



## Security Implications of Political Thuggery in Nigeria: A Study of Rivers State from 2015-2019 Elections

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the ugly phenomenon of thuggery in the body politics of Nigeria. It examines the reasons for the prevalent incidences of political thuggery, particularly during campaigns, general elections and even re-run elections in Rivers State. The paper identifies such reasons as unemployment among youths and its attendant poverty and frustration which makes youths willing tools for thuggery in the hands of desperate politicians; and the negative impact of money politics in the country's democratization process. The data collection and analysis is based on a field survey in Port Harcourt using questionnaire and descriptive analysis respectively. The study adopts the Marxist perspective of Conflict Theory as the tool of analysis to explain the act of political thuggery by unemployed youths and their recruitment by desperate politicians to serve their selfish interest of maintaining and controlling political power and economic resources. The findings revealed that thuggery created fear among candidates which hindered the electorates' political participation, peaceful and fair elections, and stable democratic transitions.

**Keywords:** Political Thuggery, Democracy, Election, Electoral Violence, Political Instability

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### Introduction

Political Thuggery has become prevalent in the democratic dispensation in Nigeria. The social, political and economic power of those involved have become a huge source of concern nationally and internationally. These categories of people who possess the power are the ruling elite and their activities have been institutionalised to the point of subverting the constitution for their selfish and economic gains. Subscribing to this assertion, Gboyega (2004) observed that political godfatherism is by design placed above the law of the land. Politicians and their thugs can carry arms without hindrance. They are entitled to police escorts and are immune to abduction, harassment and maiming. Most of these thugs are recruited and trained for various political purposes such as intimidation, harassment, violence, assassination, rigging of elections, etc, against political oppositions. Some of these thugs are employed as special advisers, special assistants and personal assistants while those who do not fit in for the aforementioned positions are made contractors to the government in federal, state or local government areas. These thugs forced electorates to vote against their wishes or deny them the opportunity to cast votes. The party representatives at the



polling booths were threatened to compromise, and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials were forced to change election results in favour of a particular party. Masses who want to participate in politics found it very difficult to penetrate the electoral environment because of money politics and violence.

The thugs have several names in different places such as: in Lagos *Oduwa* People's Congress (OPC) or popularly the area boys, in Rivers State and the rest of the Niger Delta the Niger Delta volunteers force (NDF) *Egbesu* boys, Bauchi State *Sara-suka* (cut and stab), *yankalare* in Gombe, *Yan daba* (Jungle boys) in Kano and *Ecomog* in Borno (Abdullahi, 2013). Over the years, the activities of political thugs in Nigeria have been recognised and powerfully backed by the political class. Thus, it has gone beyond what is known or seen in the first, second or the aborted third republics. Nda Isaiah (2004) observed that thuggery in the fourth republic has even gone beyond that of the second republic. The trade is no longer for the rag-tag hoodlums that it used to be.

In recent time, thuggery has been given new garb of legitimacy by the political class. The presence of energetic (but aggressive) youth can be noticed in the name of bodyguards politicians move around with. Unfortunately, physical reality has shown that violent activities are carried out when political activities like campaigns/elections are going on. The teeming youth who are supposed to have been harnessed or trained towards nation building are used (misused rather) to harass and intimidate the political opponent including the innocent citizens and at worse maim and kill under the influence of drugs and money. Thus, this study tends to identify the causes of political thuggery in Rivers State; assess how political thuggery affects political developments of Rivers State; ascertain the security implications of political thuggery in Rivers State and explore ways to solve the problem of political thuggery in Rivers State.

### **Review of Related Literature**

This section reviews the works of authors in the area of political thuggery and the increasing violence in Rivers State.

#### **Causes of Political Thuggery in Rivers State**

Numerous factors have been attributed to political thuggery in Rivers State. The continuing and widespread use of thugs by some political parties always created a significant degree of fear and intimidation (Igini, 2015).

**Unemployment:** The president of the south-south citizens residing in Oyo State, Chief Michael Obasahon, observed that as a result of frightening unemployment in the country, Nigeria is sitting on a keg of gunpowder. He advised the government to embark on massive job creation to stem the tide of pervasive social insecurity in the country (Adenyi, 2011:p17).

**The Phenomenon of Godfatherism in Nigeria Politics:** Okuhue (2011:p1) stated that since the return of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999, godfatherism has remained a force to be reckoned with. The fear of godfathers, according to him was the beginning of wisdom, especially in the political territories. He noted that no contestant for political office will achieve his ambition without the blessing of the godfather.



**Sit-tight Syndrome:** This is a situation whereby an individual tries to hold on to power for personal aggrandisement or gains. In an attempt to hang on to power, leaders often create a regime of violence, repression and political intimidation against opposition.

#### **The link between Thuggery and Violent Crimes in Rivers State**

Thuggery is the process of acting violently, especially to commit a crime. Violence on the other hand is the act of hurting people either by word or action. Political thuggery could be defined as the illegitimate means of seeking political influence while political violence is viewed as the illegitimate and unauthorized use of force to effect decisions against the desire or will of the people. Since independence, politics in Nigeria has been characterized by thuggery and violence. For example, the 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections in Rivers State were affected by political violence (Semenitari, 2015:p3).

#### **Political Thuggery and Violence in Rivers State 2011 Elections**

The remote causes of the electoral crisis in Rivers State in the 2011 elections could be traced to the decision of the then Governor, Rt. Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi to run a re-election to the office of the Chairman of the Nigerian Governors' Forum. This re-election bid was not supported by the then President Goodluck Jonathan and caused ripples in Nigeria. It further drew Amaechi, Presidency and PDP into a dagger point. Unfortunately for the President, Amaechi defeated his rival, the then Governor Jonah Jang of Plateau State. This defeat spurred up a division in the forum and political crises in Rivers State. The spate of violence went to a point of crescendo during the campaigns for the general elections, the duo-APC and PDP criminally confronted each other openly in their campaign rallies in Okrika (Semenitari, 2015:p3).

#### **Political Thuggery and Violence in 11<sup>th</sup> April 2015 Election in Rivers State**

It was alleged that there were massive irregularities that marred the 2015 general elections in the state and there were series of protests by members of APC. One of such protests was led by its Governorship candidate in March, a day after the Presidential election, and the APC Women, all to the State INEC headquarters, secondly, by the plethora of tribunal cases challenging the elections. In some extreme instances, voting did not take place. Similarly, gunmen shot dead the youth leader of the All Progressives Congress in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area, Mr. Felix Orukokwu, in Idu community. Dakuku Peterside alleged that seven persons were killed in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area (Guardian online, 2015).

In a swift reaction to the claims of APC, the State Chairman of the PDP, Felix Obua had stated that "Rivers state is a traditional PDP State and even if the elections are conducted a million times, PDP will win here". He added that the call to reschedule the elections by the APC was "the behaviour of bad losers" (Guardian online, 2015:p2). A Commission of Inquiry headed by Chidi Odinkalu, a Professor of law and Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, and had a clear mandate to probe politically-motivated killings and destruction of properties before and during the 2015 general elections in Rivers State. According to the Commission's Report, Rivers State recorded a monthly average of 19 killings between November 2014 and April 2015 (Odinkalu, 2015:p1). It further noted that out of 97 allegations of killings it received, 94 occurred between November 2014 and April 11, 2015. He further remarked that 83 incidents of destruction of properties including acts of vandalism and arson, seven of the incidents occurred before the



election while 77 occurred during the elections. A total of different violations involving killings, injuries to persons or destructions were reported to the Commission of Inquiry. Also, 236 alleged destruction of properties were identified in testimonies.

The then Director, Department of State Security Services in Rivers State, Abot Nyam, was quoted as having said in an online media (Naijapolitica.com, 2015:1) that he served in different states like Imo and Abia states but never experienced the high spate of political killings as being witnessed in the state, wondered why politics has to be reduced to violence and destruction. Corroborating the above, Anucha (2005) aptly captured the Rivers State elections when he observed that what happened in Rivers State during the March 28 and April 11 2015, Presidential and National Assembly, Governorship and House of Assembly elections, respectively, were unimaginable.

#### **Political Thuggery and Violence in 2019 General Election in Rivers State**

The 2019 election was not left out with crisis, where the politicians hire thugs to hijack electoral materials. In each local government, for instance, thugs sacked 5 polling units in two wards. They carried out the illegal action unchallenged by the security agents. In Khana local government area, the largest local government area in terms of landmass witness much crisis perpetrated by political thugs that leads to the death of supporters of some political parties. A correspondent of the News agency of Nigeria covering the bye-election in Port Harcourt was attacked and smashed with a bottle on his head. The Nigerian army troops of 6 Division killed six political thugs in Rivers State during the presidential and National assembly election, because they attacked the troops, according to Col. Sagir Musa Army spokesman, in a pre-planned attack occurred between Charles and Bob-Manuels compound in Abonnema town.

#### **Security Implications of Political Thuggery in Rivers State**

Insecurity in Rivers State is a result of the activities arising from the wide circulation of arms and ammunition in the hands of criminals which were used for thuggery at the elections. It becomes difficult to retrieve these arms from the hands of the thugs. Whether eventually settled or not, the thugs found another lucrative use for the arms by indulging in criminality – armed robbery - and it is the society that pays for it. Delivering a paper on ‘Nigeria Electoral Violence and National Security,’ the onetime Inspector General of Police, Tafa (2009:112) said: “Our experiences in the recently concluded elections indicate that there is unbridled flagrancy in the smuggling and use of arms and ammunition by political thugs and party supporters.” During the recruitment/training process of thugs, drugs and rituals are often involved (Needam, 2015). The thugs are often offered/given financial and material gratifications with protection which includes protection from punishment by the law. These gratifications can be lifetime promises which are sometimes extended to thug’s family members.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Conflict and Marxist theory shares the assumptions concerning the nature and origin of electoral violence in society. Marxists situates every social action within the ambit of the economic base and lays much emphasis on historical and dialectical materialism. Conflict theory emphasizes that electoral violence encourages conflict in the society (Jegade, 2005). The theory is based upon the view that the fundamental causes and origin of electoral violence are the social and economic



forces that operates within the society. The conflict theory, therefore stresses that the wealthy could acquire arms and weapons to perpetrate electoral violence.

### Conflict Theory

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is the exponent of conflict theory. Other proponents of conflict theory include Ludwig (1838-1909), Pareto (1848-1923), George Simmel (1858-1918), Ralph Dahrendorf, Gluckman, M. (1965), Lewis Coser (1956/1968), and Gurr, T. (1968). According to this theory, some groups come to dominate others and tow in for themselves a disproportionate share of the society's political power, which includes wealth and privileges in the society at the expense of the less powerful ones. They also incriminate the activities of the less powerful while they protect that of the powerful persons. Such situations according to this theory create violence which often leads to political violence and thuggery. Groups and individuals advance their interests, struggling over control of societal resources. Those with the most resources exercise power over others with inequality and power struggles resulting to violence. There is great attention paid to class, race, and gender in this perspective because they are seen as the grounds of the most pertinent and enduring struggles in society which often lead to electoral violence in the society (Anderson, and Taylor, 2009).

The theory proposes that continual struggle exists among all different groups of a particular society. Though these struggles do not always involve physical violence or economic exploitation; there can be underlying efforts by each group or individual within a society to maximize its benefits. The theory has been adopted as the theoretical framework for the study of political thuggery and the increasing violent crimes in Rivers State.

### Methods and Data Presentation

The data collection relied on Questionnaires distributed to 500 respondents in the highly affected areas of Port Harcourt central communities, focused on the causes of political thuggery in the society, and the link between political thuggery and violent crimes affecting democratization in the society. 400 of the 500 questionnaires were successfully retrieved and use for the study.

The survey utilized the Likert four scale response to answer the questions and simple statistical percentage method to analyze the data collected from members of the public on the political thuggery and the increasing political violence.

**Table 1. Respondents' responses on what are the causes of political thuggery in Rivers State?**

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Unemployment	190	45
Poverty	156	35
Do or Dies Politicians	15	5
Role of Security Agents	39	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey 2020

The table 1 above shows that 45% of the respondents strongly agreed that unemployment causes political thuggery, 35% agreed that poverty causes political thuggery, 5% strongly agreed the do-



or-die politicians cause political thuggery, while 15% agreed that the role of security agents cause political thuggery.

**Table 2. Respondents' responses on what are the security implications of political thuggery in Rivers state?**

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Violence	190	45
Threats	165	35
Not specified	15	5
Both 1 & 2	30	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey 2020

The table 2 above shows that 45% of the respondents said that the security implications of political thuggery is violence, 35% said that the security implications of political thuggery is threats, 5% of the respondent have no answer 15% of the respondent said that the security implications of political thuggery is both violence and threats. This by implication means that security implications of political thuggery are violence and threats.

**Table 3. Respondents' responses on political thugs are jobless youths**

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agreed	190	45
Agreed	156	35
Strongly Disagreed	17	7
Disagreed	37	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey 2020

The table 3 above shows that 45% of the respondents strongly agreed that political thugs are jobless youths, 35% agreed that political thugs are jobless youths, 7% strongly disagreed that political thugs are jobless youths and 15% disagreed that political thugs are jobless youths. This by implication means that political thugs are jobless youths.

**Table 4. Respondents' responses on that political thuggery and violence are linked together**

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agreed	192	45
Agreed	144	38
Strongly Disagreed	29	5
Disagreed	35	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey 2020

The table 4 above shows that 45% of the respondents strongly agreed that thuggery and violence are linked together, 38% agreed that thuggery and violence are linked together, 8% strongly disagreed that thuggery and violence are linked together while 12% disagreed that thuggery and violence are linked together. This by implication means that thuggery and violence are linked together.



**Table 5. Respondents' responses on godfatherism is among the factor influencing electoral violence in Rivers State.**

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agreed	200	50
Agreed	146	30
Strongly Disagreed	10	3
Disagreed	44	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey 2020

The table 5 above shows that 50% of the respondents strongly agreed that godfatherism is a factor influencing electoral violence in Rivers State, 30% agreed that godfatherism is a factor influencing electoral violence in Rivers State, 3% strongly disagreed that godfatherism is a factor influencing electoral violence in Rivers State while 17% disagreed that godfatherism is a factor influencing electoral violence in Rivers State. This by implication means that godfatherism is a factor influencing electoral violence in Rivers State.

**Table 6. Respondents' responses on political thuggery presence increases violentcrimes in Rivers State**

Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agreed	200	50
Agreed	146	30
Strongly Disagreed	10	3
Disagreed	44	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Survey 2020

The table above shows that 50% of the respondents strongly agreed that political thuggery presence increases violent crime in Rivers State, 30% agreed that political thuggery presence increases violent crime in Rivers State, 3% strongly disagreed that political thuggery presence increases violent crime in Rivers State while 17% disagreed that political thuggery presence increases violent crimes in Rivers State. This by implication means that political thuggery's presence increases violent crimes in Rivers State.

### Discussion of Findings

To identify the causes of political thuggery in Rivers State, 80% of the respondents agreed that political thuggery is caused by unemployment and Poverty. The third objective that seeks to ascertain the effects of political thuggery in the political development of Rivers State, 80% of the respondents agreed that political thuggery hinders accountability of elective officers in Rivers State and affects the electioneering process.

To identify the security implications of political thuggery in Rivers State, 80% of the respondents agreed that violence and threats are the security implication of political thuggery in Rivers State. Lastly, on what can be done to solve the problem of political thuggery in Rivers State, majority of





the respondents agreed that public enlightenment on the danger of political thuggery, creating Jobs for unemployed youths, penalising perpetrators and mopping out illegal arms will help in curbing the menace of political thugs in Rivers State.

### **Summary of Findings**

It was discovered from the findings of the research that factors influencing political thuggery in Rivers State are unemployment, money politics, the phenomenon of godfatherism, prebendal politics, political ideology, the desperation or ‘Sit-tight Syndrome’ politics among politicians, the impact of urban violence and gangsterism, and the ineffectiveness of security agents.

Regarding the effects of political thuggery in Rivers State, the collected data revealed that political thuggery used to cause hate speech, misinformation, physical assault, forced protection, blackmail, destruction of properties and underdevelopment, political instability, a cycle of violence and breed insecurity, among others in Rivers State. The findings further showed that the phenomenon of political thuggery in Rivers state has taken a troublesome facet that needs some imperative measures.

It was also discovered from the findings that the link between thuggery and violent crimes in Rivers State is election rigging, maiming, corruption and embezzlement, violence, and anarchy, among other negative activities affecting democratization. The findings also show that the youths are very highly vulnerable to political thuggery as such it has been increasing the rate of violent crimes in the society.

Regarding the factors inhibiting the eradication of political thuggery in Rivers State, the findings revealed that greed, love of power and money, thuggery, and election rigging have been the major challenges behind the eradication of electoral violence. The findings also showed that the ineffectiveness of law enforcement agencies to punish perpetrators of political thuggery in Rivers State limits the eradication of the menace. The findings further show that the inability of society to provide a legal framework to prosecute electoral offenders has increased the chances of political thuggery in Rivers State.

### **Recommendations**

Globally, youths are considered vehicles of change. It is imperative to understand that the Nigerian nation cannot be built or sustained on the foundation of lies, falsehood and deceit, therefore, the majority of the politicians, including most of the youths are guilty of electoral violence in Nigeria. Politicians engage some youths as thugs and assassins to maim, kill and destroy their perceived opponents. This factor played out in the 2015 general elections in Rivers State. The current security threat, in the country may not be unconnected with the activities of politicians who supply arms to the youths intending to win elections at all cost. Youth participation in the electioneering process has consequential effects on the outcome of the elections. The level of violence before, during and after the elections resulted in the large number of cases before the State and National Assemblies as well as Governorship tribunals, Appeal Court and Supreme Court that sat in Abuja. Virtually, all the National Assembly seats won by the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the gubernatorial and 32 State Houses of Assembly seats in Rivers State won by the PDP were challenged and about 85% of these seats were annulled by the Appeal Court and fresh elections ordered. The reasons given by the Tribunals and upheld by the Appeal Court, included among others, non-use of card





readers and allocation of scores, hijack of materials, intimidation of voters, and violence, to mention but a few. Interestingly, most of these acts were performed by the youth. Finally, the study made far-reaching recommendations which are aimed at ameliorating youth violence in subsequent elections.

There is a global renaissance in the understanding of the role of good governance in building a state's legitimacy and in providing peaceful atmosphere. Good governance is a desideratum to peaceful election globally, and its absence is incubation to anarchical situations. Youth violence in elections is considered in some climes as a pragmatic protest against the absence of good governance. This is the case in Rivers State in particular and Nigeria at large. To ameliorate youth violence in elections in the State, the following suggestions are proffered:

- Youth empowerment
- Genuine re-integration/rehabilitation
- Youth orientation/re-orientation
- Criminalization of violent politics
- Mopping up of arms
- Government/Politicians should discourage the politics of "do-or-die" and bitterness.
- NAFDAC and NDLEA should seriously increase surveillance of dangerous drugs that are used by thugs .
- The Rivers State government and private sectors should concentrate on job creation.

### **Conclusions**

Generally, the effects of the political thuggery include creating fear amongst candidates, hindering electorates, killing innocent people, violating human rights, destruction of valuable properties, insecurity during and after elections and poor political culture in Nigerian politics. It is observed that thuggery is being politically and socially motivated affecting different people in different areas. As a result, government and private properties were burnt, and valuable properties of different political parties and different individuals were destroyed and burnt. Innocent individuals affected with different degrees of injuries ranging from wounds to loss of lives and valuable properties have all been destroyed on the streets, in their shops, and in homes. Finally, the activities of thugs have fuelled insecurity that negatively affects sustainable democracy. It is characterised by killing, kidnapping, street attacks, house break-ins, shoplifting, frightening and threatening innocent individuals by losing their lives and valuable properties that invariably exacerbated violence in Nigerian politics, especially during campaigns, rallies, and election-related activities for which electorates and candidates of different party affiliations have been frightened.

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