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Armed Politics, Small Arms Control and Electoral Violence in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The article interrogates the impact of armed politics on small arms control and electoral violence in Nigeria. It conceptualises armed politics as a form of political and electoral competition where the deployment of violence and coercion is decisive in securing electoral victory. Based on secondary data collected through books, reports, journal and newspaper articles and interpreted using both thematic and content analysis, the argument is that Nigeria's electoral democracy may aptly be described as characterised by armed politics since the process of political leadership emergence is mainly through the bullets and guns rather than the ballot. The paper makes three claims regarding how the logic of armed politics affects small-arms governance, control and political legitimacy. Firstly, the legitimacy of the electoral and democratic process is contested, and people's influence on the actions of emergent political leaders is weak, resulting in continued dependence on armed actors for support and victory in elections. Secondly, political accountability to the people on the part of the ruling elites, including accountability in issues of small arms control, is generally weak and lacking. Lastly, emerging through bullets and guns adds further twists to the democratic process of controlling weapons in post-electoral victory and leadership with implications for the proliferation of small arms in Nigeria.

Key Words: Armed politics; electoral violence; leadership emergence; small arms control; small arms proliferation.

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INTRODUCTION

Electoral violence is a global phenomenon, particularly prevalent in Asia, the Middle East and Africa (Birch and Muchlinski, 2020). In sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria is categorised among countries at risk of electoral violence (Birch and Muchlinski 2020, p.228). Acts of violence causing death and destruction connected to the conduct of elections have been part of the democratic transition in Nigeria since 1999. Beginning in 2003, elections in Nigeria have become more brutal and fraudulent. The emergence and use of armed cult groups defined the character of violence and rigging in the 2003 election such that the election was described in local parlance as "carry-go" (Ikpe, 2015, p.101). The concept of carry-go raises questions about the state of helplessness of the electorate to determine who governs them through voting because of entrenched structures of electoral manipulation and violent rigging. In short, it means there is virtually no need for voting since the winner of the election is already known or foreclosed. These fraudulent trends and irregularities continued in the 2007 elections. Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, the presidential candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) who was eventually declared winner of the 2007 election, admitted publicly that the election that brought him to power was massively rigged and characterised by widespread violence. Consequently, President Yar'Adua promised to reform Nigeria's electoral process and subsequently set up the Justice Mohammed Uwais Panel to recommend ways of achieving credible, fair and violence-free polls in the country (Oyekami, 2013). Notwithstanding this effort, the country's risks of electoral violence persisted as violence did not decrease in subsequent elections in 2011, 2015 and 2019.

Some accounts suggested that 800 people died and 65 000 were displaced in Nigeria in 2011 due to electoral violence in different parts of the country (Carl and Jide Ojo, 2014, p.173). The 2019 election was bloodier than that of 2015. According to the reports of civil society organisations, which monitored the 2019 elections, about 626 people died in 2019 due to election-induced violence, a casualty figure that is comparatively higher than the 106 deaths recorded in 2015 (Sanni, 2019). The 2023 general elections were also not free of violence and rigging. Lagos, Kano and Rivers States were widely characterised by violence and intimidation of voters, including voter suppression by state and non-state armed actors. In Rivers State, for example, the active connivance of state security personnel with an ad-hoc staff of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) in different parts of the state underlined the disruption of the collation of election results during the February 25, 2023 presidential election.

Similarly, in Lagos state, electoral violence took an ethnic dimension, especially before the governorship election, where Igbo voters were targeted for

attacks and intimidation. The attacks manifested in mob actions and killings of the Igbos and targeted locking and burning of Igbo-owned shops. For example, voters were flogged in the Lagbasa and Ado primary schools in Ajah, Lagos State, during the governorship election (Centre for Democracy and Development, CDD, 2023). Generally, "voter suppression, voter intimidation and the destruction or theft of election materials predominantly by political party agents and politically aligned thugs were recorded across all six geopolitical zones of the country" in the March 18, 2023 governorship elections (see CDD, 2023, p.5). Some reports of civil society organisations, for example, the K Impact Development Initiative, suggested that 24 people died during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria due to the violent activities of state and non-armed groups (see Biriowo, 2023).

Scholars identify the increasing involvement of state and non-state armed actors as a denominator of electoral malpractices and violence and argue that their negative role more or less abrogates the electorate (Adebanwi and Obadare, 2011; Collier and Vincente, 2012; Chaturvedi, 2005). This is because guns and bullets tend to replace people's vote and voting power in Nigeria, influencing voting behaviour, electoral participation and election outcomes (Olonisakin, 2014). Taken together, the activities of both state and non-state armed actors in Nigerian elections reveal a deepening culture of militarisation of politics and raise essential questions about the legacy of fear, the legitimacy of the electoral process and the institutionalisation of liberal democratic values and corresponding modes of governance in Nigeria. Conceivably, the dynamics and consequences of militarisation imply that elections in Nigeria have assumed the character of warfare, and the specialists in war have gained the upper hand (Ake 1996, p.6). Drawing on Ake's (1996) viewpoint, it can be argued that armed cultists and professionally trained soldiers are the emergent specialists in election warfare in Nigeria that local politicians find indispensable in securing electoral victory. What this suggests is that whether armed personnel of the state (the police, army or armed non-state actors (political thugs of political parties and political elites) are employed in committing electoral fraud and perpetuating electoral violence, weapons play a significant role in determining who wins or loses elections in Nigeria.

Given this prevailing context of armed violence and the definitive role of weapons during elections, Nigeria's electoral democracy may aptly be described as characterised by "armed politics." The concept of armed politics conveys the notion that election in Nigeria is synonymous with war, and those with superior armament and firepower capability are potential winners. Yet, by its very nature, character and expression, armed politics has significant implications for democratisation, impeding small arms control and emboldening perpetrators of

electoral violence. The interactions of these dynamics are relatively analysed and understood in the literature on electoral violence in Nigeria, thereby affecting the formulation and implementation of appropriate policies and reforms aimed at disarming electoral competition in the country.

This article seeks to achieve three main objectives. First, it interrogates how the logic of armed politics generates economic and political dynamics in ways that impede small arms control and engenders arms proliferation in Nigeria. Second, it investigates how the contradictions of armed politics impact the political will of the emergent political leaders to deal with armed actors who engage in election rigging. Finally, it explores how armed politics diminishes vertical accountability, that is, accountability of the ruling political elites to the people, including accountability in small arms governance and regulation.

The article is structured as follows. The introduction analyses the nature and manifestation of the problems of electoral violence. The next section reviews studies on electoral violence and the point of departure presented as the core argument and contribution to the literature. Section three explains the evolution of armed politics in Nigeria through the prism of the postcolony as advanced by Achille Mbembe, the Cameroonian political economist and philosopher. Section four presents the methods of data collection and analysis. The following section focuses on the country's changing dynamics of armed electoral politics, arguing that it has been an integral part of Nigeria's electoral process since political independence in 1960 but had evolved and consolidated in the context of a recent attempt at democratisation, which began in the 1990s. The sixth and seventh sections explain how armed politics impacts and complicate small-arms governance, ultimately reinforcing the proliferation of electoral violence and small-arms in Nigeria. The final section is the conclusion. It offers some policy recommendations for addressing the phenomenon of armed politics in Nigeria.

The Determinants and Implications of Electoral Violence

There is a substantive body of literature on electoral violence, which continues to grow. The literature conceives electoral violence as a "coercive force, directed towards electoral actors and objects, that occurs in the context of electoral competition" (Birchand and Muchlinski, 2017, p.2). By characterisation, electoral violence is connected to the electoral process and may be committed before, during or in the aftermath of elections. It takes different forms, including assassinating political opponents and voters, attacks on electoral personnel, arson, looting, ballot-stealing, ballot box snatching and armed attacks on voting and collation centres (Nwolise, 2007; Omotola 2010).

As the literature suggests, four thematic focus areas dominate the explanation of electoral violence. First, the preoccupation has been to understand and explain the motivations for the involvement of the local political elite in electoral violence. Findings suggest that as rational actors, the political elite employ coercion to rig elections, influence votes, or manipulate election outcomes primarily to attain their political goal of securing victory (Bashir et al. 2022; Bamidele, Rasak et al. 2022). Seymour and Frary's (1918) research shows that this motive has been historically contingent, noting, for example, that in the 18th century, state and non-state violence was critical to winning votes in England and the United States. Ancient Rome presents another illustrating historical example of the nexus between violence and electoral victory (see Kraetzschmar and Cavatorta, 2010, p.327). The historical backdrop and contemporary relevance of the use of violence in the 21st century suggest that there is continuity and change in electoral manipulations. What appears to be constant, however, is the motivation for violence. For example, while using non-state violent strategy to secure votes is rare in advanced democratic societies today, it continues to be a strategic tool by the political elite in emerging democracies because of its associated incentives. Researching electoral violence in the developing world, Ellman and Wantchekon (2000) found that an incumbent, while controlling more of the instruments of coercion, such as the army, can more effectively use the threat of violence to influence votes. This is called the dominance of the incumbency factor in Africa, where the incumbent has been "more associated with violence during elections than the opposition" (Onapajo, 2014, p.27).

The second line of argument in the literature raises questions about the structural conditions that facilitate the deployment of violence by the political elite in their quest to acquire power through unconventional means. The point here is that while the patronage-based explanation is essential in understanding the deployment of violence, the involvement of individuals such as political thugs, the youth and other state officials in electoral violence can be linked to conditions of poverty, corruption, unemployment and weak state institutions. In other words, the agency and the incentive structures that predispose people to electoral violence must be considered for a better understanding. In Nigeria, studies have drawn attention to the relationship between a patrimonial state and election violence, arguing that political corruption interacts with weak institutions to engender violent electoral politics. Indeed, studies show that Nigeria experiences a higher incidence of small arms proliferation and diffusion into society before each general election (Ashindorbe, 2018; Yoroms, 2010).

The third variant of the argument in the literature focuses on the link between ethnic and religious marginalisation and the outbreak of electoral violence.

For some scholars, the large-scale organised post-election violence in Kenya in 2007, which resulted in the death of 3000 people and attracted international attention, was due to perceived ethnic marginalisation. Studies in India have also noted the causal connection between the mobilisation of ethnoreligious identities and electoral violence. Based mainly on instrumentalist and primordial explanations, this body of literature suggests that ethnoreligious groups are both perpetrators and victims of electoral violence (see Kraetzschmar and Cavatorta, 2010; Wilkinson, 2004).

The fourth line of investigation addresses a variety of challenges posed by electoral violence to democratisation (Obi, 2011; Onapajo, 2014), national security (Kumar, 2015) or the evolution of democratic peace (Joshi, 2014). Some studies seek to explain the means of preventing or mitigating the impact of electoral violence (see Birch and Muchlinski, 2018; 2017; Nwaneri & Uwakwe, 2017).

The existing literature is relevant in understanding the causes and variations in electoral violence patterns and intensity in different cultural contexts. And an important insight that can be gained from the literature is that arms fuel electoral violence. As the case of Nigeria demonstrates, the weaponisation of elections has transformed electoral competition into armed politics or situations of war (Osaghae, 2019, p. 3), making political power increasingly flow from the barrels of the guns where armed actors play significant roles. However, what is insufficiently theorised is how armed politics affects political leaders' responses to small-arm governance and their implications for electoral violence in Nigeria. This line of research has begun to attract scholarly attention elsewhere, for example, Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos's (2013) interrogation of what implications the political involvement of paramilitary groups in Colombian elections have for the possible elimination of these groups. The core empirical finding of Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos is that because the paramilitary group constitutes an incentive structure for the political elite to access power, they find it challenging to eliminate them from society. However, the dynamics and transformation of paramilitary groups into political parties have their logic for state formation and democratisation process and need more research (Marshall, 2016; Lyons, (2016). Drawing on the work of Acemoglu, Robinson and Santos and the theory of the post-colony, this article contributes to the existing literature by analysing the challenges posed by armed politics to small arms control and peaceful conduct of elections in Nigeria.

The Theory of Postcolony and the Evolution of Armed Politics in Nigeria

To effectively situate the phenomenon of armed politics within the theoretical prism of the Postcolony, there is a need to operationalise armed politics. The

concept of armed politics refers to a form of political and electoral competition where the deployment of violence and coercion is decisive in securing electoral victory, and the formality of voting merely legitimises the election process. Consequently, a key characteristic and manifestation of armed politics is that voters merely vote but do not choose (Nyiayaana, 2019). This is because reliance on tools of violence determines who loses or wins in electoral contests. In other words, the violent simply take it by force, suggesting that the specialists of violence have more chances of winning and governing the country at all levels of political leadership. This objective character of electoral and democratic politics in Nigeria reproduces contradictions along the line of small arms proliferation before, during and after elections. Armed politics, therefore, renders even the introduction of electronic devices like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), INEC Election Result Viewing Portal (IReV) and electronic transmission of results insignificant in securing and validating the votes of the electorate as the 2023 election showed.

As part of Nigeria's political culture, the phenomenon of armed politics did not emerge in a historical vacuum. Its roots lie in the legacy and political economy of the British colonial state, a state which, at independence, transformed into what Achille Mbembe conceptualised as the postcolony . Mbembe (2001, 1992) developed the theory of the postcolony to explain the transition from the violence of European colonisers to the violence of the post-colonial elite in Africa. The centrality of the postcolony is that the nature of the post-colonial state and the arbitrary use of state power tend to reinforce domination, the privatisation of state power and the constraints imposed on popular political participation in ways consistent with the motivations of colonial violence and exploitation. Mbembe's notion of commandment precisely illustrates the point that the ideology of the coloniser coincides with that of the post-coloniser. Accordingly, Mbembe (2001) argues that "although the post-colonial ruler was not a total dictator, he did not hesitate to use violence, silence dissent, vanquish rebellions, or to stage coups d'état (pp. 42-3).

Applying Mbembe's theoretical formulation, the idea of armed politics in Nigeria conceptually relates to a coup d'état against the Nigerian people in exercising their democratic rights to choose their leaders during elections freely. Not the least because, in demonstrating authoritative power, the political elite are not reluctant to deploy political violence against voters to win elections at all costs and achieve their broader aim, which is to gain power for the primitive accumulation of wealth and social prestige. Consequently, the premium on power and the struggle to capture the state have intensified in post-colonial Africa (Ake, 1996). Yet, the struggle by the elite to capture the state through violence

and the struggle between and among the elite to capture one another has its contradictions and ramifications. It is socially implicated in the activities of the military, the police and non-state actors as compradors and victims of electoral violence. In the process of privatising state power through the conversion of their coercive state authority into a tool for the denial of the electorate's voting rights, state security personnel create conditions which conduce to armed politics and the disempowerment of the people, both of which are mutually constitutive.

On the other hand, the agency and role of armed cultists and youths reflect the post-colony's crucial logic. Although cultists are rewarded with material gifts and more weapons by the political elite, the actions of the cultists reinforce their disempowerment and ultimately halt the democratisation process. Mbembe calls these logics chaotic plurality. Reflecting on Mbembe's notion of 'chaotic plurality', Perry (2007) argues that it models a multiplicity of forces in the postcolony that do not exist side by side but instead compete, constantly seeking to interrupt, contest, and protect themselves from each other (p.244). Relating it to the context of the Nigerian electoral process, we find that the complex interaction of political elites, security personnel and non-state armed actors as spaces of power critical to leadership emergence is relevant to understanding the determinants of the mobilisation of armed violence before, during and after elections in Nigeria. Put another way, weapons' power and the calculus of violence remain central to securing political victory in electoral competitions and leadership emergence. Armed politics, therefore, have a dynamic character rooted in complex forms of state malfunctioning in Nigeria.

Methodology for the Study

The methodology adopted in this article for data collection is qualitative in approach. Observations of electoral violence, and interactions and discussions with some non-actors who have been involved in electoral violence constituted key qualitative data sources. Furthermore, the residual knowledge of the author derived from observations of electoral violence in local communities during elections provided valuable insights into the nature and implications of armed politics in Nigeria. Qualitative data collected from secondary sources such as reports of Non-governmental Organizations including that of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were also used. Other secondary data sources included books, journals and newspaper articles. The secondary data were analysed through content and thematic analysis, and findings suggest that electoral violence in Nigeria has evolved historically over time, including the dynamics of actors and the nature of weapons used in the execution of violent electoral politics. Some key works and reports such as the CDD election

report of 2023; Birch and Muchlinski (2020); Collier and Vicente (2012); Mkpae (2019); Sanni (2019); Hazen and Horner (2007), Nwolise (2007); and Yorom (2010) were central to the analysis, and themes, underscoring violence and the role of guns, bullets, state security officials and other armed non-state actors in the intimidation of voters and manipulation of election results emerged. Hazen and Horner's (2007) report, for example, highlighted the historical role and changing dynamics of the use of armed actors in the execution of electoral violence in Nigeria.

Historical Dynamics of Armed Politics in Nigeria

One of the ways in which armed politics drives electoral violence is weaponisation. The term weaponisation reflects the instrumental role of weapons in voter intimidation and electoral manipulations. As noted earlier, the dynamics of weaponisation and electoral violence are not new in Nigerian political history. It dates back to the first indigenously organised post-independence elections of 1964, marked by violence, the intensity of which was highly felt in the subsequent Western regional elections of 1965. The electoral violence of 1964 and 1965 contributed significantly to the military coups in 1966, leading to the collapse of the first democratic experiment in post-colonial Nigeria. Scholars have noted that during these early years of independence and up to 1983, weapons such as machetes were the primary instruments for intimidating voters and rigging elections. However, in 1999, when Nigeria joined the league of electoral democracies in the third wave of democratisation that swept across Africa, new dynamics of arming politics emerged. There was a transition from machetes to sophisticated weapons such as Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in executing political violence and thuggery. It is argued that before the 1999 general elections, local politicians and political parties acquired sophisticated arms to rig the election (Hazen & Horner, 2007; Lubeck, Vines, 2005; Joab-Peterside, 2005). For example, Rivers State was notorious, or to put it more appropriately, the precursor in the arming and use of cult groups in rigging elections, especially the 2003 election. Today, using armed cult groups for electoral malpractices has become a national embarrassment in Nigeria, a condition that evolved with the liberal democratisation process in the country in 1999. However, given the presence of the military, which organised and supervised the 1999 elections, the use of armed groups and arms in that election was mild. But, this was certainly not the case with the general elections of 2003 and 2007. Hazen and Horner (2007) and Awuse (2004) contend that the 2003 election was the most violent and characterised by the widespread use of arms and armed groups. As Vines (2005:356) has argued, "Since 2003, there has been a fundamental shift from traditional instruments – machetes, clubs and

knives – as tools of electoral violence in Nigeria to SALW mainly locally fabricated and imported pistols and a range of assault rifles." Accessibility to and use of superior weapon systems by the political elites were not unconnected with the global availability and spread of SALW witnessed in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War in 1989. In this sense, the transition to liberal democracy in Nigeria dovetailed into the changing nature of global politics of SALW control and the liberalisation of SALW trade witnessed since the end of the Cold War (Nyiayaana, 2021). These external dynamics partly impacted the militarisation of politics and the democratisation process in Nigeria. Joab-Peterside (2005) argues that "the process of democratic rule resulted in the militarisation of politics through the commodification of violence, the logic of which negates democracy" (p.45).

Key in this regard is what Vines (2005) calls "gunpowder politics", with implications for the proliferation and accumulation of arms and armed groups. For example, unable to retrieve weapons given to the youth by the political elite after each election cycle, the youth and armed groups held on to their weapons and used them to develop their economic support systems of self-help, such as kidnapping for ransom and oil theft, leading to the acquisition and further proliferation of even superior arms. Furthermore, and importantly, armed politics, as discussed in detail in the next section, also has consequences for the control of SALW by the political leadership due to their increasing dependence on armed non-state and state actors to win elections. The history of elections in Nigeria, especially since the 1990s, has seen elections equated with warfighting and a battle for life. President Obasanjo described the election as a do-or-die affair while campaigning for the election of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in April 2007. In the words of President Obasanjo, "This election is a do or die affair for me and the PDP. This election is a matter of life and death for the PDP and Nigeria" (Daily Trust, 2007). On the whole, apart from the June 12, 1993, presidential elections, which were widely accepted as free, fair and generally peaceful, post-independence elections in Nigeria have been marked by one form of violence or the other and are recently being exacerbated by the increasing use of state security operatives by the state elite at various levels of leadership to achieve their selfish political ambitions. By implication, the more violent elections become, the more weapons are needed with their political and social complications, as illustrated by the death toll in the 2019 elections and the dynamics of voter suppression witnessed in the 2023 general elections.

The Logic of Armed Politics and SALW Control

The phenomena of armed politics and small arms control are intertwined. Armed

politics have a constraining influence on small–arms governance and control in several ways. First, the legitimacy of the electoral and democratic process is at issue, and people's influence on the actions of emergent political leaders is weak. Second and related to this, is that political accountability on the part of ruling the elite is generally lacking in the political system, including accountability in small arms control. Not the least because emerging through bullets and guns adds further twists to the democratic process of controlling weapons in post–electoral victory and leadership by the political elite (Collier, 2010, p.39). Politicians' increasing dependence on armed groups to access and retain political power in Nigeria creates a problematic relationship between the state elite's control of armed groups and the effective exercise of the monopoly of control over the means of coercion by the state. The point is that the more the political elite continue to secure and look up to the services of armed groups to ensure political victory at the polls, the more the power of the political class to effectively address the issue of weapons proliferation decreases considerably. This is because weapons remain and have been crucial to the emergence of some of these political leaders in the first place. This inherent logic is very explicit: "Those who should be instrumental in pushing for action to limit the use of armed groups by politicians are the same politicians who benefit from their use" (Horner & Jennifer, 2007, p. 88).

Consequently, the internal logic of this divergence creates a broader dialectical negation in developing an effective response to small–arms control. This finds expression in the actions of the state elite in many ways. The practice of political co–optation of cultists or ex–militants into government through executive appointment or election further fuels small arms proliferation and electoral violence. Contrary to the reforms at containing and reducing the menace. As a grand strategic political permutation, for instance, those who control caches of weapons and foot soldiers, whether as local politicians, militants, ex–militant leaders or cultists and, can demonstrate the capacity and the will to commit political violence continue to enjoy the patronage of political parties and political leaders, not only for rigging elections but also as preferred candidates for elective positions and political appointments (Mbiede and Nyiayaana, 2022). In the aftermath of the victory of the PDP in the Rivers state governorship election of 2015, some of all the people that were appointed as Caretaker Chairmen of the 23 local governments in Rivers state in 2015 by the PDP–led government were either suspected chief cultists or alleged former militant leaders in their respective local government areas (Nyiayaana, 2017). As part of the patronage system of distributing political compensations in Nigeria, cultists are rewarded with political appointments, thus enabling them to occupy positions of authority and responsibility in government. The more significant issue is that this form of

compensation and empowerment consolidates the logic and dynamics of armed politics and the militarisation of democracy in Nigeria.

Crucially, and concerning small arms control, when cultists are appointed into political offices, it creates weak institutional contexts for either the initiation or the implementation of policy frameworks for combating armed cultists, cultism and associated arms proliferation questions. The failure and ineffectiveness of the 2004 Anti-Cult Law of Rivers State are illustrative. More recently, cult violence has escalated in Rivers State, and new dynamics and patterns of cult killings have emerged. Rather than the familiar patterns of inter-cult clashes in which members of the cult groups are often targeted for murder in their show of supremacy, today, cult groups invade local communities in Rivers State and indiscriminately kill any person and burn down houses. Indeed, cult violence has generally rendered local communities in Rivers State unsafe for habitation, especially in Ogoni communities. However, the Anti-Cult Law was enacted to complement the fight against cultism and its related dynamics of arms proliferation and insecurity in the state. A critical analysis of the implementation of the Rivers State Anti-Cult Law shows that it has been observed more in breach than obedience due mainly to party politics and the antagonistic activities of the political elite. The common knowledge is that the cult boys invading communities and killing innocent people in cold blood are the foot soldiers of the ruling political elite. Therefore, the elite is constrained to deploy the instruments of state coercion to curb the violent activities of the cult groups (Joab-Peterside et al. 2021).

To summarise the preceding point about weak institutional context, the argument is that the electoral process that throws up the political elite constrains their ability to effectively respond to armed violence as well as subject security personnel involved in electoral violence to diligent prosecution and punishment based on the instrumentalities of the law of the land. Thus, the legitimacy question rooted in the marginalisation of voters in exercising their sovereign rights in the choice and emergence of political leaders is inseparable from the more significant concerns about small arms control in post-election leadership and governance. Besides the issue of prosecuting security personnel and the cultists themselves, the political elite, who have been identified as the main sponsors of the cultists and political thugs in terms of supplying them with sophisticated weapons and financing their activities, have hardly ever been prosecuted by the state. The politicians appear to be bigger and stronger than the state. Indeed, they are the state themselves. For this reason, politicians tend to sponsor armed political thugs with utter impunity. Moreover, given that these armed political thugs are incidentally the private armies of politicians, they are often protected and preserved to intimidate political opponents and orchestrate political violence and

electoral gangsterism in the next rounds of elections.

It was unsurprising to find caches of weapons stockpiled in the Osun State Government House by Ibikunle Amosun, the former governor of the state, shortly after he stepped down from power in 2019. Some have argued that the weapons were imported for use by the governor and may not have been unconnected with the processes of manipulating the 2019 elections in the state. Similarly, during President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, the negative influence of party politics on the control of SALW was aptly demonstrated at the broader national level in Nigeria. Funds approved by the state to buy weapons to fight the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria's northeast region were diverted and shared with top Nigerian politicians in 2014 under the watch of the then President Jonathan as part of the effort to garner support for his re-election.

The President himself was the PDP candidate in the March 2015 presidential election. The strategic political permutation was that the diversion and use of the funds to finance the presidential and, more broadly, PDP campaign activities would enable the President to secure victory and return to power. Following the same logic, President Buhari refused in 2019 to assent to the Bill that sought to legalise electronic card readers, technological innovation in election management in Nigeria, generally considered relevant to curtailing electoral violence and the role of armed groups in Nigerian elections. In fact, contrary to the simplistic argument of President Buhari that the rejection of the Bill was due to the relatively short time between the conduct of the 2019 elections and the coming into force of the law, citing the ECOWAS Protocol, analysts note that the refusal to sign the Bill was based on the calculations of the opportunity cost of losing the 2019 presidential elections. Conceivably, both the actions of Jonathan in 2015 and Buhari in 2019 illustrated an important point that: "a major impediment to managing small arms proliferation and armed violence is the tendency of politicians to utilise this violence to their ends, coupled with the financial capacity of politicians to foment violence or buy political victory" (Horner & Jennifer, 2007, p. 88).

Armed Politics and Electoral Violence

There is also the issue of the increasing visibility of state armed actors, particularly military personnel deployed to provide security during elections. For some, the intimidating presence of these soldiers creates the impression of a country at war. However, the soldiers so deployed have also been used to intimidate voters and the opposition to promote the private electoral agendas of the ruling political elite with implications for electoral violence. In 2014, soldiers deployed to Ekiti state by the PDP-led government of President Goodluck Jonathan prevented

two governors of the All Progressives Congress Party (APC): Adams Oshiomhole of Edo State and Rotimi Amaechi of Rivers State, from entering Ado-Ekiti to participate in the APC governorship campaign rallies organised in support of the re-election of Governor Koyode Fayem of Ekiki state.

In some cases, the army had openly clashed with non-state armed actors, as in the Abonnema community in Rivers State during the House of Assembly and governorship elections on March 9, 2019. The result of the Abonnema battle was the death of a soldier and the internal displacement of the local population in the area. In a similar vein, one Dr Ferry Gberegbe, a lecturer at the Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic, Bori, who worked as a PDP Collation Officer, was allegedly killed in Ogoni by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) personnel for refusing to allow them to manipulate the election results in favour of the APC in the 2019 governorship election in the state. Again, reminiscent of the Ekiti experience of 2014, the military invaded the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Collation Centre in Port Harcourt. It disrupted the collation process of the governorship election results. The aim was to compromise the results in favour of the ruling APC (Mkpae, 2019). Indeed, the trend since 2003 has been that government at every level in Nigeria, and political parties alike engage the services of state and non-state armed groups in competitive election rigging and violence.

In 2023, state security personnel were deployed at different collation centres in Rivers State during the presidential election to disrupt the collation of results openly. As in Bori, Rivers State, the security personel carted away ballot boxes during the presidential election, while in some other places, like the creeks in Bayelsa state, armed militants prevented some people from casting their votes. Indeed, the activities of armed political thugs undermined the credibility and technological usefulness of the innovative solutions brought about by the introduction of the BVAS. The INEC had argued and demonstrated before the 2023 elections that the BVAS would enhance the transparency of election results, thereby inspiring trust and confidence of the electorate in the electoral process (Adewole, 2022; Itodo, 2022). It was noted that BVAS would accredit voters and transmit their votes automatically and electronically, so manual rigging of election results was impossible. In other words, INEC promised that the use and effectiveness of these technologies would render the role of armed tugs irrelevant in rigging elections. As already pointed out, the February Presidential and March Governorship elections 2023 proved otherwise. This is because fraud and rigging of the elections, which were facilitated by political thuggery and violence, defined the elections, with significant implications for voter apathy and low voter turn-out witnessed throughout the country, particularly in March 18

governorship elections. Voters felt there was no need to waste their time to vote when their votes would not count in the choice of the emergent winners.

CONCLUSION AND SOME POLICY OPTIONS

Since 1999, electoral competitions in Nigeria have gradually transformed into armed politics characterised by the deployment of violence to secure victory. The findings of this article suggest that the evolution and consolidation of armed politics since 1999 negatively correlate with the development of an adequate response to small arms proliferation and control in Nigeria. This is because continued dependence on armed actors and the centrality of the role of violence in leadership emergence in democratic elections undermines the legitimacy of the process and the people's influence on the actions of emergent political leaders. Consequently, political accountability to the people on the part of the ruling elites, including accountability in issues of small arms control, could be more robust. Furthermore, armed politics contributes to the proliferation and spread of weapons, electoral violence and criminal politics in the country. For example, bent on privatising state power and state resources, political elites must win elections and secure power and regime by all means, including the use of state and non-state armed actors. The emergent political elite, therefore, can be described as the new indigenous colonial overlords whose actions intersect with both armed non-state actors and security officers as indissoluble partners in electoral malpractices and electoral violence. It is against this background that Mbembe (2001) argues that in the post-colony, the public space is not singular as it is in the classic state but rather is constituted in many overlapping domains, "each having its logic yet liable to be entangled with other logics" (p. 104). Thus, the activities of non-state actors, state security personnel and the political elite are not mutually exclusive in creating structural conditions of armed politics and electoral violence.

Therefore, to find sustainable solutions to electoral violence in Nigeria, the policy must respond to the opportunistic and extractive behaviour of the political elite, security personnel and non-state armed actors in a combination of ways that seek to transform the political culture of violence and corrupt attitudes. One policy option in this regard is making party politics less attractive in reviewing the remuneration and benefits of elected officials and government appointees through legislation. This will help checkmate the elite's intense political struggle, including resorting to armed groups to manipulate elections and orchestrating electoral violence to capture the state and its instrumentalities of power for primitive acquisition tendencies. The possibility of politics of resistance by the political elite to restructuring political compensation and remuneration is consistently

highlighted as a critical challenge. This is because the ruling political elite is said to hold the 'knife and the yam' and are structurally and institutionally placed to counter policies undermining their parochial, private interests. This challenge can, however, be overcome through pressure and advocacy by civil society and intermittent but sustained campaigns and protests by the citizenry who have been systematically conscientized through political education. The major thrust of this policy is reorientation that seeks to pressure the political elite and transform both the behaviour of the political elite and the armed actors, be they state or non-state.

Finally, setting up a special Electoral Offences Commission charged with dealing with electoral offences will check the impunity of the elite and security personnel and minimise the role of non-state armed groups like cultists in elections. When armed thugs, state security officials, and their sponsors who unleash violence to rig elections know they will be sanctioned and severely punished, some deterrence would have been achieved. Some additional policy measures, like visa denial for political elites and all those involved in electoral frauds, as proposed by the United States, will complement national efforts to address armed politics. With these, the BVAS and IReV will be strengthened and relevant in preserving the sanctity of the people's vote and power. Overall, these policy measures will reduce the relevance and centrality of weapons' role in winning electoral contests and acquiring power in Nigeria and ensure the curtailment of electoral violence. In the long run, votes will ultimately replace the power of bullets and guns (armed politics) in the country's choice and emergence of political leadership.

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