempt on the life of a stalwart of the party, ChukwudiDimkpa by some gunmen at his residence in Rumueme area of Port Harcourt (Needam, 2015b; Obuah, 2015a).

Meanwhile, the APC Chairman, Dr. Davies Ikanya in a press release, on Rhythm 93.7 FM, in a counter statement held that over 30 of its members and supporters have been killed in the political violence that has continued to rock the State in recent time. He states that: our investigations showed that we have lost no fewer than 30 of our members and supporters in political attacks instigated in parts of the state by agents of the opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). As painful as this is, we are miffed that no single arrest has been made by the police in connection with these politically-motivated killings calculated to intimidate and annihilate us as a political party.

As part of measures to ensure peace before, during and after the elections, the State Police Command directed anyone in possession of illegal fire-arms to deposit such with the Command before the commencement of the elections on March 28 or face the full weight of the law. Also, the AIG Zone 6, TundeOgunsakin during a chat with journalists in the state said that the political parties and the candidates in the state have failed to comply with the peace accord signed before him with the aim of ensuring peace, security and safety of lives before, during and after the elections (Godwin,2015).

### **Youths and Election Crisis On 11<sup>th</sup>April, 2015 In Rivers State**

The 2015 Governorship election held simultaneously in thirty-four States of the Federation including Rivers State on 11<sup>th</sup>April, 2015. At the end of the election, Chief Barr.EzenwoNyesomWike.,*CON*, the Governorship candidate of the PDP was returned elected and declared the winner. The election was said to be marred with irregularities and protests. *Guardianonline*editorial (2015, p.3)states:

Governor Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi who was almost attacked by irate youths when he stopped over at Omagwa, in Ikwerre Local Government Area, to probe allegation that electoral materials meant for the area had been diverted, described the election as sham. Armed political thugs invaded a collation centre in Buguma in Asari Local Government Area, Rivers State, killing at least five persons and burnt some houses. An eye witness who is a political party agent in Buguma told *The Guardian* that some unidentifiable gunmen stormed the Kalabari National College, in the early hours of yesterday where electoral materials were being distributed and demanded that all sensitive materials should be handed over to them. Ojukaye Flag-Amaechree, explained that at about 1:40pm, no accreditation had taken place in Buguma because people were scared of coming out to participate in the polls.

That massive irregularities marred the 2015 general elections in the State is supported by some verifiable indices. First, the protest by APC led by its Governorship candidate on March, a day after the Presidential election and the APC Women, all to the State INEC headquarters, secondly, by the plethora of tribunal cases challenging the elections. To APC, there were no elections in the State. All their candidates in the general elections headed straight to the tribunals sitting in Abuja, all challenging the conduct of the election. The PDP and the INEC differed from the APC, as the party and election umpire insisted that there was election, and the candidates of the PDP won in all the elections.

It is significant to note that the manner by which the PDP garnered the votes was puzzling. Surface it to note that across the State, there was unprecedented rigging, ballot stuffing, falsification of results, intimidation of voters, and direct assault on the people. In some extreme instances, voting did not take place. Similarly, armed gunmen shot dead the youth leader of the All Progressives Congress in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Mr. Felix Orukokwu, at Idu community. Dakuku Peterside, alleged that seven persons were killed in Ogba/Egbema/ Ndoni local government area (*Guardianonline*, 2015).

Similarly, *Guardianonline* editorial (2015, p.2) further states that:

also at Eleme, military arrested some fake policemen in Alesa-Eleme and taken away. Shortly after the soldiers left, some youths arrived the area and started hijack of ballot boxes and result sheets. Fracas broke out at State Primary School, Olanada Rumuola, where some persons had attempted to snatch sensitive electoral materials. This was followed by a prolonged altercation which resulted in the destruction of electoral materials and manhandling of a police man. Similar incident occurred at Rumuomasi where attempt to snatch electoral materials resulted in a free fight by party agents. By the time *The Guardian* got to the area, broken ballot boxes and voting

materials littered the road. In Bera and several communities in Gokana Local Government Area, there were no electoral officials at press time. In Emohua, it was alleged that materials were snatched and no accreditation had taken place at press time.

In a swift reaction to the claims of APC, the State Chairman of the PDP, Brother Felix Obuahad stated that “Rivers state is a traditional PDP State and even if the elections are conducted a million times, the PDP will win here”. He added that the call to reschedule the elections by the APC was “the behaviour of bad losers” (*Guardianonline*, 2015).

Finally, the activities of youths who acted as the hired thugs were observed across party lines but most predominantly in PDP. It played out prominently in 2015 general elections in Rivers State. Each political party in trying to wrestle power from the other or remain in power ahead of the other engaged in this criminality. Youths in thuggery cut across of Nigeria with Rivers State described as most devastating.

It was for the this level of colossal violence, intimidations and killings that prompted the setting-up of the Judicial Panel Inquiry in April, 2015 on the killings in Rivers State before, during and after the 2015 general elections by the then outgoing State Governor, Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi. The Commission was headed Chidi Odinkalu, a Professor of law and Chairman, National Human Rights Commission and had a clear mandate to probe politically-motivated killings and destruction of properties before and during the 2015 general elections in Rivers State. According to the Commission’s Report, Rivers State recorded a monthly average of 19 killings between November 2014 and April, 2015 (Odinkalu, 2015, p.5). It further noted that out of 97 allegations of killings it received, 94 occurred between November, 2014 and April 11, 2015. He further remarked that 83 incidents of destruction of properties including acts of vandalism and arson, seven of the incidents occurred before the election while 77 occurred during the elections. A total of 275 different violations involving killings, injuries to persons or destruction were reported to the Inquiry. Also 236 alleged properties were identified in testimonies.

Accordingly, the Inquiry was said have opened on May 4, 2015 where it heard over 18 out of 43 memoranda concerning incidents of violence from 11 of the 23 Local Government Areas in Rivers State.

To further buttress the spate of politically motivated killings by armed youths in 2015 general elections in Rivers State, the then Director Department State Security Services in Rivers State, AbotNyam, was quoted as having said in an online media (*Naijapolitica.com*, 2015, p.2) that:

he served in different states like Imo and Abia, but never experienced the high spate of political killings as being witnessed in in the state,... wondered why politics has to be reduced to violence and destruction, which is strange to global practices because opposition is the beauty of democracy, ... politicians should realise that everyone has the right to belong to party of his choice.

Corroborating the above, Anucha (2015, p.1) aptly captures the Rivers State elections when he observed that what happened in Rivers State during the March 28,

and April 11, 2015 Presidential and National Assembly, governorship and House of Assembly elections, respectively, are better witnessed than imagined. The ugly development should also be of concern to any patriotic and genuine Nigerian, who is, desirous of the development of true democracy and democratic culture in the country.

It is imperative to state unequivocally that the 2015 general elections in Rivers State was characterised by violence as youths recruited by the political class unleashed mayhem on the people, with the PDP led federal government then paying lip service to the issues of security in the State. Recall also that preceding to the April 11 governorship elections in Rivers State, immediately after the Presidential and National Assembly elections, calm seemed to have returned to the State due to the efforts of Assistant Inspector-General of Police, Tunde Ogunsakin, who was posted to the state to check the reoccurrence of the violence that characterised the previous elections. No sooner the AIG arrived the State than he confronted head-long the monster that the PDP led federal government had unleashed on the State through the instrumentality of armed youths and compromised security operatives. Premium times April 11, 2015 reported that the Presidency had ordered Ogunsakin out of the State with immediate effect at the eve of the April 11 elections as it suspected his actions in restoring security in the State was going to work against its resolve to take over Rivers State Brick House from the Man who piloted the onslaught and eventual defeat of the biggest party in Africa, the PDP, Rt. Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi of All Progressives Congress, APC. This action was to pave way for the PDP's forcefully capture of the Brick House and 31 out of 32 seats in the State House of Assembly. So many youths and supporters of the Opposition Party, APC, were reportedly killed by the armed thugs recruited by the ruling PDP, with no arrest and prosecution of any.

### **Concluding Remarks and Recommendations**

Globally, youths are considered as vehicles of change. However, how have they performed this task in Rivers State in particular and Nigeria at large? It is imperative to understand that the Nigerian nation cannot be built or sustained on the foundation of lies, falsehood and deceit. Therefore, all politicians especially, the youths are guilty of electoral violence in Nigeria. Politicians engage a number of thugs and assassins to maim, kill and destroy their perceived opponents. This factor played out in the 2015 general elections in Rivers State. The current security threat, in the country may not be unconnected with the activities of politicians who supply arms to their youths with the aim of winning elections even if it may involve the elimination of their opponents. Youth participation in electioneering process has consequential effects on the outcome of the elections. Our article reveals that the role played by most youths in the 2015 general elections in Rivers State was violent in nature. The violent roles were assigned to them by their '*political godfathers*' - the '*haves*', as the '*have not*' - the youths are vulnerable as a result of dislocated and poor parental background, poor education, unemployment and under employment, moral decadence and political manipulations. The level of violence before, during and after

the elections has resulted in the large number of cases before the State and National Assemblies tribunals seating in Abuja. Virtually, all the National Assembly seats won by the Peoples Democratic Party(PDP) – House of Representatives and the three Senatorial Districts were being challenged including the gubernatorial and 32 State Houses of Assembly seats in Rivers State in which by PDP was said to have won in both the State and 31 while APC in one respectively. The Rivers State governorship tribunal had annulled the elections and ordered for re-run, while 20 Houses of Assembly seats were annulled, leaving PDP with only 12, by the House of Assembly Tribunals. The reasons given by the Tribunals, included among others, none use of card readers and allocation of scores, hijack of materials, intimidation of voters, violence, to mention but a few.

All these, in the words of Prof.ChidiOdinkalu, “show how and why Rivers State and Nigeria must end impunity for political violence”. However, to ameliorate these vices or eliminate this threat to our democracy, we make far reaching recommendations which include good governance, youth empowerment and re-orientation, amongst others. Finally, in order to stem the challenge of electoral violence, Nigeria has to be firm in its commitment to providing free and fair election. This goes beyond paying lip service. The INEC also should be given more powers in order to prevent it from being manipulated by the government in power. This is important because failure to adhere strictly to the following recommendations, portends great tsunamis to Nigeria’s evolving democracy, especially in Rivers State.

### **Recommendations**

There is global renaissance on the understanding of the role of good governance in building state legitimacy and in providing peace architecture. Good governance is a desideratum to peaceful election globally, and its absence is incubation to anarchical situations. Youth violence in elections is considered in some climes as a pragmatic protest against absence of good governance. This is the case in Rivers State in particular and Nigeria at large. In order to ameliorate youth violence in elections in Rivers State, the following suggestions are proffered:

#### **Youth empowerment:**

Rivers State has an army of unemployed graduates roaming the streets. The popular saying that the ‘idle mind is the devil’s workshop’, takes toll in most of them. In civilized societies, unemployed youths are provided with social security schemes. We therefore advocate that the Rivers State Government should legislate on social security for the youths. Besides, the Government should reinvent most of its moribund industries and engage seriously in Agriculture. Through these schemes, the youths would be gainfully engaged and would shun criminality that hitherto overwhelms their reasoning and refuse to be willing tools as election thugs, assassins and others during electioneering periods.



### **Genuine re-integration/rehabilitation:**

Rivers State is one of the States that the Presidential Amnesty is in force. Some of the youths that have finished the amnesty training on skill acquisition and rehabilitation should be empowered to set up their own small and medium scale businesses or be given employment. Unlike other empowerment programmes, there should be follow-up and periodic evaluation of these businesses for the purpose of continuous advice until they are fully developed and sustained. It will demonstrate clearly to others the seriousness of the Government on the amnesty deal and discourage the youths from nefarious activities including election violence.

### **Youth orientation/re-orientation**

Youths could be strengthened to shun violence during electioneering period through public enlightenment and orientation programmes. To champion this, is the National Orientation Agency. However, the Rivers State Government is urged to establish the Rivers State Orientation Agency to co-ordinate orientation programmes in the State. The Agency is expected to embark on civil orientation and education to enable the youths understand core values, their roles (rights and duties) in society. Furthermore, they could be re-orientated on the virtues of “give-and-take” (tolerance) in politics and “politics without bitterness” and as practised by late Ibrahim Waziri. The youths should be made to be aware that they are potential leaders of tomorrow, and that no politician ambition is worth their blood and future as preached by His Excellency, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, former President of Nigeria.

### **Criminalisation of violent politics**

The commodification of violence has a political nexus. Thuggery, hired assassination and abduction or kidnapping are mostly linked to violent politics in the State, and has gained currency throughout the country. The Law Enforcement Agencies, especially, the Nigeria Police should enforce the Rivers State Secret Cult and Similar Activities Law and the Rivers State Kidnap Prohibition Laws. We commend the Government for coming up with the Administration of Criminal Justice Bill, 2015 and urge the Rivers State House of Assembly to quickly conclude Legislative Action on the Bill.

### **Reforms of the Electoral Act/Laws**

The current electoral reform efforts should be pursued with more vigour in order to draft enforceable and effective electoral laws that could confront the menace of electoral malpractices including electoral violence. There must be stiff electoral laws that will make electoral fraud, a heinous crime against the citizen and state. Politicians found guilty of electoral fraud and all those that benefited from it one way or the other should be banned from participating in politics and holding any public position. They must be made to face stringent and long lasting legal penalties and sanctions. It is hoped that this measure will serve as deterrence against any form of political lawlessness and violence.

### **Setting-up of Electoral Offences Tribunals**

We recommend for the setting-up election offences tribunals, in line with Igini (2015). These be inaugurated on the year of elections to handle all pre-election and Election Day offences which include but not limited to registration of voters, buying and selling of voter's cards, violation of time of commencement of campaign, financial inducement of voters on Election Day, corruption of ad hoc election officials etc. The tribunals should be headed by both serving judges and retired judicial officers that are still active to the service of their fatherland to handle strictly electoral offences throughout all stages of elections in an election year and six months after the elections as the case may be. This is alien to our laws for now, but should be given urgent attention by Federal Government of Nigeria including the National Assembly.

### **Setting-up of a high powered panel to review electoral offences in the 2015 general elections and the Review of Prof.ChidiOdinkalu's Judicial Panel's Report on Rivers State by the federal government**

To avoid a recurrence of the political mayhem that took place in 2015 general elections in Nigeria and Rivers State in particular, the Federal Government should as a matter of urgency institute a high powered panel of eminent jurists, without any political prejudice, to review cases of electoral violence and politically motivated killings in all the affected states including Rivers State as the state was a major flash point. The panel possibly should review Prof.ChidiOdinkalu's Report on politically motivated killings in Rivers State, with a view to ensuring that all parties involved were given fair hearing. And any group of persons indicted should be prosecuted through the proposed election offences tribunals or regular courts pending the establishment of the tribunals by law.

### **Mopping up of arms**

The mopping up of arms and ammunition in the State is a *sin-qua-non* to peace. These arms were procured and given to the youths for the prosecution of the 2015 General Elections by the major political parties in the election, especially the ruling party at the time. The Presidential Monitoring Team set up under the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs) should be empowered to work along with the Amnesty team, the Joint Task Force JTF and the Nigerian Police to mop-up arms and ammunitions in the State. Intelligence gathering through community members can help in the location and destruction of arms. It could also reveal the link between arm traffickers and the thugs. This is important as the post-election Rivers State has witnessed increased cases of kidnap and robbery on a daily or weekly basis due to the proliferation of arms during the elections in the state. This is important in order to guarantee lives and property of Rivers' citizens and residents alike so that the State does not experience in the future what happened in the 2015 general elections.

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