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Electoral violence and democratic consolidation in Nigeria: a case of the 2023 general election in Edo state

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Abstract: The 2023 general election served as a critical litmus test for how far Nigeria's democratic experiment has consolidated. However, it presented persistent challenges, including violence. This study investigated the connection between electoral violence and democratic consolidation in Edo State in the context of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The study utilised a survey research design that prioritised a questionnaire instrument to draw data from 2,043 respondents from the three selected LGAs: Esan Northeast (Edo Central), Etsako-East (Edo North) and Oredo. The entire study was anchored on the theory of structural functionalism, which posits that strong political structures enhance a credible and transparent election process, while weak institutions are instruments for electoral violence and bad governance. The results provide compelling empirical evidence that electoral violence remains a critical obstacle to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The findings revealed that the triggers of electoral violence in the state during the election period were the quest for power, poverty, financial corruption, and illiteracy, suggesting that electoral violence remains a critical factor in Nigeria's democratic process despite reforms. The study further revealed that electoral violence erodes public trust and confidence in elections, weakens political institutions, discourages political participation and constrains the growth of opposition politics. The findings further highlight that electoral violence is both a symptom and a driver of institutional and structural challenges, such as weak political institutions, elite manipulation, a weak rule of law and an intense political competitive atmosphere of winner-takes-all. The study, therefore, recommends that there is a need to strengthen the independence of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), ensure strict enforcement of electoral laws to deter future electoral violence during elections, promote sustained voter education to enhance democratic values, and address prevailing socio-economic drivers of violence in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democratic Consolidation, Election, Electoral Violence, Edo State, General Election

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INTRODUCTION

The 2023 general election served as a critical litmus test for examining the extent to which Nigeria's democratic experiment has consolidated. Between 1999 and 2015, elections in Nigeria were fraught with many irregularities and deliberate subjugation of people's will. Recurring malpractices- including ballot box snatching, victimisation of opposition and voters, vote buying, physical attacks, disappearances, intimidation, and falsification of election results- have eroded public trust in both Nigeria's electoral and democratic processes. Consequently, the legitimacy of Nigeria's elections and the credibility of Nigeria's democracy have been questioned. Discourses during the period primarily centred on Nigeria's democratic trajectory, often employing conceptual frameworks such as democratisation, democratic transition, and democratic consolidation. However, much of the literature from the period portrayed Nigeria as a democratizing nation rather than one that had attained consolidation (Olutokun, 2002; Dinneya and Tsegaye, 2004; Omotola, 2010). Scholars predicated their views on Nigeria's re-emergence from prolonged military rule, arguing that consolidation presupposes the entrenchment of democratic norms. Even studies that explored democratic consolidation, such as Njoku (2001), did so based on the optimism that greeted Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, particularly among some Western observers.

From 2011 onwards, electoral reforms introduced by Presidents Yar'Adua and Jonathan, alongside improvements in election management, began to shift scholarly debates. Reports by EU-EOM (2011) and NDI (2012) noted that the 2011 elections were significantly better than those conducted in 1999, 2003 and 2007. The shift strengthened further during the 2015 general elections following the introduction of technology. For the first time, an incumbent president suffered a defeat, a surprising event that restored people's confidence and trust in Nigeria's electoral process, management and democracy. These developments, furthered by the Electoral Act 2022, under which the real-time transmission of election results to the IREV portal and BVAS technology was introduced, received national and international accolades (Akinyetun and Ebonine, 2023). Increased voter engagement through the collection of the Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) strengthened people's hope in Nigeria's democratic journey.

However, despite the technological improvements, the 2023 general elections presented persistent challenges. Reports from EU-EOM (2023), Yiaga Africa (2023) and Kohnert (2023) documented widespread electoral violence. In Edo State, a region popular for electoral malpractice, incidents of vote buying, voter intimidation and violent attacks were prevalent. For instance, Stockemer and Amaechi (2023) revealed that voters admitted receiving between N1000 and N5000 from political agents to vote for their candidates. Rosenje and Adeniyi (2022) noted that between July 25 2020, and September 19 2020, at least 23 persons were injured, 5 killed, and many materials and property, including ballot boxes, chairs, canopies and cars, were destroyed. This trend continued throughout the election, with reports of electoral malpractices, some of which occurred under the watchful eyes of security agents (Eludini, 2023; Momoh, 2023), as well as institutional weaknesses that undermine democratic governance (Ishiyama and Shliek, 2020; Seiyefa, 2017).

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Beyond these perspectives, the consequences are indisputable: electoral violence undermines electoral integrity, credibility and participation; erodes legitimacy; and ignites political apathy. As Keane (2004:1) rightly observed, "violence is the greatest enemy of democracy." In the case of Edo State, the persistence of violence highlights the fragility of Nigeria's democratic consolidation, raising critical questions about the extent to which reforms can overcome entrenched systemic crises.

Research Questions

1. What were the triggers of electoral violence in Edo State during the 2023 general elections?
2. What was the impact of electoral violence on democratic consolidation in the 2023 general elections in Edo State?

The Concept of Electoral Violence

Traditionally, electoral violence has been conceived narrowly as a physical phenomenon. This led scholars to conceive electoral violence as physical attacks carried out by thugs or desperate politicians during an election or by citizens reacting to electoral fraud (Nwolise, 2008). Albert (2007:136) echoed this view when he claimed that 'extant literature on electoral violence in Nigeria focuses on this type of violence'. Igbuzor summarises the traditional perspective on electoral violence thus:

> Any act of violence perpetuated in the course of political activities, including pre-, during and post-election period and, may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations or the use of persons or weapons to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with the electoral process (in Egobueze and Ojirika, 2017).

However, contemporary scholarship has expanded the traditional scope of the concept to include psychological and structural forms of violence. Scholars such as Omoyibo and Asekhauno (2016) concur that electoral violence is not only a physical phenomenon but also a structural and destructive form of aggression. Laasko (2007, 227) defined electoral violence as an "activity motivated by an attempt to affect the results of the elections – either by manipulating the electoral procedures and participation or by contesting the legitimacy of the results". Bardall (2016), who suggested that election violence is a form of political violence, elaborately captured it thus:

> Political violence is a means of controlling and/or oppressing an individual or group's right to participation in political processes and institutions through the use of emotional, social or economic force, coercion or pressure, as well as physical and sexual harm. It may take place in public or in private, including in the family, the general community, online and via media, or be perpetrated or condoned by the state.

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Consequently, electoral violence can take two forms: pre-electoral and post-electoral (Amoah, 2022). Pre-electoral violence may occur when electoral laws or provisions are seen to favour a particular candidate at the expense of the other (Okechukwu, 2014). It could also occur when a candidate is overambitious and perhaps sees the signal that he may likely lose the election to the opponent. Post-electoral violence, on the other hand, may be spontaneous. It may be engineered by individuals who feel cheated, alienated or deprived by the unfair outcome of an electoral process (Obakhedo, 2011). The deprivation may be real or perceived. In Nigeria, the purpose of such violence, apart from seeking redress through illegal means, is also to 'destroy it if we cannot have it' (Okechukwu, 2014).

Electoral violence is one major problem that has continued to affect Nigeria's democratic sustainability and impede the achievement of good governance. In most cases, electoral violence involves political parties, their supporters, journalists, government agents, election administrators, and citizens. Its forms may include threats, assault, murder, destruction of property and physical or psychological harm (Abutudu, 2014).

Electoral Violence in Edo State in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

The prevalence of electoral violence in Nigeria does not exclude Edo State. Edo State is one of the states in Nigeria where electoral violence has been variously recorded in different election cycles. Beyond presidential elections, Edo State is one of the few states that hold off-season governorship elections. Cases of thuggery, political assassinations, ballot box snatching, political kidnapping, voters' intimidation, election results falsification, and the like have marred the electoral process in the state (Kimpact Development Initiative, 2020). For instance, in 2005, a ward councillor in Oredo Local Government Area was reportedly killed after indicating his interest in contesting for Oredo Local Government Area Chairmanship in the build-up to the 2007 general elections (ACLED, 2023).

During the 2007 gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections, aside from sporadic gunshots and deadly violence between rival gangs, over 5 people lost their lives across the state. Houses and properties belonging to rival political actors were attacked and destroyed. INEC offices, particularly in Akoko-Edo, were attacked at different times (Adesote and Abimbola, 2014). Furthermore, in the weeks leading up to the scheduled date for the elections in 2020 gubernatorial election, politicians set up campaigns that saw heavy attendance of people in flagrant disregard of COVID-19 rules. Political godfathers set the centre stage for election violence, where the incumbent Governor, Godwin Obaseki, was seen in an open confrontation with his erstwhile godfather, Adams Oshiomhole, in what was perceived in some quarters as a fight over who controls the state (This Day, 2020).

Away from Gubernatorial and State Assembly Elections, the level of electoral violence during Presidential and National Assembly elections was unprecedented. In the 2023 general elections, Edo State was one of the states in Nigeria where elections were postponed in some polling units due to irregularities and violence. Individuals, suspected to be political thugs, were reported to have invaded some polling centres in Benin Metropolis and disrupted the voting process. At Oredo Local Government Area, Ward 4,

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it was reported that thugs invaded Unit 42 and shot into the air and made away with ballot boxes.

In a related development, two persons were shot dead (Mr Festus Idahosa and Mrs Elizabeth Owie), leaving behind three children (This Day, 2023). The impact of frequent electoral violence in the state cannot be overemphasised. Political apathy has been on the rise. For instance, during the 2020 governorship elections, INEC revealed that out of 1,726,738 eligible voters in Edo State, only 25 per cent voted (Yahaya and Babatunde, 2020).

The Concept of Democratic Consolidation

The concept of democratic consolidation, like other concepts in social sciences, does not lend itself to a clear, all-encompassing definition. Huntington (1991) argued that democracy is consolidated when founding elites successfully hand over power to a successful winner after a defeat, and the new winner also hands over power to future winners. However, scholars such as Schedler (2000) have criticised this definition, cautioning against reducing the concept to electoral indicators alone. They argued that such an approach negates the deeper institutional and normative dimensions of democracy. Other scholars have proposed alternative criteria. Beetham (1994) proposed measuring the concept using 'longevity' or a 'generational test' criterion, whereby regular competitive elections for at least twenty years can determine whether a democracy is consolidated, even if it does not result in a change of government. Abdulai and Crawford (2010) warned that such a reductionist approach could constrain evaluation of the new democracies' capacity to resist crisis or shock if the government stays longer in power.

Consequently, contemporary scholarship has broadened the concept to include the gradual routinization, internationalisation, and institutionalisation of the ethos and values of the democratic process such that political actors believe and act according to its ethos and values. In this sense, democracy becomes "the only game in town," according to Przeworski (1991). The challenge, however, lies in determining when such durability is sufficient to render a democratic breakdown highly improbable.

Gasiorowski and Power (1998) identified three critical determinants of democratic consolidation: socio-economic development, macroeconomic stability (particularly low inflation), and diffusion effects from neighbouring democratic regimes. O'Donnell (1996) associated consolidation with regime stability, elite compliance, and the absence of anti-system threats. Schmitter (1992) emphasised the internalisation of democratic norms within social relations. Linz and Stepan (1996) conceptualised consolidation across three dimensions: behavioural, attitudinal, and constitutional. They further identified five essential conditions for democratic consolidation: a vibrant civil society, an autonomous political society, the rule of law, a functional state apparatus, and an institutionalised economic society. Merkel (1996; 1999) outlined four dimensions of consolidation: institutional, representative, behavioural, and civic-cultural. More recent contributions (e.g., Omotola, 2010, 2011; Adeosun, 2014) stressed the importance of resilience and maturity, arguing that consolidated democracies must withstand both internal disruptions and external pressures.

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Electoral Violence and Democratic Consolidation

Electoral violence and democratic consolidation are closely interlinked, with the former posing a significant threat to the latter. Przeworski (1991) and Linz and Stepan (1996) suggest that democratic consolidation depends on the extent to which both political actors and citizens adhere strictly to democratic norms, including peaceful electoral competition, acceptance of electoral outcomes and reliance on institutional mechanisms for electoral dispute resolution. Electoral violence undermines these conditions.

First, electoral violence undermines electoral legitimacy. Governments derive their authority to govern their people from a peaceful, transparent and broad-based election process. An electoral victory procured through unconstitutional means, such as violence, delegitimises the government and erodes democratic norms (Ameh-Ogigo, 2025). The wider implication is that it hinders the internalisation of the democratic values necessary for democratic consolidation.

Second, electoral violence results in widespread apathy. Democracy is the government of the people, by the people and for the people. An election is a litmus test for a candidate's popularity and widespread acceptance. Consequently, candidates often engage in issue-based debates and campaigns to convince voters. However, when voters are physically attacked, causing emotional, psychological and physical harm, electoral outcomes may be perceived as underserved, with broad implications for democratic consolidation (Harry and Kalagbor, 2021). In Nigeria, despite various electoral reforms, voter apathy still marred elections. Table 1 below shows that voter turnout has been on a downward trend since 1999 relative to the number of registered voters in each election cycle, a phenomenon that has been largely attributed to endemic electoral violence.

Table 1: The Level of Voter Apathy in Nigeria (1999-2023)

Year	Registered Voters	Total Votes Cast	Percentage
1999	57,938,945	30,280, 052	52.26%
2003	60, 823,022	42,018,735	69.08%
2007	61,567,036	35,397,517	57.49%
2011	73,528,040	39,469,484	53.68%
2015	67,422,005	29,432,083	43.65%
2019	82, 344,107	28,614,190	34.74%
2023	93,469,008	24, 377,450	26%

Source: Akin (2025)

Third, electoral violence stifles political competition. A healthy democracy is a function of healthy electoral competition. The opposition strengthens democratic norms by providing alternative political platforms for citizens and exposing the ills of the government in power (Akindele, 2011). In the Nigerian context, where corruption and authoritarian tendencies are critical indicators of governance, a viable opposition gives people a voice. Ukiwo (2003) claimed that unbridled competition for power undermines Nigeria's democratic consolidation. Chidozie and Orji (2022) argued that the state's inability to provide

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a space that addresses both social complexity and cultural pluralism is a recipe for ethno-religious violence in Nigeria, which makes democratic consolidation highly difficult.

Intolerance of opposition normalises the use of force in a democratic setting. The goal of a political party is to gain control of government. Consequently, any opposition to actualise this ambition is often met with virulent tactics that result in violence (Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2016). This weakens the behavioural and constitutional dimensions of consolidation identified by Linz and Stepan, where no significant actors should seek to subvert democratic processes. It could lead to political instability, particularly in fragile democracies, such as Nigeria, where electoral conflicts often assume ethnic, religious or regional dimensions.

Generally, electoral violence is both a symptom and a cause of weak democratic consolidation. For Nigeria and similar states, democracy may remain fragile, unstable and unable to deliver the dividends of governance if electoral violence is not addressed.

Theoretical Underpinning: Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism focuses on societal stability and order. It developed core concepts such as interdependency, socialisation, and systemic needs (Harper, 2011). Notable works by Herbert Spencer, August Comte and Emile Durkheim sought to understand the interconnectivity and interdependence of societies by applying biological processes (Urry, 2000). In the 1950s and 1960s, Talcott Parsons and his students further developed the theory by applying it to sociology. They argued that shared values and norms are crucial to societal survival, and when these values and norms are missing, society suffers from systemic decay (Smith and Hamon, 2012). According to Talcott, society seeks stability and rhythm through adaptation, goal attainment, influence (or outcomes) and latent pattern maintenance (Smith and Hamon, 2012).

Society consists of interconnected parts that function for its survival. However, these functions must evolve as society evolves. As Merton (1949) aptly stated, not every function is essential for societal sustenance. Functions can increase or decrease the stability of the social system. Merton categorised functions as manifest (intended), latent (unintended) or dysfunctional (having unintended negative impacts). Furthermore, a conservative society cannot guarantee the needed societal sustenance that would ensure stability. Over time, political scientists have used the theory comparatively to study political systems worldwide. They argue that while political structures can be interdependent, they may not necessarily exist to ensure equilibrium. Consequently, disorder and disharmony would plague a system, leading to decay (Helm, 1971).

Generally, the core assumptions of structural functionalism are as follows. First, it sees society as consisting of interrelated parts that promote stability and change through constant interactions. Therefore, to understand whether the system is functioning, it is important to study how society's parts work (Chilcott, 1998). Second, every society comprises structures whose functions are not only interconnected but also interdependent, necessary for equilibrium and transformation (Radcliffe-Brown, 1935). Third, these structures and their functions exist for the system's good health. Last, how the system works

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influences the stability of the structures in an ever-changing and unpredictable system (Chilcott, 1998; Merton, 1949).

This theory is relevant to this study because the system's stability depends on the core functions of structures, and the functioning of the core structures depends on the prevalence or otherwise of violence. Political parties, the judiciary, the legislature, civil society, election management bodies and security agents are to ensure order and harmony. Democratic consolidation, stability and economic development cannot be realised in an atmosphere of violence.

In Nigeria, the occurrence of electoral violence often finds its roots in the dysfunctional structures that exist in a seemingly trapped system. Indeed, this reality confirms one criticism levelled against the theory as being Eurocentric without taking into cognisance the political structures in developing countries, which are shaped by colonial histories and socio-economic factors necessary to make structures autocentric. As Omobowale (2018) noted, systemic flaws such as corruption, patronage and ethnicity affect the functioning of different societal groups while internal democracy seems lacking. These flaws thus impact their functions, eroding local development and intensifying division and violence.

Political parties, electoral bodies, security agents and other election management bodies have been variously noted, both locally and internationally, as causes of electoral violence in Nigeria (Ebohon, 2012; Centre for Democracy and Development, 2018; EU Election Observation Mission in Nigeria, 2019). Furthermore, because democratic consolidation concerns the stability of structures, as shown by progressive electoral processes, this theory is well suited to demonstrating the link between electoral violence (linked with weak structures) and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. By and large, if structural functionalist theory accounts for the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of various segments of political institutions, then human actors operate every structure to protect individual or group interests.

Methodology

The data for this study were part of the field survey on electoral violence and democratic consolidation in Nigeria: A Case of Edo State, conducted by the authors immediately after the general elections in 2023. The study adopted a survey research design. The study population comprised all the registered voters who voted in the elections. According to INEC (2023), 2,501,081 people registered to vote, but only 600,395 people, representing 24.01%, actually voted in the election. The study utilised a structured questionnaire to elicit responses from the selected 2400 respondents using the Taro Yamane formula. However, 2,043 respondents, representing 85.1%, ultimately participated in the study.

Stratified random sampling was utilised to divide Edo State into three senatorial districts of Edo Central, Edo North and Edo South and their corresponding eighteen (18) Local Government Areas (LGAs). A purposive sampling technique was used to select two (2) LGAs from each senatorial district. The LGAs were selected based on repeated reports of occurrences of electoral violence during elections. The researchers located targeted

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respondents through a preliminary assessment of those who participated in the election. A simple random sampling technique was used to select respondents from the selected six (6) LGAs. The six LGAs were Esan Northeast and Igueben (Edo Central), Akoko-Edo and Etsako-East (Edo North) and Oredo and Egor (Edo South) (Table 1 below).

Table 1: The Selected Sample Size for the Study

Senatorial District	LGA	Population	The Number of Returned Questionnaires	% of Total Sample
Edo Central	Esan North East	121,989	328	16.1%
	Igueben	70,276	321	15.7%
Edo North	Akoko-Edo	261,567	347	17.0%
	Etsako-East	147,335	342	16.7%
Edo South	Oredo	374,515	352	17.2%
	Egor	340, 287	353	17.3%
Total		**1,315,969**	**2,043**	**100%**

Source: Authors' compilation (2023)

The questionnaire had two parts: Part A contained respondents' biodata, while Part B consisted of questions related to the three research questions. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the instrument's internal consistency, yielding a coefficient of 0.91. This coefficient indicated high internal consistency, confirming that the questionnaire measured the individual construct.

The researchers obtained respondents' consent by fully disclosing the study's purpose and explaining that the research was conducted solely for academic purposes. Respondents were assured of the protection of all information disclosed, except as otherwise agreed by them. The questionnaires were destroyed after use.

All questionnaire items were coded using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 22.0). Data were analysed using frequency counts and simple percentages.

Results

Table 2: Biodata of Respondents

Bio-Data	Categories	Figures	Percentages
Sex	Male	1229	60.2
	Female	814	39.8
Age	Below 20	169	8.3
	20-30	309	15.1
	31-40	881	43.1
	41-50	453	22.2
	51-above	231	11.3
Religion	Islam	512	25.1
	Christianity	1257	61.5
	Traditional Religion	254	12.4

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	Other	20	1.0
Marital Status	Single	422	20.7
	Married	1336	65.4
	Divorced	130	6.4
	Widowed	147	7.2
	Other	8	0.4
Occupation	Civil Service	320	15.7
	Self-employment	759	37.2
	Student	466	22.8
	Unemployed	405	19.8
	Other	93	4.6
Educational Background	WAEC	402	19.7
	ND/HND	481	23.5
	BSc	699	34.2
	MSc	97	4.7
	PhD	13	0.6
	Other	351	17.2

Source: Field Survey (2023)

From Table 2 above, the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics showed that most respondents were male (60.2%), aged between 31 and 40 (43.1%) and self-employed (37.2%). Additionally, the majority had at least secondary school education, with 34.2% holding a bachelor's degree. These characteristics suggest a relatively young, educationally exposed and economically vulnerable population that aligns with the study's objective of examining how poverty and inducement intersect with electoral violence.

RQ1: What Were the Triggers of Electoral Violence in Edo State during the 2023 General Elections?

In multiple-choice questions, the table below shows triggers of electoral violence during the 2023 general election in Edo State.

Table 3: Triggers of Electoral Violence during the 2023 General Election in Edo State

Trigger of Electoral Violence	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
Quest for Power	1967	96.3	76	3.7
Poverty	1481	72.5	562	27.5
Financial Inducement	1944	95.2	99	4.8
The use of armed security	647	31.7	1396	68.3
Illiteracy	1189	58.2	854	41.8

Source: Field Survey (2023)

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Table 3 shows that 1967 respondents (96.3%) agreed that the quest for power triggered electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Edo State, while 76 respondents (3.7%) disagreed. Also, 1481 respondents (64%) agreed that the quest for power caused electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Edo State, while 562 respondents (36%) disagreed. 1944 respondents (95.2%) agreed that financial corruption and power caused electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Edo State, while 99 respondents (4.8%) disagreed. 1189 respondents (58.2%) agreed that illiteracy caused electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Edo State, while 854 respondents (41.8%) disagreed. The table below shows respondents' responses regarding illiteracy as the cause of electoral violence in Edo State during the 2023 general elections. However, 1396 respondents (68.3%) disagreed that armed security was a trigger, while 647 respondents (31.7%) agreed.

RQ2: What was the Impact of Electoral Violence on Democratic Consolidation in the 2023 General Elections in Edo State?

Table 4: Electoral Violence and Democratic Consolidation

Section	Variable/Response Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative (%)
Impact of Electoral Violence on Democratic Consolidation	Yes	1962	96.0	96.0
	No	81	4.0	100.0
	Total	**2043**	**100.0**	—
Extent of Impact	Very High Extent	777	39.6	39.6
	High Extent	636	32.4	72.0
	To an Extent	139	7.1	79.1
	Very Low Extent	275	14.0	93.1
	Low Extent	135	6.9	100.0
	Total	**1962**	**100.0**	—
Perceived Impact on Democratic Consolidation	Loss of trust in future elections	1802	91.8	—
	Exposure of INEC's lack of capacity	1916	97.7	—
	Increase in political apathy	1801	91.8	—

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Section	Variable/Response Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative (%)
	The elites' unwillingness to allow voters' choice	1904	97.0	—
	Extinction/weakening of opposition parties	1655	84.4	—

Source: Field Survey (2023)

Table 4 shows overwhelming agreement among the respondents that electoral violence during the 2023 general elections significantly impacted democratic consolidation in Edo State. An overwhelming 96.0% of respondents agreed that electoral violence affected democratic consolidation, highlighting a strong negative perception of its implications. Additionally, the impact is pronounced, as a large proportion of respondents (72.0%) rated the impact as either "very high extent" (39.6%) or "high extent" (32.4%). This suggests that electoral violence is not a trivial issue, but a primary obstacle to democratic deepening and stabilisation in Edo State, by extension, Nigeria.

The perceived impact of electoral violence on democratic consolidation corroborates the above assertion. A vast majority of respondents identified the electoral body's incapacity to conduct credible elections (97.7%) and elites' unwillingness to allow the genuine expression of voters' preferences (97.0%) as key impacts. Additionally, high proportions of respondents pointed to loss of trust in future elections (91.8%) and increased political apathy (91.8%), both of which undermine citizen participation and confidence in democratic institutions. The weakening or possible extinction of opposition parties (84.4%) further suggests a shrinking democratic space and erosion of political competition. Collectively, these findings underscore that electoral violence not only disrupts electoral processes but also erodes institutional legitimacy, citizen engagement, and political pluralism—core pillars necessary for democratic consolidation.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings strongly reinforce the existing scholarly debates that electoral violence significantly impacts democratic consolidation. Specifically, the study found the triggers of electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Edo State as the quest for power (96.3%), poverty (72.5%), financial corruption (95.2%) and illiteracy (58.2%). Elections are mainly contested over power. However, the privileges and dignity accorded to candidates make elections in Nigeria more violent. Edo State has been notorious for power contestation among political bigwigs. The most recent was the power struggle between the current Edo State governor, Godwin Obaseki and his erstwhile godfather, Adams Oshiomhole. The gale of defections following that struggle restored the ascendancy of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) after years of relegation by the All Progressives Congress (APC) (Akhaine, 2020).

Broadly, Nwozor et al (2021) confirmed that Nigeria's elections over the years have been characterised by unhealthy power rivalry. They argued that incumbency often worsens

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electoral violence in Nigeria. Incumbency gives those in power latitude to wield so much power over the opposition. This incumbency factor challenges other power-seeking political gladiators in other parties, and its by-product is electoral violence that often characterises the electoral process. (Eze, 2023).

Furthermore, poverty has been linked to electoral violence in Edo State and, by extension, Nigeria. Edo State has witnessed over two decades of economic stagnation, fuelling rising unemployment and over-dependence on oil rents from the federal government (Department for International Development [DFID], 2018). In Nigeria, a country of over 200 million people with abundant human and material resources (NBS, 2022), it cannot sustain itself. It appears that political actors deliberately pauperise Nigerian people to continue to make them susceptible to manipulation in any election period. According to the National Bureau of Statistics [NBS, 2022], 133 million Nigerians, representing 63% of the entire population, live in multidimensional poverty. Eze (2023) found that poverty is a major factor orchestrating electoral violence in Nigeria, as energetic unemployed youths are hoodwinked into perpetuating violence during elections for a promise of little reward that would sometimes not materialise.

The effect of illiteracy on electoral violence remains understudied in the literature. This may be attributable to the popular view that poor socio-economic indicators breed poor educational sophistication required to understand the huge risk inherent in indulging in electoral violence. However, INEC maintained that apart from poverty, ignorance and illiteracy are other major factors fuelling electoral violence in Nigeria (Aigbokhaevbo, 2023).

Isiaku, Obatta and Nweke (2020) critically argued that the spates of electoral violence in Nigeria could only be stopped through education. As has been the norm in the Nigerian electoral context, political actors often recruit helpless, illiterate Nigerians, some of whom are school dropouts or never went to school at all, and who have found alternative jobs in gangsterism during elections (Abutudu, 2014; Obakhedo, 2011). However, literature on education and political participation abounds, suggesting that education may eliminate the incentive to indulge in all forms of electoral violence (Willeck and Mendelberg, 2022).

The study found no significant relationship between the use of security agents and electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Edo State, as 68.3% of respondents maintained that the electoral violence that occurred across the state could not be linked to the presence of the security agents in the election. This finding is consistent with the clamour across the country for more security during elections to prevent electoral violence. The police, and not the military, are trained to maintain peace and order (Arase, 2022). CLEEN Foundation (2023) commended the spread of security agents across polling units during the elections but identified some areas where their presence was lacking.

However, while providing security during elections is important, militarising elections usually violates democratic norms. Onuoha, Okafor, Ojewale and Okoro (2020) discovered that security agents were culpable of aiding and abetting electoral violence during the 2019 general elections. During the 2023 general elections, former President Muhammad Buhari was accused of militarising the election to give his candidate an undue advantage (Eguegu and Iwara, 2023). Indeed, militarisation of elections creates psychological,

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emotional and physical apprehension among the voters, thereby raising suspicion of manipulation and other electoral fraud.

More significantly, the study found overwhelming evidence that electoral violence can impact democratic consolidation, a broad focus of the study. Out of 96.0% of the respondents who affirmed this statement, 72% maintained that electoral violence 'highly' impacted democratic consolidation in Nigeria through exposure of INEC's lack of capacity to conduct future free, fair and credible elections, elites' unwillingness to allow people's choice to emerge, loss of trust in future elections, increase in political apathy in future elections, and the extinction of opposition parties.

Nigeria's global profile improved immediately after the 2015 and 2019 general elections. The introduction of technology and the acceptance of defeat by the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan, a first of its kind in the history of Nigeria, excited the world, which began believing in Nigeria's democracy. Part of democratic consolidation, as Linz and Stepan (1996) claimed, is the elite's acceptance of defeat and recourse to laid-down rules when dissatisfied with the outcome of elections. As noted earlier, the Electoral Act 2022, which introduced novel provisions to enhance the credibility of elections, heightened hopes for a 'new' Nigeria. However, the election has been adjudged as one of the worst elections ever conducted in Nigeria (Egobiambu, 2023; This Day, 2023), given multiple reports of electoral violence. As a result, this finding links electoral violence to democratic consolidation, aligning with previous findings that electoral violence has affected democratic consolidation in Nigeria (Igwe, 2012; Inokoba and Maliki, 2011; Inokoba and Kumokor, 2011; Omotola, 2009).

Conclusion

This study investigated the connection between electoral violence and democratic consolidation in Edo State in the context of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The results provide compelling empirical evidence that electoral violence remains a critical obstacle to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the triggers of electoral violence in Edo State and the link between electoral violence and democratic consolidation during the 2023 general elections. The findings revealed that the triggers of electoral violence in the state during the election period were the quest for power, poverty, financial corruption, and illiteracy, suggesting that electoral violence remains a critical factor in Nigeria's democratic process despite reforms.

Furthermore, the study reveals that electoral violence erodes public trust and confidence in elections, weakens political institutions, discourages political participation and constrains the growth of opposition politics. The broader implication is that the intensity of the 2023 electoral violence will affect people's participation in future elections in Nigeria. Additionally, the results contradict the primary principles of democratic consolidation as espoused by Adam Przeworski, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan.

The findings further highlight that electoral violence is both a symptom and a driver of institutional and structural challenges, such as weak political institutions, elite manipulation, a weak rule of law and an intense winner-takes-all political competitive

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atmosphere. This aligns with structural functionalism, which posits that strong political structures support a credible and transparent election process, while weak institutions trigger electoral violence and weak governance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following recommendations

First, the study recommends strengthening the independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) through improved funding, technological innovation and institutional reforms. This will help the institution build the required capacity to conduct free and transparent elections in Nigeria.

Second, electoral laws should be strictly enforced to deter future electoral violence. Special offences tribunals can ensure timely justice and deter future violations. To achieve this, critical stakeholders such as the judiciary, the INEC, civil society and security agencies should be strengthened to handle election disputes and violence effectively and impartially.

Third, sustained voter education is crucial to promote democratic values such as tolerance, civility, non-violence and respect for human rights and electoral outcomes. The media and civil society organisations play a crucial role in this regard.

Last, there is a need to address prevailing socio-economic triggers of violence in Nigeria. Economic empowerment and social welfare schemes can help address lingering issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality, particularly among the youth.

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