

POLITICAL THUGGERY: A THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the ugly phenomenon of thuggery in the body politic of Nigeria. It critically examines the reasons for the prevalent incidences of political thuggery particularly during general elections and even re-run elections in the country. The paper identifies such reasons as unemployment among youths and its attendant poverty and frustration which makes them willing tool for thuggery in the hands of desperate politicians; desperation or 'do or die' politics among some politicians, and the negative impact of money politics in the country's present-day democracy. Some other reasons include the phenomenon of god-fatherism in democratic Nigeria; lack of political ideology and principle, and the absence of internal party democracy in contemporary Nigerian political parties. These reasons have largely encouraged dictatorship and arbitrariness among political leaders at different levels. This, for example, has resulted in the imposition of candidates for various elective offices by powerful cliques within political parties, using thugs to compel obedience and instill fear in the majority of party members. Political thuggery is a serious threat to democratic consolidation in Nigeria because it scares credible candidates, including women from active participation in democratic process. It has also given rise to the militarization of the political space with the consequent proliferation of arms, ammunition and other dangerous weapons purportedly for acts of criminality, including thuggery. This, in turn, has resulted in many unresolved politically motivated assassinations across the country, which diminishes the essence and value of the country's evolving democratic culture.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses in detail the menace of political thuggery in Nigeria's democratic system. It critically examines the reasons for the widespread incidences of thuggery in the country, especially during political campaigns for elective offices, and periods of general elections, and even re-run elections. This ugly phenomenon in Nigeria's political life poses a serious threat to democratic consolidation in the country, which is one of the cherished goals of the transformation agenda of the present administration. In February 2012, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan stated during the People's Democratic Party (PDP) gubernatorial rally in Cross River state that his administration would conduct the 2015 general elections "without the security (personnel) carrying guns". According to President Jonathan,

We want to make sure that we conduct election in Nigeria without the police, we want to conduct election without security people carrying guns, we want a situation where Nigerians will queue up, vote and go back home, the votes are counted and nobody is cheated so that at the end of elections, there will not be all kinds of litigation (Fadeyi, 2012:11).

During his visit to New York, United States of America in September, 2014 President Jonathan once again reassured Nigerians, and the international community at large, that the general elections of 2015 in Nigeria would be conducted in accordance with global best practices. This, according to him, is to further strengthen the country's democratic institutions. President Jonathan further stated that this resolve to conduct free, fair and credible elections in 2015 "is in keeping with his administration's dedication to openness and transparency in the conduct of public affairs" (See Taiwo-Obalonye, 2014:8). The optimism of President Jonathan about the possibility of conducting peaceful, orderly and violent-free elections in 2015 devoid of heavy presence of security personnel appears to be a tall dream. This is in consideration of the history of general elections in Nigeria since independence and, more so, the persistence of the culture of political violence in which political thugs play dominant role. For instance, the former Vice President, Atiku Abubakar observed in 2005 that "our democracy is corrupt". He frankly admitted that "the electoral system that brought him and others into office was largely fraudulent and imperfect". (Lere and Akor, 2005:1). Atiku Abubakar was the Vice President of Nigeria between 1999 and 2007.

Despite the fact that the 2011 General Elections have been adjudged to be freer and fairer than the past ones, the prevalence of political violence during the primaries and during the elections evidently showed that the country has not institutionalized an ideal democratic culture. The imperfection associated with the electoral system largely emanate from the desperation of some politicians for political offices. Such politicians often engage the services of thugs to achieve fraudulent victory through the manipulation of the electoral process. During the presidential campaign of 2011, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan warned politicians against violence. He stated that his political ambition or that of any politician is not worth the blood of any Nigerian. He specifically reminded the youths [who were often employed as political thugs by desperate politicians] that no one's "personal ambition is worth the blood of another" (Ologun, 2011:3). Moreover, in spite of the stringent law forbidding hoodlums from engaging in thuggery and perpetrating violence during the 2011 General Elections, yet there were many reported incidences of political violence across the country. For example, the 2010 Electoral Act stipulated a maximum of ₦1 million or 12 months imprisonment for anyone who infringes on the Act. (FRN, 2011:22-23). The 2010 Electoral Act was made more stringent on the issue of political thuggery because it was believed that previous laws for checkmating electoral violence were weak, and thus did not adequately address the issue of political thuggery. The widespread incidences of thuggery which often characterize Nigeria's general elections, and even re-run elections, constitute a serious impediment towards achieving free, fair and credible elections. Thus, the issue of electoral violence largely perpetrated by thugs in furtherance of the political ambition of their sponsors remain an intractable problem in the country's electoral process. The extent to which political thuggery poses a serious threat to free, fair and credible elections and, by extension, frustrates the effort towards democratic consolidation in Nigeria is the focus of this study.

The Meaning of Political Thuggery

The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1995:1031) defined thug as "any person who uses violence or brutality". Thuggery, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Current English (1998:952), simply means "violent act or behaviour by ruffians". Also, Lawal cited in Idris (2011:1) views thuggery as criminalization of politics. He noted that when politics is criminalized, it is left in the hands of ruffians, thugs and hooligans, while the good citizens are scared away. On the whole, political thuggery is characterized by robbery, intimidation, gangersterism, murder, physical assault and often involves physical combat

between two opposing gangs or groups which ultimately generates inter-personal or group hostilities. Since the pre-independence General Elections of 1959 politics in Nigeria has been characterized by thuggery and violence.

Reasons for the Prevalence of Political Thuggery in Nigeria

The reasons for the prevalence of political thuggery in Nigeria's body politic include the following:

(1) Unemployment

Unemployment has been identified as a major social, economic and political problem in Nigeria. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, unemployment in Nigeria increased to 23.9 percent in 2011, and the situation did not substantially improve in 2012 and 2013. In view of this, the Bureau described the situation as 'potentially dangerous'. More than 60 percent of millions of unemployed Nigerians are said to be between the ages of 15 and 44 (Akanbi, 2012:28). Thus, youth unemployment is said to near the 50 percent mark. The existence of this huge 'army' of idle hands was perhaps the reason why President Jonathan predicted the possibility of a revolution in Nigeria (Oni, 2011:21). Unemployment exposes many youths to certain criminal activities, for example, political thuggery, kidnapping, robbery, and hired assassinations etc. The President of the South South citizens resident in Oyo state, Chief Michael Obasahon observed that as a result of frightening unemployment in the country Nigeria is "sitting on a keg of gun powder". He advised the government to embark on "massive job creations" so as to stem the tide of pervasive social insecurity in the country (Adeniyi, 2011:17). Unemployment and its associated economic deprivation, frustration and helplessness lures many youths into political thuggery which is not only a criminal act, but a dangerous misadventure.

(2) The Phenomenon of Godfatherism in Nigerian Politics

Historically, the phenomenon of godfatherism can be traced to the orthodox churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church. Ideally, the new converts of the Christian faith were tutored through a series of catechismal classes, where the sacred nuances of the church liturgy, Christian way of life, fundamentals of biblical teachings were inculcated into the new converts. When satisfied that such a person had sufficient knowledge of the way of Christ, baptismal session was arranged (Odivwri, 2003:4). The new convert was expected to have a guarantor, appropriately referred to as the god father. The god father was expected to oversee, supervise and guide the actions of the convert now appropriately referred to as godson or god daughter. In the context of Nigerian politics, the god father is the man or woman who has enormous goodwill and respect of the people, so much that his belief system represents those of his people (Odivwri, 2003:47). The god father also has considerable wealth as well as social and political connections and influence with which he tilts situations and opportunities in his favour and that of his followers. Moreover, in contemporary Nigerian politics, many god fathers maintain army of thugs who intimidate political opponents, snatch ballot boxes during elections and play other key roles in manipulation of election results in accordance with the wishes of the god father. Okohue (2011:1) stated that since the return of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 the god-fathers have remained a force to be reckoned with. The fear of the godfathers, according to him, was the beginning of wisdom especially in their political territories. He noted that no contestant of political office could achieve his ambition without the blessing of the god father. He concluded that the roles of the god fathers in the country's

political environment were as important, if not more important, than that of the electorate. This is especially in the manipulation of the electoral process in favour of their choice of candidates. In 2010, for instance, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Mr. Ogbonna Onovo raised alarm that candidates for the February 6 gubernatorial election and their godfathers in Anambra state had procured arms, ammunition and other dangerous weapons with which they intended to rig the election. The IGP also revealed that some of the candidates also procured fake mobile police uniforms ostensibly to disguise the true identity of their thugs (Uzendu and Akparanta, 2010:1). In South South geo-political zone, particularly in Bayelsa state, political thugs were said to operate as rival cult groups either in favour or against a particular godfather (political leader). On November 8, 2011, for instance, five persons were reportedly killed in a shootout traceable to the attempt by Governor Timpriye Sylva and his rivals to control cult groups in the state, preparatory to the November 19 PDP primaries and February 11 governorship election (Ejim and Mmuta, 2011:1). Thus, the phenomenon of godfatherism has been largely responsible for the prevalence of political thuggery and the subversion of the electoral integrity of the country. Falade (2010:39) observed that:

While the electoral body (INEC) has been receiving knocks for elections gone wry in Nigeria, it is a known fact that the problems of rigging, violence, ballot snatching and ballot stuffing and other forms of election malpractices, as well as police collaboration with political thugs, are well beyond the electoral body, or the person who chairs the commission (Falade, 2010:39).

It is the godfathers who recruit, finance and empower the political thugs who engage in political violence and manipulation of the electoral process to satisfy the wishes of their sponsors.

(3) The Desperation or ‘Do Or Die’ Politics among Politicians

The desperation among some Nigerian politicians to win elections and occupy political offices by all means is a major cause of the prevalence of political thuggery and violence in the body politic of the country. The desperation or “do or die” politics became more worrisome since the return to civil rule in 1999. Fabowale (2011:12) accurately observed that:

In Nigeria, politics is not a game. It is war. The blood-stained pages of the nation’s political annals, its do-or-die character exemplified by thuggery, violence, blackmail and vendetta that define political behaviour of stakeholders all testify to this (Fabowale, 2011:12).

The do-or-die politics of the country is largely responsible for series of politically motivated assassinations across the nation of which many of them could not be successfully investigated and resolved. To minimize the incidences of political violence exemplified by dastard acts of thuggery and achieve electoral integrity in Nigeria, there is need to remove the basis of political desperation or political ‘do or die’. This entails preventing any group of people from having too much power and access to national resources and privileges which they then hesitate to relinquish and would rather preserve than respect any electoral and institutional conventions (Falana, 2009:31). However, Dudley (1973) observed that in a pluralistic society like Nigeria, the problem of competition for limited resources seems to compound the problem of political instability, as competition takes ethno-religious-cum-regional dimensions. This accentuates the problem of political violence in the country often perpetrated by thugs during elections.

(4) Impact of Urban Violence and Gangersterism

The existing culture of urban violence and gangersterism in Nigerian cities has raised the crescendo of political thuggery in the country. As a result of the existence of various social gangs in urban cities whose stock in trade is stoking violence at slightest opportunity, it has been easy for desperate politicians to engage their services as thugs. The notable gangs include the secret cult groups in tertiary institutions, touts that abound in most motor parks, Area Boys in Lagos, 'Yankalare' and 'Yandaba' in some cities in the North particularly in Kano and Bauchi, and some militant groups in Niger Delta region etc. The Nigerian Compass Editorial (February 3, 2011:10) lamented that "Nigerian politicians are still relying on crude methods in their quest for political power." The paper specifically referred to Bayelsa state where it stated that desperate politicians allegedly engaged in an unhealthy competition for thugs who would help them actualize their ambitions for 2011 elections, and were spending fortunes for that purpose. The paper observed that the scramble for thugs had given the impression that the politicians were preparing for war and not election. Thus, the availability of various groups of idle men and gangsters in many urban cities in the country provides opportunity for the recruitment of thugs. Besides, desperate politicians eagerly seek their services in order to achieve their inordinate political ambitions.

(5) Lack of Internal Party Democracy

This is one of the major problems that have encouraged political thuggery in Nigeria's political environment. Lack of internal democracy within a political party entails that a powerful clique within the party may hijack the party's leadership and structure, and arbitrarily takes party decisions and actions in its favour, and to the detriment of popular will of the larger membership. Omeje (2010:33) observed that internal party democracy is one issue that has consistently eluded Nigerian democracy in virtually all the four republics the country has had since independence. He noted that political parties have always been hijacked at all levels by powerful potentates who impose loyal clients, sychophants and bootlickers as candidates for elections. The absence of internal party democracy encourages utter disregard to the popular will of the majority of party members. It creates the tendency to enthrone candidates by the so-called "consensus method", which is an act of impunity and arbitrariness. The former Chairman, defunct National Electoral Commission (NEC), Professor Humphrey Nwosu has stated that the emergence of political leaders through 'consensus' hinders democratic process. He noted that "a situation where few individuals impose leaders on the majority through consensus would in the long run lead to chaos and conflict in the polity" (See Aminu, 2008:9). During the People's Democratic Party (PDP) 2006 presidential primaries, President Olusegun Obasanjo and his clique imposed Alhaji Umar Musa Yar' Adua as the flag bearer of the party for the 2007 general elections. President Obasanjo was, no doubt, aware of Yar' Adua's debilitating health condition, but was bent to use him to protect the interests of his clique in power. Yar' Adua, a gentle man and trustworthy leader, however, was incapable of national leadership due to ill health. As President, his long absence from office due to ill health and eventual death on May 5, 2010 nearly resulted in national chaos. It was the "doctrine of necessity" initiated by the National Assembly which paved the way for swearing in Dr. Goodluck Jonathan as the Acting President and subsequently the President of Nigeria. Thus, it was the National Assembly in its wisdom on the issue of doctrine of necessity that saved the country's democracy.

Besides the PDP, other notable political parties, such as the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) etc

lack internal party democracy. For instance, the ACN's primaries for the 2011 general elections were described as "scandalous" due to widespread imposition of candidates (*Nigerian Tribune Editorial, January 17, 2011:17*). This ignited convulsive protests and bloody conflicts between opposing groups within the party in some states. It also resulted in extensive use of thugs by some candidates to achieve their political ambitions. In Edo State, for example, 10 persons were killed during the January 2011 ACN primaries across the state (Osehobo, 2011:17). Thus, lack of internal party democracy accentuates the problem of thuggery in Nigerian politics. Many politicians often resort to "self help" when they are convinced that party rules and regulations guiding primary elections and other vital issues would be subverted by the clique that has hijacked the party. The politics of exclusion and hijacking of political parties by a clique sometimes results in the use of thugs to unleash mayhem on the party members and possible destruction of party properties. It was partly as a result of this scenario within the political parties that the INEC Chairman, Prof. Atahiru Jega raised alarm in March 2011 that "the political class remains a threat to peaceful polls" (Anucha, 2011:13). Consequent upon this prevailing ugly situation in the polity, the House of Representatives on 30th September, 2014 resolved to give the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) express powers to 'request' for deployment of soldiers during election in the country (Onochie, Jimoh and Doka, 2014:5). This is to protect the voters from possible harm, safeguard electoral materials and ultimately guarantee free, fair and transparent elections.

Moreover, lack of internal party democracy in Nigerian political parties has largely contributed to massive defections by politicians from one party to another, and the pervading tension being witnessed in the build-up of general elections of 2015. Since 2013, Nigerian political parties particularly the two major parties – the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressives Congress (APC) have witnessed massive defections of their members in opposite directions Eze and Emmanuel, 2014:6). This is partly a display of political opportunism, and partly a reaction to the unfavourable decisions of godfathers and cliques that control party structures. Besides, Adighibe (2014:18) rightly observed that defection is akin to espionage in Nigerian politics. He noted that "when a politician enters the inner sanctum of a party to steal its secrets and transfer same to opposition, it creates an atmosphere of vendetta which is currently the bane of our society". Massive defections across parties as witnessed in contemporary Nigerian politics portend grave danger to the country's democratic experience. It provokes inter-personal acrimony across party lines. Defecting politicians are known to harbour grievances and bitterness over unresolved issues in their former parties. This accentuates inter-party hostility and violence in Nigerian politics. The thugs are largely the perpetrators of political violence in this circumstance in obedience to the wishes of their sponsors.

(6) The Negative Impact of Money Politics

The enthronement of money politics in Nigeria's political arena is the major cause of political thuggery in the country. As politicians spend a lot of money to secure political offices, they employ the services of thugs to ensure the realization of their political ambitions either by fair or foul means. A veteran politician and member of the PDP, Chief Ebenezer Babatope observed that "...what is bad within the political system that we operate today is the criminal use of money". He lamented that unlike in the past, "people are paid these days for coming to a party convention". This, according to him, is a sad development (Ogunaike, 2010:9). Similarly, Cardinal Olubunmi Okogie stated that politics in Nigeria does not mean what it is in either Britain or America. Politics in Nigeria, according to him means "lining up one's

pocket with the people's money". This, he argued, is the reason why it is 'do or die' affair. (Dadzie, 2010:38). In the same perspective, the former INEC Chairman, Professor Maurice Iwu has faulted the character of Nigerian politics which he stated lacked ideology and principle. He also stated that the perception of political office as easy access to wealth was the prevailing expression of the character of democracy and elections in the country. This has encouraged the prevailing act of thuggery which enables politicians to manipulate elections and to assume or retain political offices at the detriment of the society. (Edike, 2008:7) However, Anifowose cited in Salarni (1994:76) has noted that violence has been used by groups seeking power, by groups holding power, and by groups in the process of losing power.

Indeed, politics appears to be the most lucrative business in contemporary Nigerian society. In view of this, some persons who occupy political offices make extensive use of thugs to sustain their power irrespective of the wishes of the majority of the people. The political godfathers as well sustain their influence and demands on their sponsored candidates through the use of thugs. In Anambra state during the era of Governor Chris Ngige, his disagreement with his political godfather, Chris Uba resulted in unprecedented destruction of government properties by thugs allegedly sponsored by Chris Uba. Achife, Maduforo and Mumeh (2004:1) reported that as a result of bad blood between the two men, and the failure of Abuja to reconcile them, thugs laid siege to the state for more than a week and continued their mission of terror and destruction unhindered, and eventually taking the mayhem to the country areas. They noted that the governor's office, the seat of power was not spared in the orgy of violence unleashed by the rampaging thugs. Thus, Nnamani (2003:38) observed that the godfather is simply a self-seeking individual out there to use the government for his own purposes. He noted that the cost of the incidence of godfather's is enormous to the state as what actually obtains is that when the incumbent godson is at pains to satisfy the whims and caprices of the godfather, among other competing demands on the scarce resources of the government, the interest of the larger number is savagely undermined. As conflict might arise between the godfather and the godson over the appropriation of resources, the incumbent godson faces the risk of instability in his administration. In most cases, according to Nnamani, the godfather dares to terminate the oxygen of the godson's administration (Nnamani, 2003:45). Thugs are usually employed by godfathers for this purpose.

Thuggery as a Threat to Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Political thuggery poses a serious threat to democratic consolidation in Nigeria in the following ways:

1. Thuggery leads to the militarization of the political environment. This scares away credible and patriotic individuals from active participation in the democratic process. This hinders the effort towards consolidation of democracy in the country.
2. It contributes immensely in the proliferation of arms and ammunition in the country which, in many cases, are employed for rigging elections and harassment and intimidation of political opponents of the sponsors of the thugs.
3. Thuggery has contributed in no little measure in creating the unfortunate scenario in most of the states whereby only the political party in power calls the shot in public affairs, and ignores or muzzles the opposition. Omotosho (2012:9) in reference to the Southwest Nigeria decried the existing political situation resembling that of one party state in the geo-political zone. He lamented that 'the one party nature of our states makes our politics look like the power plays (rather than politics) of a criminal gang

dedicated not only to committing crimes but also to escaping the appropriate punishment.’ Thuggery plays a vital role in sustaining such undemocratic culture.

4. Moreover, thuggery has been largely responsible for the evolution and sustenance of violent political culture in the country. This has emboldened some desperate politicians to threaten and actually resort to violence when they fear that they might lose elections. For instance, the Osun State Governor, Rauf Aregbesola was reported to have called on the APC supporters to attack security agents with charms and amulets during the August 9, 2014 governorship election in the state (see Wahab, 2014:48). The alleged calls for the use of amulets in the voting arena could possibly scare away large number of voters and thereby derail the peaceful transition of power through credible election. It is in view of this comment credited to the governor that he was described as “one of the dangers of democracy in Nigeria” (See Wahab, 2014:48).

However, a few days before the election in Osun state, the Director General of the National Orientation Agency, Mr. Mike Omeri advised the politicians in the state to “imbibe spirit of tolerance to ensure continued peaceful coexistence of the society”. He pointed out the need for stakeholders to embrace peace and to impress it on their followers (See Oraniyola, 2014:57).

5. Thuggery is a tool for the perpetration of political violence and subversion of democratic order. Some political leaders employ the services of thugs to intimidate majority of party members in order to impose candidates during party primaries, and to ensure that such candidates win the general elections. Omotosho (2012:9) observed that it is as a result of the desperation of some politicians and their highhandedness that “there is virtually a total lack of democratic process in our political parties”. He noted that the consequence has been that “instead of a process producing a candidate genuinely interested in working for the people, we have rigged process that produce favoured and invariably incompetent candidates”. This situation discourages the consolidation of democracy in the country.
6. It also discourages the electorate or voters from exercising their franchise and thereby creates the unacceptable situation of ‘low turnout’ during general elections. In the governorship elections conducted in five states namely Kogi, Cross River, Adamawa, Bayelsa and Sokoto states there were reports of low turnout of voters in most cases. For example, in Cross River governorship election, there were 1,242,916 registered voters. The total votes cast were 501,117 votes, thus representing less than 50 percent of the total registered voters (Okoro 2012:6). This was partly as a result of fear of the menace of thugs. It then necessitated the deployment of large number of security personnel to safeguard the lives of voters and as well guarantee the peaceful conduct of the elections.

In Bayelsa state, for instance, 15,000 security agents and 575 observers were deployed for the governorship election of 2012, while 24,464 security personnel and 800 observers monitored that of Kogi state (Ombe and Ehikioya, 2012:5; Ganagana, 2011:14). Similarly, during the June 21, 2014 governorship election in Ekiti state, 12,000 policemen were deployed. Also, in the August 9, 2014 governorship election in Osun state, 73,000 security personnel were reportedly deployed to protect the electorate, the adhoc staff, and to secure the logistic materials of INEC. According to the National Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) Commandant in-charge of Operations, Mr. Evans Chidi the heavy presence of security personnel during the election was so make sure that “miscreants and people that have been

defined as enemies of this country did not infiltrate into Osun state to truncate the exercise” (See Gbolagunte, 2014:13). The palpable fears of the thugs as well as the heavy presence of security personnel during elections, no doubt, represent a perversion of the true culture of democracy.

CONCLUSION

Since Nigeria’s independence in 1960, political thuggery has constituted a recurring problem in attempts to organize free, fair and credible elections in the country. Although the 2011 General Elections were described as “a giant stride in terms of evolving a credible electoral process”, nevertheless, acts of thuggery manifested prominently during the elections. This clearly demonstrated that some desperate politicians often employ the services of thugs to harass and intimidate political opponents and to manipulate the electoral process in their favour. Besides, opportunistic politicians employ thugs to scare away the electorate and overwhelm opponents in the ding-dong war of Nigerian party primaries and general elections. The pervasive acts of thuggery in the body politic of Nigeria constitute a serious impediment in the effort of government to achieve democratic consolidation in the country. It is in recognition of this problem that the INEC Chairman, Prof. Attahiru Iega stated that “the key issue is that there are systemic security challenges in Nigeria”. He argued that unless INEC makes adequate security arrangement these challenges [particularly violence often unleashed by thugs] can undermine the electoral process (Oladimeji and Ezea, 2014:2).

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