Youth Political Participation and Electoral Violence in The 21st Century Nigeria: Bridging The Gap

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Abstract— **Young people have played crucial roles in shaping the political discourse in Nigeria, both negatively and positively. Picking electoral violence as a negative component of this political engagement, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis as to why young people find themselves enmeshed in violent contestations, especially during election periods. The paper goes beyond superficial labels of criticisms tagged on the Nigerian youth by arguing that there is urgent need to understand the structural dynamics which condition violence. Using theoretical constructions by prominent scholars like Douglas North et al. (2014), Huerta (2015) etc., the paper provides lucid political economy explanations of youth's engagement in electoral violence. Again, the paper analyses youth's participation in electoral violence in Nigeria and concludes by providing key recommendations to the various stakeholders, including political parties, electoral management bodies, CSOs and governments on how to dissuade young people from participating in electoral violence.**

Index Terms— **Electoral violence, youth, political participation.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Between 1999 and 2015, about 60 per cent of elections in Nigeria experienced some form of electoral violence. The purpose of political participation in any society, either civilized or primitive is to seek control of power, acquisition of power and dispensing power to organize society, harness and distribute resources to influence decision making in line with organized or individual interests (Arowolo& Abe, 2003). Violent electoral occurrences in Nigeria are occasioned by both strategic and incidental factors. This trend notonly poses a threat to peace and security on the country, but also risks the long-term sustainability of the democratization processes. Electoral violence is revealed in many ways, for instance, intimidation of candidates and voters, physical harassment, assault on journalists, imprisonment and assassinations, confrontations with security forces and attacks on local party headquarters. This type of violence is mostly triggered by the interaction of three principal agents: political parties, elite groups, and youth groups (or party youth wings). At the center of these violent encounters are the Nigerian youth. Many societies in contemporary Nigeria are now coming to terms with the fact that youth questions, if not fully addressed, are a ticking time bomb ready to explode. This concern is neither unfounded nor misplaced, not just because more than two-thirds of the country's population are under the age of 35 years – making it the most 'youthful' country – but, more importantly, because a plethora of youth engagements are creating either progressive or digressive ripple effects across the country. It can be argued that young people find themselves embroiled in this undemocratic mess because of the hopeless and disadvantaged status they occupy within the current Nigerian political landscape. Admitting the fact that youth are much unrepresented in the political arena, how come they suddenly become violence actors? There are two possible explanations for this question: on the one hand, youth demographic dominance is used to champion the interests of particular dominant elites with no or little response to youth issues. Many youth in Nigeria are exploited by the older political elites who use them as a climbing ladder to attain their own political ambitions. On the other hand, young people see electoral violence as a last resort to create their own spaces within the political arena. Young women and men are using their creativity and agency to create their own spaces for action in which they try to subvert authority, bypass the encumbrances created by the state, and fashion new ways of functioning and maneuvering on their own. Whatever the answer is, one fact is clear: leaving Nigerian youth out of political engagement is perilous to all sustainable development efforts. African history is dotted with countless examples of how young people have played critical roles in either establishing or overthrowing political structures. Starting from the nascent consciousness that led to the formation of the Pan African Movement in the early 20th Century and the landmark Manchester Conference in 1945, African youth were actively involved in the struggle to liberate the continent. For instance, all the 12 African participants including Nigerians at the Manchester Conference were youth. Because of the enormous pressure mounted by this cohort of young Africans, the conference made an unequivocal declaration on the equality of all men regardless of color or place of birth and appealed to the colonial powers to free the African people 'forthwith from all forms of inhibiting legislation and influence and be reunited with one another. Even today, there is increasing evidence that young people's contribution towards the dismantling of exploitative power structures in Nigeria is on the rise. This paper tries to answer this fundamental question: Why do youth engage in violence when non-violent methods are available and can alter outcomes? Why do young people risk retaliation and punishment – even death – on behalf of parties and candidates?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Political participation

Political participation is the process of gathering and sharing of political information, interaction with politicians, participating in political campaign or taking part in voting exercise, (Dalton, 2008; Evans, 2003). Some literatures have

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categorized political participation into two types, conventional and unconventional political participation. Conventional participation refers to a behavior of being a responsible citizen by attending and participating in a regular election exercise (Dimitrova, Shehata, Stromback, & Nord, 2011), while unconventional participation simply means any legal activity that sometime shows a sign of inappropriate manner such as signing petition, organizing and supporting boycotts and staging demonstration or protests in public places. Political participation can be seen as those actions of private citizens which they seek to influence or to support government and politics. Participation in electoral processes involves much more than just voting. Political participation derives from the freedom to speak out, assemble and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected and to hold office at all levels of government. When there is poor participation in politics, a wrong leader maybe selected and it becomes a problem for them to deliver on the vision for good government thereby causing the citizens to suffer.

B. Youth and Electoral Violence in Nigeria

From the onset, it should be noted that the social, political and economic landscape in which Nigeria youth operate is fraught with gigantic difficulties. Therefore, taking a look at the structural conditions that shape youth experience and provide incentives for violent choices in the way they express 'self' is critical to having a holistic conversation about the 'youth problem'. In other words, beyond youth entering popular discussions as troublesome citizens for instance, township youths in the heyday of apartheid in South Africa, rarray boys in the ghettos of Freetown, egbesu boys in Nigeria's oil delta, area boys in Lagos the circumstances pushing them towards the margins of society must also be taken into consideration. It is important to understand that the discourse on youth in Nigeria cannot and should not be dominated by narratives of political violence which oftentimes tend to be too narrowly focused on youth as threats while the underlying socio-economic and political meanings of violence, for instance with regard to legitimate claims against an authoritarian and incapable state, are ignored. We can easily establish a causal relationship between the emerging role that young people are playing in political violence and broader questions about social decomposition, economic crisis and political underrepresentation. Deconstructing youth participation in violence in Nigeria is, therefore, incomplete without an engagement with this important phenomenon: not only does it demonstrate the deep-seated crisis of dis-empowerment facing many societies, it also provides crucial insights into the way youth navigate this complex terrain and the weapons or tools they use to do so.

C. Bridging the Gap

In deconstructing youth participation in political violence it is helpful to answer the questions of 'why' and 'how'. 'Why' helps us to understand the specific factors that draw youths into violent political conduct while 'how' explains the tactics and tools with which they navigate the dangerous geography of violent conflict. Both questions collectively provide vital insights into the dynamic engagement of youth with electoral violence in Nigeria and the implications for political and social change.

D. The Models of Youth Participation in Electoral Violence

Murphy's four models of youth participation in political violence illuminate the argument further. The first is the 'coerced youth model' which views youth as being brutally coerced into violence and thus as being passive victims. This model has very little applicability to the electoral violence conundrum, but it can mostly be used to explain youth engagement in political instabilities like civil wars and other protracted conflicts, for instance, when young people are abducted as child soldiers and forced to commit heinous war-time acts like murders, looting etc. The second is the 'revolutionary youth model' which views youth as rebelling against political and economic marginalization. A naïve analysis of events in Uganda might, for instance, suggest that the profusion of youth groups such as 'No More' Campaign, 'Jobless Brotherhood', 'Poor Youth', to mention but a few, that were formed in the run up to the 2016 general elections are examples of the revolutionary youth mode. This type of approach is motivated by propositions like that of Lindberg (2010), who argues that the use of violence and exclusionary tactics against an obviously flawed electoral processes have in many cases stimulated increasedvigilance and unity among reformers, as well as increased determination by international actors to have an impact on the nature of the regime. The third is the 'delinquent youth model' which views youth participants in violent conflicts not as revolutionary idealists but as alienated and economically dispossessed opportunists exploiting the economic spoils of social and political turmoil. In this case, 'young people engage in violence in defense of no higher ideal, but rather for the heady adventure of violence itself'. The fourth is the 'youth clientelism model' which emphasizes how youth manage their dependency and agency within 'an institutional structure of repressive patrimonialism in which their subordination to adults is based on a cruel mixture of brutality, personal benevolence and reciprocity'. This model uses institutions built through client-patron relations to explain youth agency in violence. The other question of 'how' relates primarily to methods and tools for navigating the complex geographies of violent political conflict in Nigeria. It is important to understand that the tactics with which youth engage in or navigate violent political situations cannot be explained with a mono-cultural or fossilized lens. It requires a series of constantly adjusted tactics, developed in response to the constraints and incentives created, on the one hand by an unfavorable socio-economic context, and on the other by the immediate consequences of political violence.

E. Youth Mobilization by the Elites as a Demonstration of Violence Capacity

Elections are inherently a competitive process. This competitiveness is further exacerbated by the 'winner-take-all' approach which is a key trait of Nigerian politics. Because of young people's relentless energy, their vast skills and knowledge, they have inevitably become the glue that holds together competition in electoral politics.

Political agents are increasingly becoming reliant on the mobilization abilities of Nigerian young men and women. The ability of the political agents to mobilize young people and use them as a political threat against their opponents may be viewed as a demonstration of violence capacity, a subject explored further by North, Web, Wallis and Weingast (henceforth NWWW) in their classical work on the limited access order theory. They argue that in most developing countries, individuals and organizations actively use or threaten to use violence to gather wealth and resources. For development to occur, violence capacity ought to be restrained. This restraint is only possible if politicalelites create and share rents which incentivize them to coordinate rather than fight. At the center of this framework are elite bargains which are the negotiation process of determining who gets what, how and why. In a functioning limited access order framework, the elites use their privileged positions to create and distribute rents to ensure that there is maximum cooperation for peace to prevail. If the value of the rents the leaders earn from their privileges under conditions of peace exceeds that under violence, then each leader can credibly believe that the others will not fight (NWWW, 2014). The leaders remain armed and dangerous and can credibly threaten the people around them to ensure each leader's privileges. Using this school of thought, the fragility of violent electoral encounters among the youth in Nigeria can be attributed to the dysfunctional limited access order where elites fail to agree to access and share rents and end up exploiting young people's energy and drive as a tool to express their violence capacity. Young people are, therefore, used by both incumbents and challengers to manipulate electoral processes to gain advantage over their opponents.

F. Electoral Violence as a Blackmail Ploy

Democracy is a system that produces winners and losers. This logically means that losing parties should simply accept defeat and start preparations to participate in the upcoming electoral processes. However, disputing electoral outcomes has become a normal part of opposition political engagement in Nigeria. Initial challenges tend to take the form of losing parties announcing their refusal to accept the results of the election, proclaiming themselves winners, or announcing their intention to resort to legal measures or to stage protests to challenge election results. Why do opposition leaders and/or opposition political parties' dispute election results? Hueta (2015) uses the electoral blackmail theory to lay down some context. He argues that electoral losers challenge electoral results to strengthen their own capacity for negotiation with the newly elected government. The theory of electoral blackmail contends that losing political forces, in exchange for conceding defeat, are interested in: reforming the electoral process; legislating key issues to further their parties' agendas; getting pork barrel; filling committee chairs in congress/ parliament in order to gain influence over the legislative process; obtaining cabinet positions; appointing members of their party as judges; and so on. These benefits help increase the losing parties' chances of success infuture elections and also increases their share of power immediately after losing an election.

G. The Economics of Youth Electoral Violence

With the skyrocketing youth unemployment and biting poverty comes frustration which is easily translated into violence during election seasons. The feeling of 'nothing to lose' and 'perhaps something to gain' tends to incentivize energetic young people to discount the risk of engaging in electoral violence. It is thus logical to conclude that so long as the binding economic constraints that underpin the feeling of a hopeless future remain unaddressed, political violence, and especially that related to elections, will never cease as a feature of Nigeria politics.Unemployment and poverty have indeed compounded the attenuation of organizational capabilities within political and civic organizations, fueling clientelism and organizational capture, and thus weakening the ability of different youth groups to organize effectively so that they are able to elect leaders and subsequently hold them accountable Mugisha et al. (2016). A myriad of factorsexplain the current state of underdevelopment in Nigeria, but a specific focus which can help us understand the current plight of the Nigerian youth ought to be turned to the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) which Mkandawire and Soludo (1999) in their classic literature, Our Continent, Our Future, claim stymied most attempts to develop the capacity of young Africans, especially through education, the engine of human capital development. This, they argue, weakened the ability of political and civic organizations to build capacity for democratic practice. This argument has further been buttressed by Alcinda (2012), who opines that SAPs deeply weakened African states' ability to determine national socio-economic policies and priorities and to uphold the social contract with their citizenry, worsening the stage of life in youth that she refers to as 'waithood'.Waithood, with all its challenges, also constitutes a period of experimentation, improvisation and great creativity as young Africans adopt a range of survival strategies to cope with the daily challenges in their lives. Amidst their socio-economic and political marginalization, young people in waithood are able to develop a sense of shared identity and consciousness that leads them to challenge the establishment and fight for their rights. Most of the SAPs policies promoted private capital development to the detriment of nurturing a sustainable political system in Africa. This in effect weakened the link between political and economic democracy. When the 'third wave' started sweeping across Africa, donors hastily poured billions of dollars to support civic engagement in Africa, a situation which led to the inorganic growth of what Mkandawire terms as a 'socially rootless' civil society which primarily responds to donors' rather than citizens' interests. The failure by Nigerian governments to create a robust framework for youth economic empowerment is a recipe for disaster. The 2007 World Development Report, for instance, noted that poverty is not only the result of violence but it is now a primary cause. In fact, Nigeria's democratic stability is already under threat because there is a very positive correlation between stagnant economic development and young people's engagement in electoral violence. The political consequences are most often manifested in increased clientelism and patronage politics as survival becomes most critical. During elections, the patron-client relations trigger what Murphy (2003) calls the 'youth clientelism model' of electoral violence.

H. Partisan Youth and Electoral Violence

In Nigeria, political infractions, disturbances and the riotous behavior of party supporters all contribute to violence before, during and after elections. Unfortunately, youth encounters in these violent showdowns are on anunprecedented rise in most States of Nigeria. Whether it is the Hallelujah boys of the APC and PDP of Nigeria, the Barefoot Soldiers of the NPC Party in Ghana or NRM's crime preventers in Uganda, political parties have found a special advantage in creating pockets of youth groups and militias who count among the major instigators of what Bob-Millar (2005) calls low-intensity electoral violence in Africa. In partisan maneuvers, youth political activists inject enormous energy into supporting individual politicians to win elections and massively mobilize to provide this support. In return, these youths expect political elites to provide political opportunities such as jobs and contracts as personal rewards for their contributions. In this context, partisan youth use low-intensity electoral violence to respond to changes in material incentives. Their activism is, however, sometimes riddled with aggression and little objectivity, stemming from the fact that most of such youth activists are naïve about the intricacies of political operations. Their brand of political activism has features of lawlessness, and the line between conventional participation and contentious politics becomes blurred. This scenario is best illustrated by Murphy's (2003) 'youth clientelism model' which uses institutions built through client-patron relations to explain youth agency in violence.

I. Electoral Violence and Partisan Youth in the Age of Social Media

At no time in Nigeria's history has new media induced dynamic and fluid political participation like in the recent political campaigns in various parts of the country. Social media intensified the electoral participation as citizens mostly in urban centers took to Twitter and Facebook to campaign for and against their political candidates. These platforms were also used for mobilization and sharing recent political updates and events. Social media has indeed become a perfect medium for untainted political engagement. It is altering power dynamics and giving all citizens the power to influence how they are governed. In Nigeria, many young people who had previously been apolitical joined political conversations on social media. A plethora of campaigns on social media by both the government and civil society organizations (CSOs) like 'OhanaezeNdigbo' led to a spike, for instance, in registration by young people to vote. As a result of these social media campaigns, youth votes accounted for 45 per cent of the total votes in the 2015 elections. Apart from individual social media engagement by youth, political parties have also found a special niche to use the dexterity and online abilities of the Nigerian youth to mobilize and engage on party positions and other political issues. The two major contending political parties in Nigeria (APC and PDP), massively used social media to campaign and reach out to the electorate. Because of its ability to easily mobilize young people, social media makes it easier for electoral violence to be ignited and subsequently spread like wildfire. Of course, there are arguments by critics like

Andrew Keen in his latest work that social media is leading to an uncontrolled explosion of information and creating a platform for those who want to attract the most attention by shouting loudest. The thesis of his work is that, unless social media campaigns are backed by real-life constructive offline engagement, little political or any other impact can be achieved. But the landscape is slowly being shaped in Nigeria today. All around the country, there are massive campaigns by civil society organizations (CSOs) calling upon young people to translate their online activism into offline constructive engagement. During the 2016 election campaigns, for instance, the youth mobilized both on social media and in the streets of the capital and small towns of the country. Subsequently, social media became a battleground for the contestation of ideas between youth political activists from both sides ofthe political spectrum. With these technologies, pro-democracy agitators are able to build extensive networks, create social capital, and organize political action. As a result, networks are easily materialized in the streets.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/ORIENTATION

A. CONFLICT THEORY

Conflict theory originated with the work of Karl Marx in the mid-1800s. Marx understood human society in terms of conflict between social classes, notably the conflict in capitalist societies between those who owned the means of economic production (factory or farm owners, for example) and those who did not (the workers). Subsequent thinkers have described different versions of conflict theory; a common theme is that different social groups have unequal power, though all groups struggle for the same limited resources. Conflict theory has been used to explain diverse human behavior, such as educational practices that either sustain or challenge the status quo cultural customs regarding the elderly, and criminal behavior.Conflict is a part of social interaction when state delegates on issues on what concerns them, it becomes a conflictual situation. Conflict might be at the class level, local government level, state or even international level. Conflict do occurs when few or more parties does accept a particular situation the party might be individual or within states. Conflict theory suggests that human behavior in social contexts results from conflicts between competing groups.

Conflict theory has been criticized for its focus on change and neglect of social stability. Some critics acknowledge that societies are in a constant state of change, but point out that much of the change is minor or incremental, not revolutionary.

There are different types of conflict theories which includes; Structural Conflict Theory, Realist Conflict Theory, Biological Conflict Theory, Physiological Conflict Theory, Economic Conflict Theory, Psycho-Cultural Conflict Theory, Human Needs Conflict Theory, Relational Conflict Theory And Systemic Conflict Theory. All these have an explanation to political violence but the ones that best explain this topic are:

B. Human Needs Conflict Theory

The position of human needs theory is similar to that of

Frustration-Aggression and Relative deprivation theory. Its main assumption is that all humans have basic human needs which they seek to fulfill, and that the denial and frustration of these needs by other groups or individuals could affect them immediately or later, thereby leading to conflict (Rosati et al. 1990). 'Basic human needs" in this sense comprise physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs. In essence, to provide access to one (e.g. food) and deny or hinder access to another (e.g. freedom of worship) will amount to denial and could make people to resort to violence in an effort to protect these needs.

IV. DISCUSSION

Political arena is naturally selfish, individualistic and conflictive place where people pursue their interest and such interest more often is conflicting with others thereby making conflict inevitable. Hence, youths who participate are often prepared to deal with the outcome and consequences of participating in politics since conflict is inevitable. Again, because of the basic human needs and the frustration that often bedevil young people participation in politics and the denial of these needs by other groups or individuals are the contributing factors of electoral violence. Youths inject enormous energy into supporting individual politicians to win elections and massively mobilize to provide this support. In return, these youths expect political elites to provide political opportunities such as jobs and contracts as personal rewards for their contributions and when these are not met, it result to conflict in subsequent election where the same youth use high-intensity electoral violence to respond to changes in material incentives. Hence, their activism is riddled with aggression and little objectivity, stemming from the fact that most of such youth activists are often times naïve about the intricacies of political operations.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISSUADING YOUTH FROM ENGAGING IN ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

As discussed above, electoral violence has great potential to undo the achievements of Nigeria's democratic struggles. As one of the most important stakeholders in this violence stake, young Nigerians need to be actively involved both at the policy and at the grass-roots levels. There are several strategies which will greatly reduce youth's tendency to engage in election violence. There is urgent need to create multiple economic opportunities for youth across all sectors. This will play crucial roles in erasing the predisposing factors to violence such as poverty, which make youth violent. There is also an overarching strategy to sensitize youth and promote their engagement in politics always. While youth engagement during the polls heightens, there is, however, always a tendency for citizens to disengage from politics and public affairs once polls are concluded. This phenomenon in part explains why citizens often fail to continuously monitor and hold leaders to account beyond election seasons. Thus, it is crucially important that youth sustain their active political engagement beyond the polls to ensure that their aspirations, as outlined in the different communications they set out to promote during the campaign period, stand a better chance to make it to the government's and political parties' policy agenda. Moreover, the need to promote and sustain the commitment to peace, which youth initiated during the volatile campaign season, needs tobe carried forward in view of post post-election tensions that the country continues to grapple with.

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