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REDUCING ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN VIOLENCE IN ELECTIONS IN THE FOURTH REPUBLIC IN NIGERIA THROUGH E-POLITICS

By

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Abstract

Elections are the hallmarks of democracy; they also serve the purpose of peaceful change in government and confer political legitimacy on the government. Viewed from this prism, elections represent the expression of the Sovereign will of the people. Nigeria's political history is replete with narratives of flawed and disputed elections that have turned violent, resulting in numerous fatalities and reversing previous attempts at democratic consolidation. Investigation reveal that electoral violence had been the root cause of the collapse of the successive attempts in the First, Second, and Third Republics to entrench sustainable democracy onto the Nigeria's body politic through elections. Incontrovertible evidence from the five successive elections conducted so far under the present Fourth Republic in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 point to the fact that if care is not taken the said Fourth Republic might suffer the same fate that befell its predecessors in the hands of electoral violence. Investigations also show that at the root of the high level of electoral violence that dogged the recent 2019 General Elections in the country was the use of e-campaign, in fact, the social media to be precise, as a tool for negative propaganda that was laced in most parts with inflammatory and acrimonious messages, hate speeches, and sectional diatribes. Against this backdrop, therefore, this paper examined the challenges and prospects of using e-politics or e-campaigning with emphasis on the social media to combat the menace of electoral violence in the campaign to major elections in Nigeria. The review and content analysis of relevant literature on the topic of this paper revealed that e-campaigning based on use of the various social media groups, namely, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, among others were used both for good and bad causes in the 2011, 2015, and 2019 general elections; and that the negative use of the said social media contributed much to the acts of electoral violence that almost marred the recent 2019 General Elections. It was the recommendations of this paper that the present Electoral Act 2010 be amended to incorporate provisions for the control and regulation of e-campaign, in general and use of the social media for electoral campaigns in particular; closer monitoring of the use of the social media for electoral campaigns by the NCC, INEC, NOA, and Federal Ministry of Information & Culture; and special advocacy campaign by CSOs and other stakeholders against use of the social media for negative propaganda during elections on the part of election candidates, their political parties and their supporters.

Keywords: elections, e-elections, e-politics, electoral violence, social media, campaign, democracy

Introduction

Electoral violence has indeed become a constant common feature of Nigeria's political history. It has been widely fingered as the major cause of the collapse of previous attempts by the nation to entrench sustainable democratic system of governance categorized as the First Republic (1950-1966), Second Republic (1979-1983), Third Republic (1991-1993) and, of course, the present fourth Republic (1999 till date) (Ashindorbe, 2018; Olowojolu, Bamidele, Ake, Ogundele, & Afolayan, 2019; Taiwo, 2000). According to one commentator, a major challenge to the Nigerian State since independence has been the inability to evolve a transparent electoral system and conduct free and fair elections devoid of violence (Fagbohun, 2013). Elections have been a source of disputations, litigations, violence, and political instability for most of the state's existence since 1960 (Oni , Chidozie, & Agbude, 2003; Taiwo, 2000). As shall be shown soonest, there are many instances under First, Second, and Third Republics, and this present fourth Republic under discussion to show that electoral violence has ruled the roost in Nigeria's chequered history of instituting sustainable democratic rule. In fact, it is electoral violence that led to the collapse of the First, Second, and Third Republics, in 1966, 1983, and 1993 respectively (Olatunji, 2003). As a number of starting evidences point to, if care is not taken, it (electoral violence) might also sound the death knell to the on-going experiment at consolidation of democracy under this present Fourth Republic that took off in May, 1999. To cite but one recent instance, it was widely reported that the orgy of violence that trailed the just concluded 2019 General Elections in Nigeria that commenced in October 18, 2018 and ended in March 2019 took the lives of at least 626 persons and destroyed property valued at N5 billion naira (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Premium Times, July 4, 2020; Nigeria Civil Society Group, 2019).

Previous studies show that electoral violence doesn't just happen, but is caused by a number of inter-related factors. Prominent among such factors include inflammatory or acrimonious electoral campaigns or electioneering, ethnic and religious bigotry, politics of prebendalism, rising cases of unemployment and poverty among the youth, vestiges of prolonged military rule, lack of internal democracy among political parties, and culture of impunity among security agents (Orji & Uzodi, 2012; Onimisi & Omolegbe, 2019; Osaghae, 2016; Momoh, 2014;).

This paper argues for adoption of e-campaigns typified by the use of ICT devices and Web-based social media and smartphones in the conduct of electoral campaigns or electioneering that culminate in elections proper as a strategy to reduce the usual orgy of violence that trail most general elections in the country, particularly before, during and after polling or announcement of results. Interestingly, research has indicated that social media as an e-election tool has turned into one of the fundamental platforms for political aspirants in Africa. Through social media, they propagate diverse campaign messages to their constituents who have some interest in their political careers and aspirations (Williams & Gulati, (2013). Therefore, it has been indicated that African political leaders have found the outstanding effectiveness of social websites and to that extent use them for their political campaigns. In this regard, Okoro & Nwafor (2013) reported that with social networking sites, political aspirants appeal to citizens, and contact supporters and as such supporters contribute actively by commenting on various political aspirants' agendas and anticipations. David, Zhitomirsky-Geffet, Koppel, & Uzah (2016) and Kreiss (2016) commented that most political parties and leaders maintain an account on Facebook and Twitter in order to lay out their schedules. For instance, the utilization of social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter. Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Classmate, and other less popular sites like Google+ Myspace and Blogs were massively deployed in the 2015 General elections, due to its participatory und creative nature,]t turned into an utter and exceptional platform for political campaign organizers doing electioneering crusades and other ideological trumpeting exercises, as well as political mobilization among others. According to Oseni (2015), starting from the point of the campaign, through voting to the collation of results and the subsequent proclamation of winners by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), social media were formidable forces in maintaining the masses informed. This suggests a strong relationship between political activities and social media. Put in another way, ample findings by previous studies have shown that social media are essential social forces that lubricate the engine room of democracy in Africa (Borah, 2016) and are no doubt revolutionizing the process of political communication and expanding the frontiers of political participation and mobilization. In this study, it is argued also that the same e-election tool such as the social media backed, of course, by cellphones, particularly smartphones can be deployed as a potent strategy for reducing the orgy of violence, inflammatory and hate speeches that go

with electoral campaign rallies, including reorientation or dissuading the jobless army of youthful thugs recruited by some unpatriotic political elite members in Nigeria against the penchant for intolerance and acts of violence at any slighted provocation.

Conceptual Framework

- ***Electoral violence***

With much insight from Galtung's seminal work on violence and peace, Albert defines electoral violence as "all forms of organized act or threats- physical, psychological and structural- aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view to determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process" (Albert. 2007: 136). Electoral violence can, therefore, take any of the three dimensions of Violence espoused by Galtung. Physical electoral violence, according to this definition, will include the kind of bodily attacks politicians or their ardent supporters inflict on one another at party conventions, during political campaigns, during elections and when election results are released most of which culminate in fatalities. Psychological electoral violence basically manifests in the form of the climate of siege and uncertainty that is created in the psyche of citizens of what could possibly happen to them a result of their participation in electoral process. Structural electoral violence going by this conceptualisation manifests in the form of exclusionary or discriminatory policies and practice prevalent in the electoral process. The exorbitant fees required obtaining nomination and expression of intent form by intending aspirants within the parties for instance, effectively shuts the door against candidates without the financial muscle or a money bag ready to bankroll, the electoral expenses of such candidates. Another instance of structural electoral violence is the attempt to deliberately create bottle neck in the electoral process such as stuffing the voters register with fictitious names with the aim of achieving pre-determined outcome.

In giving further insights, Nwolise (2007) also states that electoral violence could occur in the form of physical assault, assassination of political opponents or people perceived as a threat to one's political ambition, burning down of public or opponents' properties, partisan harassment by security agents, arrests, forceful dispersal of rallies, or shooting, wounding, or killing of people, kidnapping and hostage-taking, bombing of

infrastructure, forceful disruption by thugs of political and campaign rallies, and destruction of ballot boxes and ballot papers by thugs or partisan security agents. 'Fischer (2002) also gave further insight into what electoral violence is and noted that it is any random or organized act that seeks to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an election with violence such as physical assault, forced "protection," blackmail, destruction of properties, or assassination.

Hoglund (2006) observes that electoral violence can emerge from a variety of sources, such as state actors (military and police), political parties, guerrilla/rebel group, and militia and paramilitary groups. However, political parties both those who hold government positions and the opposition have been key organizers of electoral violence. Political parties have also been known to 'pay 'thugs or make use of the youths wing to carry out the violence, and thus violent clashes became an element in, the run up to elections (Hoglund, 2006). In the same manner, Biegon (2009) observes that a fragile state with weak political, economic and social systems is more prone to electoral violence which in turn makes the state more fragile and weaker.

- ***e-Campaigns***

Electronic campaign is otherwise referred to as e-campaign, digital campaign (d-campaign) or electronic electioneering (e-electioneering). e-campaigns system has been defined by Chaum, Ryan, Schneider (2005:179) as a "structured process that involves the use of computer-based devices, Internet or online-based media (the new media or social media), and GSM cellphones to connect with the electorate (voters) and disseminate election-related messages such as profiles of political parties and their respective candidates, their election promises and manifestos, and debates with a view to influencing the opinions, support, and final votes of the former at public elections.

- ***Social Media (New Media)***

Social media, otherwise referred to the new media, is defined by Boulianne (2015) as an Internet or on-line tool which allows its users to form a web-based profile group that permits them to easily communicate with one another using various video releases, voice lines, feature reports, headlines, and broadcasts. Today, many social media sites exist, prominent among which include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Classmate, and the less popular ones such as Google+, Myspace and blogs,

among others. Evidence has established that social media application are now applied across diverse endeavours such as advertising public relations, strategic communications and political communication (Kaplan & Hoenhen, 2010). In this regard, recent years have seen a growing body of knowledge demonstrating the connection between social media and electioneering campaigns and even political processes (Fountaine, 2017), suggesting that the prominence of social media, particularly in politics has the potential of positively influencing political participation and behaviours (Steiglitz & Dong-Zuan, 2013). This connotes that the advent of social media has brought around a different type of political process and campaigns referred to as political digital campaigns which requires political candidates getting acquainted with social media strategy to connect with electorate so as to influence them and the society at large, Therefore, there is good evidence largely from existing studies to suggest that social media is now being used in political campaigns to circulate diverse campaign messages to various constituents who have an interest in the political career and aspirations of a candidate. Indeed, there is a relationship between social media and politics and through social media political mobilization for participation and supports are attainable (Borah, 2016).

Trends of Electoral Violence in Nigeria's Journey to Consolidation of Democratic Rule (1960-2015).

Ordinarily, the electoral process or elections in particular as a hallmark of any meaningful democracy is expected to contribute significantly to the efforts at entrenching democratic rule in any polity across the world. However, in most developing countries, Nigeria inclusive, elections have brought untold anguish and insatiability that even undermine the democratic experiment. In fact, since flag independence in 1960 till quite recently, elections in Nigeria had been characterized by disputations, electoral malpractices, and litigations which in most cases have led to mindless acts of electoral violence and brigandage (Fagbohun, 2013; Olowojolu et al., 2019). Studies have shown that the said electoral violence has featured as the prominent factors that caused the unfortunate collapse of the three successive First, Second, and Third Republics in Nigeria (Taiwo, 2000; Fagbolun, 2013; Olowojolu et al., 2019;). Even the ongoing present Fourth Republic is least spared from the obnoxious effect of the said electoral violence as was witnessed in the just concluded 2019 General Elections in the country.

For instance, in the First Republic (1960-1966), the federal elections of 1964 and the Western Nigeria regional election of 1965 were mired in deep intra-party feud with and between the contending parties, thus setting the stage for the deep controversy, acrimonious and inflammatory campaigns and elections. The foregoing finally led to large-scale violence throughout the then Western Region known as '*Operation Wetie',* in which individuals and property were doused with petrol and set ablaze, thus earning the region the notorious sobriquet of 'wild wild west' (Tamuno, 2000: 143). It was indeed the orgy of violence that led to imposition of a state of emergency in the region and finally to the collapse of the First Republic on January 15, 1966 and a 30-month civil war between 1967 and 1970 (Ashindorbe, 2018).

As part of the effort to consolidate the democratic rule of the Second Republic, elections were held in 1983. As things turned out, large-scale arson, assassinations and general violence dogged the pre-election, election and post-election periods in the quest to rig, stop rigging and clear the way for some not-so-popular candidates to emerge as winners at various levels. In the ensuing melee, Ondo, Oyo, Niger, Kaduna, and Kano states were engulfed in violence, while several others of the nineteen states had their own issues (Taiwo, 2000:88). Bouyed, of course, by such high level of election-related violence, the military led by Maj. Gen Muhammadu Buhari struck again with a military coup on December 31, 1983 and put an end to the Second Republic.

The hopes of many Nigerians were dashed when the military government annulled the presidential election. Shortly afterwards, nationwide protests, industrial strike action and civil disobedience engulfed the country. The post-June 12 crisis led the military ruler, General Babangida, to abdicate his exalted position as head of state on August 27, 1993. General Babaginda hurriedly relinquished power to an unpopular Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chie Ernest Shonekan (Olowojolu et al., 2016). The Interim National Government was sacked by General Sani Abacha on November 17, 1993, thus bringing the till-fated so-called Third Republic to an inglorious end.

Other elections conducted in the Third Republic and the current Fourth Republic starting from the 1999 elections witnessed various forms and dimensions of violence. The 2003 elections which marked the first time the country will successfully complete a transition from one civilian regime to another were worse than that of 1999 and the 2007 elections progressively worse than the 2003. The then outgoing president after he

attempted and failed to change the constitution to have another term in office described the 2007 election as 'a do or die' for him and his party. His outburst set the stage for different acts of brigandage and violence and the elections described by different observer groups as the worst ever conducted in Nigeria because it resulted in a 'direct capture of votes' (Orji & Uzordi, 2012).

The 2011 elections witnessed large-scale post-election violence with an estimated 800 fatalities mainly in the northern region (Human Right Watch, 2011).Paradoxically, the 2011 elections were adjudged by different observer groups to have been better organised than previous elections in this dispensation.

The post-election violence perpetrated mainly in the northern part of the country, therefore, raises the question of the motivation of such orgy of violence, and brings to the fore the ethno-religious character of electoral violence. As the country prepared for the 2015 elections, there was palpable signs and an apocalyptic foreboding trailing the elections with the first sign being the six-week postponement ostensibly because of insecurity in the northeastern part of the country as a result of the activities of the insurgent group Boko Haram.

The pre-election violence, according to the National Human Right Commission of' Nigeria, resulted in the death of 106 persons within 3 months (Olupohunda, 2015). This high number of fatalities and threat or more violence was accentuated by an ethno-regional sense of entitlement that was brought to bear during the campaign. While the Niger Delta region and many other people in the south believed the out-gone President who hailed from their region deserve and must continue in office, majority in the north were of the view that power must return to the north after the former President violated a supposed zoning formula for power rotation between the north and south after the death in office of a sitting President of northern extraction in 2010.

Similarly, the 2019 General Elections also witnessed electoral violence. It was reported that over 626 people were said to have been killed between the start of the campaign in October 2018 and the final election in March 2019 (Coalition Observer Group, 2019). According to the report, the North-west region recorded the highest number of deaths with 172 killed during the elections, while the North-east followed with 146 fatalities. Also, the report revealed that the south-south and North-central had 120 and 111 fatalities respectively. Sixty-three people were killed in the South-west, while 14 were

killed in the South-east. The organisation also revealed that Benue, Borno, Kaduna, Rivers, and Zamfara led with the highest casualties during the elections.

The Three Campaign-related Factors that Course Electoral Violence in General Elections in Nigeria

- **Acrimonious, and Inflammatory messages**

In Nigeria, most general elections witness heavy inflammatory campaigns across the major political divides and among political elites and their supporters . The level of the inflammatory messages that do accompany general elections often leads to acts of violence in some sections of the country. The political loyalists do act on inflammatory statements of their political godfathers and usually resort to some actions which invariably lead to electoral violence witnessed during most general elections. According to Ehinmore & Ehiabhi (2013), election campaigns in the country are often characterized by show of thuggery, insults of political opponents, confrontation of all kinds, and ethnic or religious profiling and intimidation of perceived enemy, which often lead to violence in the election. The case in point was the massive violence witnessed in Nigeria during the 2019 general elections. Inflammatory election campaigns which polarize the constituencies, or the nation remain a vital reason for post-election violence (Angerbrandt, 2020).

- ***Sectional Campaign and Ethnic Profiling***

Candidates of major political parties during the electioneering process do resort to ethnic and sectional campaign instead of campaigning on important issues that have a direct impact on the citizens. Campaigns along ethnic lines during electioneering encourage violence especially when other ethnic groups feel voting otherwise during elections. The electoral violence is commonly triggered by the political class or political party whose means of identification does not go beyond sectional or regional, religious and ethnic inclinations and thus relies heavily on this means of wooing voters. The use of ethnicity in Nigerian electioneering is such that the political aspirants with a great amount of ethnic influence having lost an election tends to directly or indirectly incite their thugs and supporters to cause disturbance which in most cases leads to violence in the community (Agbalajobi & Agunbiade, 2016).

- ***Ethnic and Ethno-religious Politics***

Candidates in elections in Nigeria are seen as representatives of their respective ethnic groups, sections, religions, or regions. This is equally applicable to how the people perceive political parties, as their voting patterns tend to follow this particular configuration (Orji & Uzodi, 2012). Members of the Nigerian political class employ communal, sectional, ethnic and religious sentiment, when they are faced with stiff political competition for power (Orji & Uzodi, 2012). No doubt, the 2019 general elections in Nigeria witnessed stiff competition for power amongst the political class. The political class then turned to their ethnic and sectional cocoons to gain a political advantage before and during elections. The electoral violence witnessed in some parts of Nigeria during the 2019 general elections was as a result of the uncontrolled ethnic and sectional sentiment exhibited before, during and after the elections. While the ethnic and sectional politics works for some politicians, it did not work for the others thus resulting in the use of violence to show their unhappiness.

Understanding the General Background Role of e-Campaigns (Social media) in Elections

From research evidence, the social media have emerged as one component of e-politics or e-election that have the most direct or meaningful influence on electoral campaigns (Boulianne, 2015; Kaplan & Hoenllein, 2010). This being the case, therefore, throughout the remaining part of this study, e-politics or e-election will be proxy by the social media or the new media.

In recent decades, the potency of social media utilization and adoption as well as its impact on political campaigns has attracted an array of prior and recent studies (Conway, Kenski & Wang, 2015). Although studies have demonstrated that the traditional mass media still take on a significant role in the campaign ecology, because it is a platform for television debates and advertising of press conferences. However, the emergence of social media which is specified as "platforms for interaction and information exchange" [Apuke & Appollos, 2007) has introduced a new pathway for inducing political attitudes and participation and enhancing participatory communication, as well as faster dialoguing and engagement [Ross & Burger, 2014].

- ***A More Personalized Campaign Strategy***

As a recent e-campaign tool, social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter allow political aspirants to speak to voters at once in more personalized, responsive and dialogical manner, thereby enhancing the connection between citizens and candidates [Oelsner & Heimrich, 2015). Put simply, it is medium to bypass the conventional media and communicate directly with voters via website and other social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Indeed research has demonstrated that campaigning through social media such as Facebook and Twitter places more emphasis on the individual politician rather than the political party resulting in increased personalized campaigning and interaction with the electorate and supporters [Eni & Skogerbo, 2013]. Moreover, most political online campaigns adopt, the online relationship cultivation strategies that require the disclosure or openness, data dissemination, interactivity and involvement.

- ***A More Direct Means for Reaching out to Larger Voters and Donors***

Rodrigues & Niemann (2017) pointed out that the advent of social media has provided politicians across the globe a direct means of reaching out and interacting with their potential supporters during election campaigns. In supporting this notion, a survey demonstrates that political aspirants and the electorate have signed up on various social media such as Facebook and Twitter in order to build their online followings and support positive electoral outcomes as well as seek for donations. Satterfield (2016) reiterated that there is a shift in the political landscape due to the potential of social media in political campaigns. Political aspirants and their supporters constantly post their views on Facebook and Twitter.

- ***An Effective Campaign Tool for Keeping Regular contact, inducing Greater Contributions, and Deepening of Likeness by Election Candidates.***

Through social media networking sites, election candidates can much more effectively appeal to the citizens, particularly their supporters by keeping regular contact with their supporters, thereby inducing supporters' contribution and likeness through active comments. This supports studies which emphasized that most political parties and leaders maintained accounts on Facebook, Twitter and other social network sites where they place their agenda.

Indeed, the use of web-based social networking systems, for instance, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in the electioneering campaign can never be overemphasized [Satterfield, 2016]. For example, social media sites allow users to partake in their political beliefs, support a specific candidate and interact with others on political issues (Rodrigues & Niemann, 2017). Specifically, evidence has indicated that a notable use of Facebook was during Obama's 2008 political campaigns. This was efficiently used to contact the group of the electorate, notably the young (Smith, 2015).

Similarly, it was also found that social media sites (Alfred, 2016) was the greatest assets of Donald Trump; he made extensive and adequate use of it to reach out to the masses which eventually made him the winner of the 2016 presidential election. Expanding on this observation, Sophia (2015) observed that during the United States campaign, Trump had outgunned all other prospects with his usage of the social media as a tool to speak straight to his voters to portray his own personality in extreme detail and to wage Twitter wars against his rivals. This proves the effectiveness of the utilization of social media in political efforts which has revamped and changed politics.

However, research has shown that social media are sometimes used inappropriately by political aspirants and their supporters which affect the fairness in political campaigns and processes at large [Apuke & Iyendo, 2017]. Supporting this view, Suntai and Targema (2017) remarked that although social media provide a medium to facilitate democracy in Nigeria, yet, in the build-up to the 2015 general elections, the platforms were deployed to perpetrate campaigns of calumny against candidates with opposing views, which almost divided the country into the extremes of the Muslim-North and Christian- South. This implies that electoral crises and squabbles between contestants have taken on new dimensions due to the influence of social media. Put simply, social media could promote free and fair elections; all the same, there are rising fears that it could be used for propaganda and manipulating of the electoral process in Africa and Nigeria in particular. These manipulations could affect the credibility of social media and politicians; as well as contribute to misinformation within the society, which, as ample evidence has shown, could lead to societal conflicts and violence, including violence at electoral campaigns, during voting, and release of election results.

From the foregoing and more not discussed here for want of space, it is clear that there is a plethora of works on social media, political communication, and democracy in

Nigeria and a considerable number of these works indicate that social media usage has an impact on electioneering campaigns. Nevertheless, if used negatively it tarnishes the image of political aspirants and opponents leading to high level of propaganda. This view will be expended upon in the next segment of this research, which describes the propaganda in e-electioneering campaigning in Nigeria.

The Social Media as a Tool for Propaganda, Mischief, and Electoral Violence General Elections in Nigeria

There is a research assertion which suggests that since social media pass information freely because they are not so strictly regulated, it is possible that much of the information is not subject to scrutiny and may be cooked up as misrepresentation, or even misinformation. This notion has attracted a number of studies on the political propaganda techniques found on social media during electioneering campaigns, and process across Nigeria. For example, Akubor (2016) reported that the 2015 general elections in the country, was characterized by character assassination, violence and abuses and hate speeches on social media. Similarly, Emetumah (2015) reported that in the presidential electioneering campaign, the All Progressive Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) which were the two most notable political parties then in Nigeria accused themselves of spreading false information on social media using their followers, the platform became a new ground for propagating unreliable election messages. Another study concluded that in the' 2011 and 2015 general elections, social media became a more potent tool and even a more lethal weapon and this resulted in releases in the form of videos, voice notes, headlines, as well as broadcasts that made and mar many political parties and individuals (Apuke & Appollos, 2017).

Apuke & Apollos (2017) as well found that there were dysfunctions in the Facebook pages of the 2015 political aspirants in Nigeria, such as deliberate distortions in the information about opponents, abusive words, distortion of the facts about personal performance, and misinformation as a strategy for influencing the electorate. This is consistent with prior studies which remarked that the new media were used to malign, intimidate, and discredit political opponents through comments and posts, resulting in high level of misinformation which triggered conflicts [Anggraini, Mustofa & Sadewo, 2014; Olabamiji, 2014). In a similar study, lbrahim, Pate, Pereira, Ya'u & Agbanyim (2020)

found that in the build-up to the 2015 elections in Nigeria, there were enormous hate and dangerous speeches, along with sentiments that lied latent in the minds of people expressed via social media. This implies that social media were employed to increase the divide between the North and the Southern parts of the country, thereby creating an atmosphere full of enmity for one another. This situation posed a great threat to the fragile democracy which the country has been striving to consolidate. In the same way, Olabamiji (2014), who investigated the use and misuse of the new media for political communication in Nigeria's 4th Republic revealed that although the new media like Facebook have enhanced political awareness and interaction, however, they are also being used in Nigeria to malign, intimidate, and discredit political opponents thus triggering conflicts.

In recapitulating the role of social media in political processes, Suntai & Targema (2017) contend that although social media present a useful tool in the hands of activists and concerned citizens to participate effectively in elections, they play a watchdog role, a privilege which was not initially obtainable. However, there is the prevalence of hate and inflammatory speeches, intensity of lies, mischief, falsehood and negative propaganda, and the use of comment sections to verbally assault, bully, and demonise co-speakers, political aspirants and electorate.

Ways of Fighting the Scourge of Electoral Violence Using the Social Media in Campaigns to Elections in Nigeria.

In the preceding section of this paper, we have been able to note that the use of inflammatory and acrimonious messages, ethnic or ethno-religious sentiments or profiling, and hate speeches at electoral campaigns was the root cause of acts of electoral violence that variously sabotaged successive efforts at entrenching sustainable democracy in Nigeria since 1960 till date (Ehinmore & Ehiabili, 2013; Angergbrandt; 2020; Agbalajobi & Agubiade, 2016; Tamuno, 1991). We were also able to see how, in spite of their positive and appropriate uses for noble causes in electoral campaigns, the various social media as an article of e-politics were mischievously deployed as a tool for negative propaganda to incite the uniformed into committing grievous acts of electoral violence in successive General Elections in Nigeria (Akubor, 2016; Ibrahim et al., 2020; Suntai & Targema, 2017; Apuke & Apollos, 2017). Against the foregoing background, therefore, this paper

makes a number of suggestions on the ways to fight the dreaded cankerworm of electoral violence during campaigns to major elections in Nigeria using the social media tool.

First and foremost, the various civil society organizations (CSOs), Faith Based Groups (FBGs) and INEC, among other stakeholder groups like corporate entities should embark on special advocacy campaigns against use of inflammatory and acrimonious messages, hate speeches, ethnic profiling, and sectional politics during electoral campaigns using the same social media. Noteworthy in this respect is the attempt to use various accounts of the various social media such as those of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp for effective mobilization during the 2011, 2015, and 2019 General Elections in Nigeria. Notable among such accounts or hashtags or Tweet meets and hangouts was #VoteNoFight that was geared towards discouraging acts of electoral violence during the 2015 General Elections. To this end, they said stakeholder groups may do well as part of the advocacy campaigns against inflammatory speech and sectional politics create and sponsor social media accounts with such hashtags like #TolerateFellowNaija, #iHateHateSpeech,#iVoteOneNaija, #ViolenceKills, #iTalkandVoteWazobia, and #FakeResultsKills, among others. These social media hashtags could be effectively used to disseminate videos, pictures, feature reports, comments and diverse opinions or views against hate speech, sectional politics, electoral violence, prebendal politics, and the rising culture of militarism and valorization of politics in general during electoral campaigns in particular (Ashindorbe, 2018).

Secondly, the Nigeria Communications Commission (NCC) as the official regulatory body over telecom industry in Nigeria should as part of the campaign against electoral violence during campaigns to major elections in the country sanction and blacklist any telecom network service provider (TSP) in Nigeria such as MTN, Globacom, Airtel, and 9-Mobile, among others which allows its network to be used for spreading hate speech, inflammatory comments, and sectional campaign messages during major elections. NCC can do so by not wasting any time in investigating and prosecuting any defaulter for possible payment of heavy fines or outright deregistration as the case may be. Doing so as and when due will no doubt serve as a deterrent to any prospective offender. As a corollary to the foregoing, the commission can also use the BVN and other vital biometrics of individuals to investigate and prosecute any election candidate, any of his or her supporters; or political party suspected to have resorted to spreading inflammatory

speeches and sectional campaign messages through the social media, and if found guilty should be sanctioned accordingly, possibly by deregistering such a person's smartphone Sim cards to all the telecom service provider networks in Nigeria.

Thirdly, and as a corollary to the foregoing, the Federal Ministry of Information & Culture and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should be more vigilant and proactive in their watchdog role in monitoring compliance with the recently enacted Hate Speech Law, 2019. As part of the ongoing fight against electoral violence in the country, these two national bodies should waste no time in investigating and prosecuting any suspected persons using any of the social media sites to disseminate hate speech, inflammatory and acrimonious messages, and sectional campaign stunts during campaigns to any major elections in Nigeria.

Furthermore, INEC should also rise up to the challenge of its responsibility and role in the implementation of the recently enacted Hate Speech Law. The election management body should in this regard waste no time in investigating and prosecuting any election candidate, his supporter, or political party who in any way violates the said Law by using any social media site to spread inflammatory or hate speech and sectional diatribe as part of the campaign to major elections in Nigeria. Such prosecution or outright sanction of such offender by way of fine or disqualification from contesting the election will no doubt serve as a deterrent to others.

Again and more importantly, the Federal Government should do well to amend the present Electoral Act 2010, particularly its section 52 (1) (b) which is the major impediment to adoption of e-election in Nigeria. As part of the proposed amendment, it should be ensured that the Act is accorded full official recognition and legal backing to the use of e-campaigning alongside its social media backbone as a potent tool for electoral campaign in Nigeria. Doing so will not only facilitate investigation of any user of the social media suspected to have used any of them for malicious and inflammatory electoral campaign, but also provide ample legal grounds for easy and diligent prosecution of such suspected offenders.

Finally, the Federal Government should also ensure, as part of its vanguard role in the concerted fight against the two familiar bed fellows known as hate speech and electoral violence, that the much talked about Electoral Offences Commission and separate special courts for trial of election-related offences are established. If established, such Commission

shall be charged with the responsibility of investigating and prosecuting persons suspected to have used the social media to spread hate speech, inflammatory messages, and sectional diatribes during campaigns to major elections at the newly created special courts for electoral offences. Doing do will no doubt also serve as a smart strategy to decongest the regular courts of the numerous court cases on electoral violence that have since piled up at such courts in most parts of Nigeria.

Conclusion

This paper examined the role of e-campaigns in reducing electoral violence during the build-up to General Elections in the Fourth Republic in Nigeria. Based on relevant literature, the paper conceptualized electoral violence away from the earlier narrow definition based only on the physical dimension, to include the psychological and structural dimensions of the concept. The study also traced the trend of electoral violence from its origin in the 1964 federal and 1985 Western Regional Elections, through 1983, 1993, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and up to the recently concluded 2019 General Elections in which over 626 lives were lost and property valued at over N5billion were destroyed. The paper also identified three factors, namely, inflammatory speeches, sectional campaign messages and profiling, and ethnic and ethno-religious politics as the prime causes of electoral violence during campaigns to major elections in Nigeria.

It was found that the social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube were significantly used both for positive ends and mischievous purposes during the campaigns to the various general elections so far conducted under this present Fourth Republic. Most worrisomely, it is also the conclusion of this paper that the use of the social media by political aspirants, their respective supporters, and political parties as a mischievous propaganda tool for spreading inflammatory messages, hate speeches, and sectional campaign diatribes as part of their grand electoral campaigns was patently responsible for the several incidents of electoral violence that trailed the 2011, 2015, and 2019 General Elections in Nigeria.

In response to the foregoing, this paper canvassed a number of strategies and ways which if diligently implemented have the potential of reducing the scourge of electoral violence that often arises from the use of social media in conducting campaigns to major elections in Nigeria. In proffering the said recommendations, care was taken not to completely dismiss nor disparage the social media as being anti-election or to wish away

the great role they play in the pursuit of sustainable democracy in Nigeria. In line with foregoing frame of mind, suggestions offered by this paper were, therefore, geared towards repositioning the social media as veritable tool for electoral campaigns in Nigeria's major elections as they evidently do in other civilized democracies all over the world.

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