

SECURITY UNREST IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS AND NATIONAL UNITY.

Maxwell O. Ekwe Esq.

Legal Practitioner and Public Issues Analyst.

Mobile phone: +2348037891997

Email: donmax62@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper analyses recurring security threats in the South Eastern states and the implications for 2023 general elections and Nigeria unity. It relies extensively on doctrinal research method with the aid of already documented evidence in drawing out its major inferences. Against this backdrop, the study finds out that the state of affairs in Nigeria and particularly South Eastern extractions are serious under security threats not only against smooth conduct of elections but in other social fabrics that stimulate the peaceful coexistence of Nigeria as a body politic. The situation has invariably elevated the pangs of crisis, poverty and severe hardship among the citizens of the affected regions largely due to government inability to address the perceived grievances. Hence, the paper opines that the paradox of Nigeria peaceful co-existence and the smooth conduct of 2023 general elections can only be redressed through decisive actions towards alleviating the suffering of the masses and dissociation from state security apparatuses to suppressing lawful agitations. These new citizens-based development paradigms must be anchored strictly on national interest devoid of sectional cleavages otherwise Nigeria peaceful existence and smooth conduct of 2023 general elections would remain a mirage among barrage of other national ordeals competing for genuine government attention.

Keywords: Election, Security threats, South East, and national unity

Introduction

Elections are critical aspects of the democratic framework for governing modern societies. They serve as instrument of political choice, mobilization and accountability. In the context of liberal democracy that has become the most popular form of democracy in a unipolar world, elections are to facilitate the smooth transition from one civilian administration to the other and help in legitimizing sitting governments. In a democratic system where elections are devoid of crisis, long term disputes or political violence, are amicably resolved. Such system enhances the prospects for political stability, peace, development and continuity in governance. But where elections are characterized by violence, use of thugs, intimidation, rigging, ballot box snatching and stuffing and other forms of electoral malpractices, they bring to question the very essence of democracy and compromise the nation's security and progress. One of the major functions of a modern state is the protection of lives of its citizens but where this cannot be guaranteed by the State, it makes the citizenry vulnerable to all forms of security challenges as being witnessed in several sections of the country presently.

Thus, there is no gainsaying the fact that in recent time, security situations all over the country have been precarious and fragile occasioned by incessant herders and farmers crisis, kidnapping, rape, banditry, Boko Haram insurgency, IPOB and Yoruba nation secessionist agitations to mention but a few. The aforementioned factors have undoubtedly turned conduct of elections in Nigeria into warfare, characterized by gangsterism and political disorder.

Politics is a set of social relationships associated with a central body of varying legitimacy, whose function is to make and implement overriding decisions for the whole population, in the interest of the

latter (Nnoli, 2003:5). By its nature, its definition means identifying what is necessary and sufficient for achieving a general understanding of the phenomenon. Politics does not provide the details that are important for a deep understanding. This means that if one wants to achieve full understanding, one must focus on phenomena that are similar in details, those that are comparable. In this sense, for example, the politics of the pre-colonial societies of present day South East people are quite different from what they are today. Therefore, they are not really comparable, understanding one does not help to understand the other (Onwe, 2011:9).

The nature of an election makes it vulnerable to a range of security threats against participants, infrastructure, information and materials. Also, a high level of communication and coordination among the agencies responsible for the administration and security of an election is also a significant advantage. As such, adequate security analysis and strategic planning remains a vital key to forestalling security breaches during, pre and post election periods in the country.

The types of security threats likely to arise in a particular election are influenced by both structural and circumstantial aspects of the election process. Nigeria generally, as well as South East in particular, faces the kind of security threats arising from the structural design in the electoral process. And to what extent would the prevailing fragile security architecture in the country particularly in South East region undermine the smooth conduct of elections and more so the stability of the entire nation.

Methodology

The objective of this study is to appraise the institutional frameworks engendering security threats in the South East with a view to revealing its efficacies for exterminating security threats in 2023 general

election in Nigeria and its overall stability. To achieve this objective, the study explored doctrinal research method supported by a contextual analysis, including reference to internet sources, an extensive review of academic literature, examination of case studies and the analysis of relevant issues that had plagued Nigeria in the last decades. This paper is a doctrinal research work that adopts point-by-point method as the key factors responsible for insecurity in the South East. The study recommends the use of dialogue and participatory democracy as panacea for insecurity debacle in the South East as witnessed during the Niger Delta agitations and the Nigerian state. The study adopts secondary sources, such as journals, textbooks and primary sources, such as listening to interviews of prominent South East political elite and observes events as they happen to colour the work. It suggests the need to use the lessons learnt from the Niger Delta crisis to reform Nigeria polity as to forestall the confidence of the citizenry on both the electoral processes and the larger spectrum of Nigeria project.

In the light of the above, the paper analyzes security threats in the South East since the return to civil rule in 1999 and the insecurity it spawns in the country while bringing out the implications of not tackling insecurity challenges in Nigeria before the 2023 polls.

Causes of current Security Threats in South East Nigeria:

South Eastern Nigeria is a region that borders Cameroun to the east and Atlantic Ocean to the south. It is the region dominantly occupied by the Igbo speaking people. Presently, it is one of the six geo-political zones in the country and consists of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. Security threats in the South East could be traced to the nature and character of the Nigerian state. It has been a major setback to the unity and stability of the country. As an institution, the Nigerian state does not exist in vacuum, rather, it is made up of various groups whose political, social and economic interest are always in pendulum

and constant conflict as each of them struggles grimly to meet its parochial interests. The Nigerian state, like other capitalists states, therefore, is not neutral, class-wise, but is rather immersed in constant class struggle within and between the various institutional groups which make it a reality. And it is the character of the on-going conflicts among and between these groups that has come to define the content and direction of the nature of Nigeria state (Omoweh, 2000:34).

In terms of character, the Nigerian state is not just capitalist, but also transnational in the sense that it helps reproduce the global capitalist process of accumulation of which it is an intricate part. Conceptually therefore, it is a social public force whose objective is its monopoly and use of coercion not to police and guide the society rather impartially since it has to meet the conflicting interest of the institutional groups that make it a reality. Instead, it is a specific public force dominating the larger society through the system of institutional or class mechanism to cater for its selfish political, economic and social interests, and those of its local fronts (Omoweh, 2000:35).

Accordingly, the class or section that ascends to power indulges in the politics of marginalization of other groups with high propensity for primitive accumulation on grand scale. This implicit domination in the guise of marginalization both in political appointment and sharing of democracy dividends help to hike agitations for redress.

Obafemi Awolowo once said that “any political system which does not allow any citizen from the minority group to aspire to any office in the land cannot survive as a nation”. According to him, under a true federal constitution, each group, however small, is entitled to the same treatment as any other group, however large. Opportunity must be afforded to each to evolve its own peculiar political institution. The present Nigerian structure reinforces indigenous colonialism, a crude, harsh, unscientific and illogical system (TELL,1999:18). Lateef

Adegbite once noted that “if we continue to operate a very defective system, this country would face very serious danger of survival because this constitution cannot sustain this country”(TELL, 1999:14).

Nigerian politics is full of painful paradoxes. As well, these elite, lacking a strong and viable base in production, turns to the state as its primary instrument of primitive accumulation. In this process, the state is mangled and rendered impotent in the quest for nationhood, growth, development, and much less democracy. (Ihovoubere, 2000:74). It is therefore important to understand the historical dynamics or basis of security threats ravaging the South East states and the Nation at large currently.

As the campaign for the Federal Election heated up during the second half of 1964, all of the energy of Nigerian politics was sucked into the vortex of ethnic regional conflict. Historic tensions between North and South and between the Igbos and their ethnic rivals now reasserted themselves on the vengeance. Vituperative rhetoric was joined by wide spread violence and expression, as the main political parties-now polarized into two competing alliances-clashed head-on in a momentous struggle for supremacy that would produce the worst political crisis in Nigerian history. Several elections of this crisis were; foreshadowed in the Mid-Western Regional Election of February 1964 (Diamond, 1988:190).

Security threat that bedeviled Niger Delta region seems to have been tackled by the Yar Adua’s administration with the grant of amnesty extended to the militants through dialogue. However, the whole trend changed when Muhamadu Buhari came to power in 2015. Before this time, little was known about the movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), IPOB etc. The recent influx of herders with graded military weapons and started attacking

communities in Nigeria did not spare the precarious security situation. These herders rape, maim, kidnap and destroy farm products of host communities with impunity. That particular trend changed the environment and created rooms for different agitations because the government paid deaf ear to these gunmen killing people and state security apparatuses were also visibly made helpless and citizens relied on self help mechanisms to curtail these marauders.

Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe the minority leader stated that the Nigeria people started witnessing the influx of non-Nigerians with military graded weapons into Plateau, Benue and South East following cattle in the name of cattle rearing. There was no effort that was made by the government to stop them. These gunmen with graded weapons started killing Nigerians without cause. If any community fights against these gunmen, the Nigeria police force and the military will fight back in favour of the gunmen (Abaribe 2021). Moreover, the senator also pointed out that the current administration has paid deaf ears to the principles of federal character in appointment to federal offices.

The problem of election security threats in the South East which has renewed agitations due to the politics of subverted federalism depicted the character and nature of the Nigerian state. The issue of national security has remained a talking point in the South East and the pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty orchestrated by the influx of gun men killing people (Abaribe, 2021). It is noticeable that there has been a renewed agitation in the South East through the movement for the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Various opinion moulders believed that unless the present administration turns a new leaf to allow those that know how to do things do it, it will be difficult to hold elections in the South East in particular and Nigeria in general come 2023 . The increased security threats and the influx of non-Nigerians with military graded weapons following cattle to the South East without the government taking any solid measures to protect the

people has made many Nigerians not to have confidence in the government of Nigeria (Abaribe, 2021).

Implication for 2023 General Election

Several prominent Nigerian leaders and security experts have been quoted in various media interviews in recent times to have expressed fears that violence may mar the forthcoming general elections and that the people's wish for a seamless handover of power in 2023 could be a mirage after all. For instance, the former Governor of the old Anambra State, Dr. Chukwumeka Ezeife, was recently quoted to have said, "I don't think we can sustain this kind of insecurity for more than a few months" (PUNCH, 2020:28). As it is now, elections may be difficult to conduct in this kind of atmosphere of insecurity. We need to pray and appeal to the conscience of everybody to think about Nigeria". Ezeife said (Channels Tv, 2021).

Similarly, a former Minister of transport, Ebenezer Babatope, have this to say, "the current security situation is grave and baffling (PUNCH, 2021). A People's Democratic Party chieftain, Baba Galadima, reportedly said, "it is going to be extremely dangerous for every living Nigerian because these people who have not performed will try to divide us further and install their own puppet, who will close their back" (Vanguard, 2020). There are agitations everywhere, and outcome of elections conducted under such atmosphere may likely lack credibility. You will recall that there was an election in the South East in 2019 despite the Indigenous People of Biafra's (IPOB) threats to disrupt the polls in the South-East Zone in general. Then, they were not attacking police stations but now massive attacks have been unleashed on security agencies including military formations and Correctional Centres in the South East.

Presently, IPOB has issued stern warning that the November 6, 2021 gubernatorial election won't hold unless their leader(Mazi Nnamdi

Kanu) currently under detention in DSS custody is released. So which one will the security forces be facing during the period of election? Is it the conduct of the polls or maintaining peace and security within the area? Moreso, when the IPOB sit at home order in the South East has come to stay. Therefore, Nigeria currently has a multifaceted security challenge ranging from menace of Boko Haram terrorist, armed banditry, kidnapping, and activities of unknown gun men to that of Fulani herders. People would definitely be afraid to go out and vote on election days if these security challenges are not drastically mitigated.

Also, the Executive Director of Civil Society Legislative Advocacy centre, Auwal Musa Rafsanjani, said that most Nigerians were currently focusing on the insecurity challenges facing the community at the moment and were thinking less of the 2023 polls. He said, “In less than two years from now, the presidential elections in Nigeria will take place but that has not been the major headline from the country’s election management body, considering that the country is totally distracted as a result of other pressing issues that bother on human security. “Since the security of persons and electoral materials are also very germane, it bothers everyone on how to navigate rural communities without facing the venom of criminals now taken over territories and are regaining with mayhem” (Rafsanjani, 2021).

He lamented that the anticipation of the polls had been doused by recurring gunmen attacks. He said, “for instance, on Monday, April 19, 2019, at least two policemen died when suspected hoodlums razed, Zone 13 police headquarters in Ukpo, Anambra State. On April 18, 2021, about three persons were shot dead by unknown gunmen in Awka, Anambra State while in March 2021, lawyers in Anambra took to the streets to protest the worsening security situation (Rafsanjani, 2021).

Senator Enyinnaya Abaribe maintained that the proliferation of gunmen violence with military graded weapons in the South East and other parts of Nigeria leaves much to be desired. According to him, the worst part is that the present administration lacks the capacity to handle the security challenges. According to him, the Nigerian military was able to restore orders in Sierra Leone, Liberia and other African countries that had security challenges but were unable to tackle the security challenges in Nigeria. The reason is that the civil authority did not give them the support that they needed to stop security problems. And as a result of this security challenges, there may be no election in 2023, (Abaribe, 2021).

One of the greatest threats to the 2023 general elections is the agitation for the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement. This movement came as a revival to the defunct MASSOB. However, the agitation became revived when the leader, Nnamdi Kanu emerged. It was he who made the defense of IPOB and was so articulate and factual that the movement could not be jettisoned. The movement could be said to be the casting aside of Igbo peoples' dependence and subservience. The original concept was brought about by Igbo people who were oppressed and suffered so many disabilities and began to turn to IPOB for salvation. It is a concept that stresses the unity of Igbo people, it uphold their rights to self determination and of need to be treated with dignity as equals to other people in all parts of the world (Onwe, 2011:25).

The movement stresses coexistence on the basis of equality and respect for human dignity. It stands for the political, economical and cultural unity of Igbo people both at home and in diaspora. It rejects all forms of non-indigenous control of the whole of the South East social, economic and political system. Its policy is that of positive stand in the ideological war on freedom of all Igbo people from the hands of its oppressors. The movement has suffered much diversity

and has passed many regimes and administrations. It became a new organization under Nnamdi Kanu, so positive was the response and so zealous the willingness to serve by the members that the task soon changed from one of awareness creation to that of management control (Onwe, 2011).

As the activities of the movement became intensified, it was not limited to the South East alone. It embraces all the Igbo and non-Igbo of the old Eastern region and those in diaspora.

Moreover, the Mondays sit-at-home strategy has been at work since the arrest of the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu and seems to be gaining prominence despite its economic implications in the South East. Proponents of the sit-at-home concept are of the view that it is a safer strategy than warfare to persuade the Federal Government to release the leader of proscribed IPOB group. Similar situation was witnessed when President Buhari came to Imo State on 9th September, 2021 on official visit. People were practically afraid to come out due to fear of unknown gun men. Resultantly, the fanfare associated with such high profile visit was nowhere to be found as the streets had become empty and deserted. That was because the people were obeying the order of the IPOB to sit-at-home as a sign of their disapproval to the president's visit (The Guardian, 2021).

It means that it would send strong signals on how the people feel about the situation in Nigeria. These days people living in South Eastern part of Nigeria live in apprehension not knowing the chart course of security situation in the area.

A situation where the people do not listen to the government of the land but adheres to IPOB orders, it is difficult conducting election in such a situation. It calls for an urgent attention so that the situation will not aggravate to what happened in the Democratic Republic of Congo as envisaged by the late sage, Nnamdi Azikiwe

Conclusion

Insecurity is the handwork of the political marauders, irresponsible fellows roaming around the seat of power. The current insecurity is a threat to the 2023 general elections because the police is demoralized, the people are in great fears of gunmen attack. Moreover, the police have been stigmatized and the personnel have been made to believe that they are the targets.

All over the country, there is an upsurge of security challenges orchestrated mainly by the lackluster drives of the national leadership to tackle the menace. And the affected communities are inherently incapacitated to fight back in self defense given the unwholesome attitude security operatives. Presently, there seems no measurable improvement to make Nigeria and in fact the South Eastern States safe. Before now, the Niger Delta crisis were quailed by the Yar' Adua/Jonathan's administration with the amnesty largesse, while pockets of security unrest were experienced mainly at the North East due to the activities of Boko Haram insurgents.

The country continued to dwell in lies while insecurity and political crisis continue to threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria as one indivisible entity. The Nigerian experience with general elections has shown that the political elite have not fully come to terms with the referents of elections for democratic sustenance and national security. More often than not, the elite have failed to play by the rules of competitive electoral politics which prioritizes politics of tolerance, conflict and consensus, bargaining and compromise.

Moreover, the attacks on police stations, breaking of Correctional Centres and other security formations in the South East is a dangerous signal and threat to the peaceful conduct of 2023 general elections. The worst scenario in Nigerian is that the poor masses are rendered

more vulnerable even the recent trend does not spare the political class.

Although today's security is a global concern as it is borderless. There is urgent need to put in place stringent measures to arrest the situation and cushion its negative attendant effects in the polity. Such measures include but not limited to the following: Anti-terrorism laws should be replicated across countries.

Emphasis on evolution of sound and autonomous economic and development plans is key but there must be a corresponding implementation framework to meticulously drive such policies to positive end. Accordingly, electioneering campaign slogans and inordinate politicking should not be elevated as a platform for social engineering, economic, and security revitalization in Nigeria. Thus this paper advocates for total delinking of state security apparatuses from sectional or cleavages of political loyalty as it would the excesses of political interferences on the efficiency and effectiveness of these security agencies.

It is also the submission of this paper that no society is insulated from unforeseen security downturn, but in case of Nigeria every down turn is usually made an avenue for enriching self or sectional interest on grand scale. As such, the current spate of insecurity in the South East should not be escalated into conduit pipes of draining the nation's resources recklessly in the guise of curtailing same.

People with requisite technical know-how should be appointed to man our nations security formations devoid of sectional considerations while at the same time equipping them to what obtains elsewhere in tandem with global best practices. Nigeria.

Various State governments should domesticate anti open grazing laws in their localities as the current Federal Government urge for States to

adopt ranching programmes may likely not end insecurity challenges occasioned by herders-farmers hostile relationship in near future in Nigeria.

Summarily, this paper has so far tried to show the inherent contradictions and negative coincidences being generated by security challenges in the country particularly as it concerns the electoral process and continued unity of Nigeria as one indivisible entity. Ending the disdainful treatment of the masses by the political class remains very cardinal and instructive to resolving these unpalatable configurations surrounding security situations in the South East in particular and Nigeria at large usually guised under secessionist agitations and its other sister concepts

Insecurity as an ideology causes structural imbalance and deficiencies in the society and does not need a miracle worker to resolve but adequate policies to be conscientiously, diligently, consistently and transparently pursued for its intended national purposes and benefits to be manifestly enjoyed by the masses, otherwise any offensive military or counter military operations launched to quell these agitations and other security unrest would be exercise in futility and counterproductive to our electoral processes and continued unity as one indivisible country.

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