Political Violence in Nigeria: The Role of the Church

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In Nigeria today, it seems that politics is synonymous to violence. Though there are many political parties with different ideologies in the country, some of them are found to engage in actions or words intended to hurt people. In fact, they go to the extent of using dangerous weapons to inflict injuries on perceived political opponents. In this respect, this paper establishes the fact that there is political violence in Nigeria and also examined some of the factors responsible for violence in Nigeria politics such as political environment, ethnicity or tribal politics, intolerance, the insincerity of our political leaders, and electoral fraud. In the same vein, critical criticism as a result of deep hatred for a party or person may also engender political violence in the form of words or utterances. The consequences of such political violence are enormous in every aspect of our national life, which would need the intervention of the church as a voice to save Nigeria and the world from the state of violence and the insurmountable problems attached. Though the church in this country has been playing significant roles, more has to be done to make a positive impact especially among the youths who are the leaders of tomorrow and unfortunately the instruments being used for this political violence. This paper adopted a qualitative research method, while data were collected through secondary sources and internet materials.

Keywords: politics, violence, the church and Nigeria

Introduction

There is no gainsaying about it, that political violence is prevalent in Nigeria. In fact, in the nation today, politics is synonymous to violence. We are yet to reach a stage where political tolerance is fundamental to peaceful coexistence. In Nigeria, there are many political parties with different ideologies on how to govern the country. There are struggles to gain influence and assume power by all means. They are all struggling to gain influence and get power by any means. These struggles for power result in violence. When one political party does not get what it desires, its members get involved in actions or words intended to hurt members of other political parties. Also included are attacks with the use of dangerous weapons like knives, guns, etc. to inflict injuries on perceived political opponents or critical criticism borne out of hatred for the person and political ideology of other person or political party.

According to Samuel, history is full of conflicts and violence, while some are recorded in history books, others have almost gone into extinction. He opines that some of these wars/violence were political in nature and others had an ethnic and religious undertone. But violence is still a continuous phenomenon. Violence, with the inclusion of political violence, is relatively a common type of human behaviour that occurs throughout the

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Although, people of any age could be involved in political violence, older adolescents and young adults are mostly involved. The effects are enormous on those who witness or experience it, but youths are especially susceptible to its harmful effects.3

Unfortunately, various programmes established by the government and non-governmental organisation aimed at preventing and eradicating political violence have been unsuccessful. Hence, the writing of this paper bothers what the church in Nigeria can do to stem the tide of political violence.

In view of these, the church in Nigeria has to develop an understanding of the nature of this violence and how Christians should respond to them. Therefore, the need arises for the church to answer the questions about her attitudinal position to the use of violence as a means of resolving political conflicts, and in the same vein, how the church and individual Christian should respond to oppression and injustice by the government or the politicians. These are pertinent questions steering Church leaders, members, politicians, and other stakeholders on the face. Therefore, in this paper, we set out to clarify some key terms, discuss the major causes of political violence, examine the effects with references, and finally explain what role the church should play in curbing political violence in Nigeria.

Concept of Political Violence

The word “politics” was derived from the Greek word polis which literally means city-state. Ancient Greek society was divided into a collection of an independent city-state, each of which processed its own system of government in its own terms which suits each city-state. In the light of this, politics is defined as a system of a social organisation centred upon the machinery of government.4 Politics can be referred to as opinions about the ways country is governed which are never the same. On the other hand, according to Encyclopaedia Brittanica, violence is described as an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm which may be physical, psychological, or both.5

Yusuf Turaki defines violence as the use of force to injure or wrong someone else, which may be perpetrated by individuals, groups or institutions and is not necessarily physical. People are subjected to violence whenever they are denied justice, equality, freedom, and human dignity. Such violence often springs from tribalism, colonialism, sexism, religious bigotry, and greed (Jer. 22:17).6 He was of the opinion that, institutional violence is the result of structural evil, that is evil that has permeated a system, institution, or society, while individual violence comes from evil in individual hearts.7

Therefore, violence involves spoken words or actions that are put in place with the aim of injuring someone. In this sense, it includes attacks with the use of various dangerous weapons to inflict injuries on perceived political opponents and critical criticism resulting from hatred for a person or party and their political ideology. In a way, it involves words or utterances. Furthermore, Ukanna defines violence as a physically

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injurious expression of conflict.\(^8\)

Thus, political violence is the use of physical force so as to damage or injure a person or persons or their property for political reasons. It is a pointer to the fact that there are instability and chaos within a political system. Ukanna in the word of Anifowose, also defines political violence as the use of threat of physical activity carried out by an individual or individuals within a political system against another individual or individuals, and/or property, with intent to cause injury or death to persons and/or damage or destruction to property; and who’s objective, choice of targets or victims, surrounding circumstances, implementation and effects have political significance, that is, tend to modify the behaviour of others in the existing arrangement of power that has some consequences for the political system.\(^9\)

Therefore, the above definition portrays that, in any political violence, political process restructuring must be intended. In this regard, political violence aims at directly or indirectly influencing the decisions of the state, controlling the state decision making machinery, attempting to change the entire state structure, and crippling the state. For instance, a military coup attempts to replace a civilian government with the military or the military government with another set of military rulers within the existing state and political system. Terrorism, for instance, attempts to weaken the state and cause the terrorist groups to assume more prominent positions and wield considerable influence in the state decision process.

Ukanna also opines that political violence belongs to the realms of unconventional political behaviour. But then, it is the political process in the conventional arena that gives rise to injustice or inequality between groups that engender conflict which results in violence. People employ the instruments of violence to make their grievances heard and influence the government decisions on some important social issues that affect their lives.\(^10\)

An Overview of Political Violence in Nigeria

Political violence seems to be a common phenomenon in Nigeria political history because political power is one of the ways to access wealth. Therefore, more often politics becomes “a do-or-die affair”. Politicians resort to violent methods like the use of political thugs which has become a common occurrence across the country in their desperation to get to the corridor of power or retain their political power. Jobless youth are employed by politicians or their supporters to disrupt electioneering campaigns and steal ballot boxes on election days.\(^11\) Political violence in Nigeria has taken many forms and shapes which include: homicide (the killing of an individual by another person), assault (physically attacking another person with the intention to cause harm), robbery (forcibly taking something from another person), rape (forcible having sexual intercourse with another person), military coups, gang armed clashes, pre-election, election, and post-election violence, etc.\(^12\) These are usually the practice in Nigeria political violence whenever and wherever it occurs. In recent times, it includes terrorism and spates of kidnapping all over the country.

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A contemporary examination of political violence in Nigeria also shows that Nigeria has not been the best example of a peaceful electoral process.\(^{13}\) It all began in the early years of our independence and it is unfortunate that instead of the tempo decreasing, it has been on an increasing spate since then. According to Akinniyi, there were series of political violence that has taken place in Nigeria since independence; for example, after the elections conducted immediately after independence in the 1960s, in the Western Region, following both federal and regional elections conducted in 1964 to 1965, rift between Awolowo and Akintola, political violence in parts of Northern Region, especially between supporters of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and Action Group. He was of the opinion that, the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 can also be categorised as political violence, while a national election conducted in 1983 witnessed massive post-election violence following the declared landslide victory of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in Oyo and Ondo states that was considered to be the stronghold of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). He reiterates that political violence includes the several killing of politicians like Dr Harry, Funsho Williams, Bola Ige, and Dipo Dina to mention few\(^{14}\).

The reports of political violence are so numerous that Human Rights Watch cannot verify whether every incident was in fact politically motivated. Over the last couple of years, a great deal of violence was associated with jockeying for position within the political parties.\(^{15}\) While government officials and leaders of several political parties have made public statements condemning political violence, political parties and its candidates have sometimes accused their opponents of participating in political violence with little apparent basis, which exacerbates tensions that could lead to violence between their supporters.\(^{16}\)

**Causes of Political Violence in Nigeria**

Most researchers seem to agree on the fact that political violence is multi-causal, that is, it comes as a result of the combination of factors, including those originating in the violent person’s social or cultural environment and those representing immediate situational forces.

At this juncture, we shall take a glance at some of the causes of political violence in Nigeria as follows: The first one has to do with the Nigeria political environment, which may be referred to as political culture or tradition of the country since the first republic. Nigeria politics has never been a peaceful type. It has often been characterized by violence. Hence, the youth of yesteryears, who are now leaders of today had cultivated the idea that politics devoid of violence cannot be practised in Nigeria. There is a belief that thuggery and intimidation must be used in order for someone to succeed in Nigeria politics.

Secondly, ethnicity or tribal politics has created a deep gulf in our politics. The first republic political parties were divided along the tribal inclination and that was why each tribal party had dominance in its respective region. Even up till now, it has been an impossible task totally removing tribal politics. Thuggery and violence have been the order of the day in the quest to grab power at the centre, the resultant effect of which is the destruction of lives and properties.

The third one is intolerance. In a way, this is the major cause of violence in the politics of this nation. Members of party A find it difficult to tolerate actions of members of party B which culminate in sentiments


\(^{14}\) Omobolanle Joseph Akinniyi, [https://www.academia.edu/10250378/_Nigeria_and_political_violence_.](https://www.academia.edu/10250378/_Nigeria_and_political_violence_)


rage and undesirable attacks. Their inability to tolerate one another for any reason, results, in most times, in violence of serious magnitude. Many at times, lack of trust and unhealthy rivalry coated with selfish interest and jealousy result in the assassination of political opponents or within a party. This is the height of the violence, which we are still witnessing even in this present political dispensation. This, of course, does not portend a good future for this country, with the youths who are the future leaders being recruited for these dastardly acts.

Fourth, the lack of sincerity by political leaders is another factor. Majority of these political leaders are insincere in the sense that they are not honest in the expression of their feelings to their followers. In a way, they are hypocritical. During their political campaigns, they cajole the people in order to secure their votes, but they ended up doing something contrary after winning the election. This eventually develops to frosty relationships between the ruled and the rulers, hence, violence in form of physical attacks, destruction of properties, kidnapping, as currently being witnessed across many of the states in Nigeria, becomes the reaction of the electorates. The leaders feast sumptuously with impunity, while people who voted them into power are neglected, impoverished, and abandoned to their fate. Therefore, the apathy developed towards people’s welfare makes the electorate to take the law into their hands by dealing with the leaders through violence.

Moreover, another cause of political violence in Nigeria is an affront of the rule of law. This is as a result of autocratic tendency. The leaders are rulers to themselves. Judicial pronouncements are spurned at will. Justice is denied and human right records are at its lowest ebb. The separation of powers among the three tiers of government seems not to be recognised by the executive arm of government. This kind of attitude may result from one violence to the others.

The last one is electoral fraud. This has been an age long problem in the politics of this country. The people’s votes are not counted. Candidates are selected, rather than being elected. This results in annoyance with the immediate violent reaction resulting in maiming and destruction in various degrees. Electoral officers are always being used and manipulated by the power that is to perpetrate evil. Electoral arrogance and carefree attitude are exhibited by these electoral officers because of the support they enjoy from the executive. In the long run, these same people are commended for a job well done.

In conclusion, the utterances of our leaders also usually spark violence. They say some very intuitive and inciting words in a bid to ensure their continuity, perpetuation of injustice, and cover up lies. Politics ought not to be taken as “a do or die” affair. Everybody must be encouraged to contribute his/her quota in a free and fair manner in order to aid the development of the country irrespective of sex, tribe, education, and socio-economic background.

**Effects of Political Violence in Nigeria**

Regardless of its cause, political violence has negative impacts on those who experience or witness it. In this same way, it has never solved any problem in Nigeria, but rather added problems to the country. It does not lead to permanent resolutions of any political conflicts, but rather creates more problems than existed before. According to Akinniyi, the effects of political violence in Nigeria are always of great magnitude negatively such as: destruction or loss of many lives and destruction of public and private properties including churches, mosques, and other institution worth of millions of Naira. He reported that, the 2011 post-election violence was most intense in Kaduna where the highest number of deaths and destruction was recorded, with figures released by the Nigeria Police, which indicated that 401 people were killed, 1,435 private houses, 987 shops, 157
churches, 46 mosques, 45 police properties, 16 government properties, 437 vehicles, and 219 motorcycles burnt and destroyed. He further reported that, in Bauchi State, protesters destroyed INEC offices in Itas-Gadau, Jama’are, Bauchi, Dambam, and Misau Local Government Areas. The protesters either looted or destroyed properties including about 500 laptop computers, 13 power-generating sets, file cabinets, and other properties from the offices. Kunhiyop also asserts that political violence causes chaos and instability, and never a product of peace.

Furthermore, Kunhiyop adds that violence produces more casualties and bloodshed than non-violence approaches that achieve the same result. He opines that the use of violence to accomplish some objectives or settle some disputes (religious, ethnic, or political) always results in bloodshed and unnecessary loss of innocent lives and property. So is the case in Nigeria, with millions of lives and properties being lost to political violence? It is counter-productive and self-defeating. In the real sense, the desired results which are peaceful coexistence would have been achieved through non-violent approaches in form of dialogue and diplomacy. The 2011 post-election violence forced more than 65,000 people to flee their homes. It makes some people perpetrate evil under the disguise of protest, riot, and demonstrations, that is, during any political violence, an unspecified number of female members of the society are always raped, molested, and assaulted by irate youths.

Also, globally, political violence affects the bilateral and diplomatic relationship between other countries and Nigeria, with a serious decline in the number of tourists visiting the country at that time because of fear of being killed, kidnapped, and molested.

In the actual sense, political violence affects every sector of society, for instance, educational activities are brought to a halt leading to disruption in the school calendar, which in turn leads to an extension in the year of study of students. This attracts more expenses from the parents and students are exposed to social vices like drugs addiction, alcohol, armed robbery, prostitution, among other vices during the period of their staying at home.

Commercial activities also are seriously affected in the sense that, political violence causes a reduction in economic output because the environment becomes insecure for business persons and investors.

It is therefore, believed that whatever the effect, the church still has roles to play in order to reduce the effect on the barest minimum and on forestall future occurrences, hence the discussion on the role of the church.

The Role of the Church in Ameliorating Political Violence

Though, churches in this country have been playing some positive roles in stemming the tide of political violence, more has to be done in order to make a more positive impact in society. On this note, the church, being a group of believers who have been called out of darkness to the light of God (I Peter 2:9), must not relent in her efforts to make Nigeria politics free of violence. Therefore, a variety of programmes must be developed by the church to prevent political violence in individuals who have already shown a tendency toward violence and in the congregants generally.

Engaging the Youth in Political Education

In the first instance, the youths, who are the major player in the political violence in this country, must be groomed by the church for a leadership position in the larger society. The youth in any society is the sustenance of society in order to ensure continuity. The church should create programmes for them where they can be spiritually prepared for the larger society and thus contribute their quota as Christians in any position they find themselves in the secular world. Church programmes must be tailored to help them grow and consider themselves as agents of transformation than agents of destabilisation and violence.

Truth Telling Among the Church Leaders to the Politician

Secondly, the church has the role of telling the political class the truth even if they frown at it. The church must stand on her feet. They should be strong and courageous to tell the leaders the truth. The idea of saying “it is well” when “it is not well” should be discouraged. Obijole opines that the church has prophetic function to the state which involves a declaration of the mind of God to the state and her citizens and rebuking the state when it acts unjustly and turns against God (II Sam. 12:1-14; Dan. 3:20-27: 17-28). This shows that Nigerian church leaders should toe the steps of prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Elijah, Elisha, and others in the New Testament like John the Baptist, who was beheaded for speaking the truth. Also, those heroes and heroines of faith who laid down their lives for the truth and their boldness are good examples for our church leaders to follow. Whenever Christian leaders are faced with compromise and disobedience, they must choose to obey God rather than men without resulting in political violence (Acts 5:29).

Obijole reiterates that, the church has pastoral duties over the state, which are as follows: to provide teaching and directions to the leaders and those being governed (Matt. 28:19-29), to encourage Christians to be good citizens who obey the state and pay their taxes (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13), and to see that the state and her citizens do nothing contrary to the word of God. According to him, Apostle Paul, in Romans 13, opines that the goal of every Christian should be to work toward making the state better. This can be done by being a good example of service and influence in society. In this wise, the amalgamation of the church and state should benefit all and sundry.

Parental Responsibility

Parents, in particular, have a serious responsibility to lead their wards to Christ, because charity they say begins at home. Hence, Christian parents should be role models to their children in matters of faithful service unto God, that is service at home, church, and public life. They should be taught to know the right values for hard work, to avoid getting to the top through bribery and corruption or cutting corners, to advise them against the wrong imitation, like cultism, immoral dressing, smoking, alcoholism, and the likes.

Furthermore, fervent prayers make things happen. The church must pray regularly for peace and an end to political violence in society. Every individual Christian must not be involved in any activity that can breach the peace of society. According to Obijole, the church has a priestly function to perform to the state, which includes prayers for those in authorities and for the protection and healing of the nation (I Tim. 2:1-3).

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Despite the omnipotent and Omniscient nature of God, He has chosen Christians to use the weapon of prayer to positively change and influence the world. In James 5:16, Apostle Paul urges Christians to pray for the leaders in government, believing that their fervent prayer will be result oriented.

In line with this, the church could also organise seminars, workshops, and other such avenues that would enable congregants and people in the society shun violence and embrace peace always as Christ has taught them. In all, Christianity is not violent but peaceful. The Bible, many times, enjoins Christian to seek good and not evil, to seek peace, and be at peace with everybody. Therefore, the peace that Jesus gives is not that of the world but the one that passes all human understanding which shall always be available for them. The future is guaranteed for the man of peace ( Psalm 37:37) and not a man who engages in violent behaviour. Christians are not only to seek peace but to pursue it (I Peter 3:11). In this wise, violence in any form is bad.

**Christian Education on Politics Without Violence**

Christians must be taught not to be involved in political violence because Christian’s “warfare” is carried out by means of spiritual “weapons” such as faith, prayer, and the preaching of the gospel. 23 Christians are called to be “in the world” but radically “not of the world”. This implies a total refusal to use the weapons of violence, even if suffering and death result. 24 In our violent world, the most compelling general stance from the biblical standpoint will be that of active peace-making and a commitment to non-violent ways of resisting violence and evil thereof. Violence tends to beget more violence; there has not appeared any war to end all wars. Christians should follow their Lord in bearing the cross and trying to break the cycle of violence.

Christians must search for creative and redemptive ways of mitigating conditions which provoke or encourage anger, pride, envy, and violence. They may help the potentially violent to discover non-violent ways of expression. They can often defuse rage with a caring, empathetic listening ear.

Christians can protect and honour life with their words. The church should say “no” to the abuse of the youth, the weak, and the aged, police brutality and all other forms of excessive force in our world, as well as to the popular media which glorify violence. Saying “no” to political violence may need to be accompanied by a demonstration of good behaviour by church members, involvement in politics, and political campaigns, and legislative reforms from members voted for.

Christians’ non-support for political violence should be expressed in words and actions, which creates safe places for both the victim and the violent.

In conclusion, if churches carry out their search for the will of God in the context of the scripture, prayer and community peace, make a whole-hearted effort to find a none-violent, peaceful response coupled with all that have discussed above, then their likelihood of sowing peace in a politically violent world will be greatly

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increased. Christians should know that political authority is a necessary feature of human society, with a positive role in God’s purpose for this world.

**Christian Participation in Politics Not Violence**

Christians should participate in politics which include exercising one’s rights to vote and be voted for, speaking out against any wrongdoing by those in power, and holding leaders accountable for their actions without necessarily resulting to violence. According to James, moral bankruptcy, corruption, poverty, disease and ignorance, all clearly call for Christian participation in politics. African Christians need to understand that the destinies of their nations rest on their political participation. As the Bible says, “When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when the wicked bears rule, the people mourn” (Prov. 29:2). People will enjoy life when the righteousness is in authority, but suffer under wicked regimes.28

The Bible makes it clear that God abhors violence (Gen. 6:11, 13; Mal. 2:16). He instructs us to avoid it and to turn from it (Ezek 45:9; Jer. 22:3). Jesus pronounced a specific blessing on those who brought an end to violence (Matt. 5:9). By contrast, Jesus calls on us to meet violence with peace (Rom. 12:17-21), the sword with forgiveness, evil with good (Luke 6:27-31), and wrath with love. Jesus and the apostles modelled non-violence by not retaliating when they suffered violence (1Pet. 2:20-24).29

**Conclusion**

The frequent use of violence to settle the incessant political conflicts that have been happening in the country has not proffered any solution. Instead, it has resulted in hatred and more violence. The solution to all these continuous political imbroglios in Nigeria is the non-violence that Jesus practised and instructed His followers to practice. Their refusal to use violence does not mean that they are passive or cannot fight, but it portrays that violence should not be a way of life or means of settling political conflicts. Only love for the enemy as instructed by Jesus Christ, and determination not to use violence as a means for resolving conflicts can help us to live in peace and harmony in Nigeria.

According to Kunhiyop, the effectiveness of non-violent responses to oppression and injustices has been demonstrated worldwide with the following examples: In South Africa, Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela stood for non-violence but active resistance to the oppressive apartheid regime. Also, in the United States of America, Martin Luther King Jr. was the major spokesman for non-violence but active resistance to racial segregation. In the same vein, Ghanaian adopted a non-violence approach to solve the political crisis.30

In conclusion, the government and the church have mutual responsibilities. The church should no longer compromise her role but should rather take up the active responsibility of preaching the truth without any bias especially to those politicians who are master minders of political violence in the country by pretending to serve the interest of the people.31 The church should also work on her members, so that they would be of good examples to the outside world and a real epitome of godliness. However, the government has the full

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responsibility of ensuring good and reputable governance, and the church is to stand as a check, thus, ensuring that government complies with the directives from God which must be passed across without bias but rather with painstaking thoroughness. By the time both work hand in hand, they would achieve the same goal that would definitely lead to having a God-fearing society.

References