

The Role of Voter Education in Combating Hate Speech and Electoral Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examined the role of voter education in combating hate speech and electoral violence in Nigeria. Hate speech and electoral violence have been serious issues in Nigeria in recent time, they have caused many problems to the level of growth and development of Nigeria. There is no doubt in saying the development and culture of men affected by hate speech and electoral violence in Nigeria. Hence, this paper extensively discussed the concept of electoral violence and hate speech, forms, and causes of hate speech and electoral violence as well as the effects of hate speech and electoral violence. The paper concluded that the only mechanism in curbing hate speech and electoral violence which seed has eaten deep in the life of the electorates is voter education. To this end, the paper suggested among others that the government should create massive sensitization through voter education to prevent the menace of hate speeches in the country.

Keywords: Political Campaigns, Electoral Violence, Hate Speech, Voter Education

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Introduction

Democracies of various phases of development and consolidation have proven vulnerable to hate speech, which leads to electoral violence and other ill effects. Hate speech and incitements to violence during election constitutes a challenge. Globally, electoral violence has widespread and diverse consequences. The use of hate speech during elections, particularly the campaign period is a dynamic and rapidly evolving issue. The role of voter education in any electoral process cannot be underestimated. It is very crucial that voter education commences on time in order for elections to be void of electoral violence. Voter education focuses on the role of the citizen as a voter. These include knowledge around several issues, the duties and obligations of a voter, voting procedures political parties and candidates, and electoral offenses others are counting procedures, the responsibilities of the election management body, and mandate protection. Indeed, voter education is design to equip citizens with knowledge about the entire electoral process. Therefore, this paper examined the role of voter education in combating hate speech and electoral violence in Nigeria.

Concept of Electoral Violence

Fisher (2002), defined electoral violence (conflict) as any random or organize act that seeks to determine, delay or otherwise influence an electoral process through threats, verbal terrorizing, scorn discourse, disinformation, actual attacks, constrained "security", shakedown, devastation of property, or assassination. Megan (2010) cited by Majekodinmi and Adejuwon, (2012) viewed electoral violence as any spontaneous or organized act by any candidate, party supporters, election authorities, voters, or any other actors that occurs during an electoral process. Such an act starts from registration date to the inauguration of another government that utilizes actual mischief, terrorizing, shakedown, boisterous attack, vicious exhibition, mental of misusing, disturbing, deciding, rushing, postponing, reversing, or otherwise influencing an electoral process and its outcome.

Likewise, Igbuzor (2010) cited by Adesote and Abimbola (2014) described electoral violence as any demonstration of brutality executed throughout political exercises, including pre, during, and post-political decision periods. This may incorporate any of the accompanying acts such as thuggery, utilization of power to upset political gatherings, or casting a ballot at polling stations, or the utilization of dangerous weapons to scare citizens and other constituent cycle or making substantial damage or injury any individual associated with electoral processes.

International Foundation for Election Systems (2011) defined electoral violence as any violence (harm) or threat of violence (harms) that aimed at any person or property involved in the election process, at disrupting any part of the electoral or political process during an election period. According to Albert (2007) in Adesote and Abimbola (2014), electoral violence has to do with all forms of coordinated acts or dangers, physical, mental and basic pointed toward scaring, hurting, extorting a political partner previously, during, and after the political decision to decide, delay, or otherwise influencing an electoral process. The above definitions caught the nature and phases of appointive savagery in Nigeria right from the introduction of the fourth republic.

Concept of Hate Speech

Hate speech is an act that attacks an individual or a specific group based on an attribute such as the targets sexual orientation, gender, religion, disability, color, or country of origin. Hate speech is a crime because it encourages violence towards the targeted group or individual. It is a speech intended to offend, insult, intimidate, or threaten an individual or group based on a trait or attribute, such as sexual orientation, religion, color, gender, or disability (Adebe, 2015).

United Nations Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2013) observed that hate speech consists of spoken words that are offensive, derogatory, and or threatening towards an individual or a group based on a particular attribute of that targeted person or persons. Some of the target attributes include traits as ethnic background, sexual orientation, race, or disability, though there are other target attributes.

In the United States, another term for hate speech is “fighting words” which are probably going to incite a generally sensible individual into acting thoughtlessly against the person who made provocative statements. The laws of certain nations portray hate speech as a discourse, signal, lead, or show that actuates viciousness or biased activity against an ensured gathering or individual dependent on their membership of the group. Hate speech is any speech that is laced with intentions of hatred, to hurt, disparage bringing down, exposing to the risk of danger, person or group of persons.

According to Neisser (1994), hate speech refers to all interchanges verbal, composed, that affronts a racial, ethnic and political gathering, regardless of whether by recommending that they are mediocre in some viewpoint or by showing that they not invited for different reasons. Neisser argues that apart from causing danger or physical assault, hate speech risks violent reactions.

Forms of Hate Speech

Hate speech has various methods of propagation, it does not have a definite method just as there are different reasons it can be propagated. According to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2013), forms of hate speech include:

- ❖ All dissemination of ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred, by whatever means
- ❖ Incitement to hatred, contempt discrimination against members of a group on grounds of their race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin
- ❖ Threats or incitement to violence against persons or groups on the grounds of their race, color, descent, national or ethnic origin
- ❖ Expression of insults, ridicule or slander of persons or groups or justification of hatred, contempt or discrimination on the grounds mentioned above, when it amounts to incitement to hatred or discrimination
- ❖ Participation in organizations and activities which promote and incite racial discrimination

Causes of Hate Speech

- ❖ **Social Media:** Social media is a vehicle through which hate speech propagated beyond reason. Nigeria has also suffered from the negative aspect of social media because somehow, it has romanced very deep-seated hatred and that it seems nobody can do something about. Nigeria has gone beyond caution and justification. Things that many have said in the last one year have never in the 40 years. Moreover, when words are spoken and written and they kept available for the record, they give rise to situations that have caused friends to become enemies. The role of the social medial before, during, and after election has identified alongside electoral frauds. This is in line with Agus, Okeke and Idike, (2011) who found that social media contributed to the post-electoral crisis in 2011 as well as the pre-election violence in 2015
- ❖ **The Arrogance of the Political Class:** This is the winners and losers syndrome. Ignorance also plays a role sometimes, citizens often do not know what they are talking about, and that is where lack of adequate knowledge and information on politics and electoral process worsens the effect of hate speech on the people, especially the youths. Attitudes are difficult to track as well as the profile of those that participate in election violence, especially those commonly referred to as “thugs. They are keys participants in election-related violence in Nigeria from antiquity to the present, and hate speech usually provokes illiterate people to violence. Usually, perpetrators of electoral violence are rarely educated, except the ones given to them by their religion or ethnic leaders. Orji and Uzodi (2012), Concurred with the above views and argue that the ethnic linguists often mislead the illiterates during electioneering campaigns and steer them to fight and defend territorial enslavements despite, Federal Government seems not to be bothered.
- ❖ **Class War:** another thing that promotes hate speech is the class war. There is so much disparity between the rich and the poor in Nigeria. However, it is not merely the issue of the difference alone, but there is a lot of hopelessness associated with poverty among the oppressed. The rich look at the poor as if they will never make it. When people made to feel like that, sentiments set in, and hatred begin against the system. The rich only look at the port as mainly for the casting of votes, and they see themselves to hold the political class (Nwachukwu, Agemalo & Nwosu, 2015).

- ❖ **Ethnocentrism:** Domestic xenophobia that claimed the lives of Nigerians gives rise to a situation where the man from the North sees the man from the South as the enemy. In addition, the man from the South sees the man from the North as the enemy. Recently, utterances of government have brought that feeling back that giving rise to back domestic ethnocentrism. Some parts of Nigeria should be relegated upon, and if the person in power does not begin to reverse that trend, the hate speech will continue to move faster. Look at the Fulani herdsmen, criminality, and atrocities across the country, the government's inability to halt. Their criminal tendencies seem to have given them special treatment; they see themselves having a license to go into domestic xenophobic attacks. Northern chairman of the Miyetti Allah, cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) purported have allegedly justified the attacks carried out in Barkin-Ladi Local Government Area of Plateau State Nigeria, on the 23rd and 24th June 2018 who reported having alleged of the attack carried out as a reprisal where over 300 cows were alleged to have been stolen, despite that there was no reaction from any of the security operative
- ❖ **Failure of the Government to Resolve National Issues:** The fundamental national question of Nigeria's corporate existence is a result of the failure of our government to address salient issues. The opportunity has arrived for the initiative to lock in and meet peoples of high expectations of managing the hydra-headed, issue that is at the foundation of Nigerians adversity. An opportunity to do the inescapable is currently, since nobody knows the sickness that will murder the debilitated man. The fifty-seven years of Nigeria's existence as an independent state have been be-deviled with troubles that have often brought her to the precipice. Today the country is on the brink, tomorrow she manages to wriggle out. It is more like one-day tone trouble. These troubles, which are entirely human and avoidable, are responsible for the sorry state of affairs in Nigeria. A country cannot develop without a workable structure. National devotement is an anchor on a functional structure. So long as the framework or foundation is unstable, there is nothing anybody can do. The trouble today, trouble tomorrow, how much longer shall we remain in this nightmare. Adibe (2015) added that hate speech has eaten deep into the bone marrow of Nigerians, and it has continued unabated. The hatred between the ethnic groups that make up Nigeria has intensified as the use of hate speech continues unregulated. This hatred manifests mostly between the dominant ethnic groups, which are Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The Igbo and Yoruba *label* the Hausa man as an “*aboki*” which though means friend but is said derogatorily to suggest that they are a moron. Similarly, the Hausas and Yorubas see the Igbo as *lovers of money* while the Hausas and Igbo see the Yoruba as *cowards and saboteurs*.
- ❖ **Religious Intolerance:** Nigerian said to have crossed all lines; we have crossed the purple, red, green line and not just red. There are so much religious antagonism and intolerance now. A Christian see a Muslim as a threat by calling him names like; Mallam, Aboki, e.t.c, while Muslims as well calling Christians offensive words such as; *k, a*, etc. We see this entire daily, and for us to be able to get out of the menace there should be religious tolerance devoid of hate speech.

Consequences of Hate Speech

Hate speech often accompanied by intimidation and incitements can trigger physical or psychological violence that directly undermines electoral security and electoral integrity. Hate speech may lead to actions that are an offense in law, and that may qualify as a hate crime. In other instances, even the speech itself may carry criminal penalties. Irrespective of the aim of hate speech, Adibe (2015) noted that it is a catalyst for electoral violence and other sectarian killings in Nigeria.

Fischer (2002) identified different manifestations of election violence as follows:

- ❖ Pre-election day violence (it occur during the registration period and can lead to massive disenfranchisement of voters due to psychological fear)
- ❖ Campaign violence (it is during this period that major political meeting and rallies are holding. The period is a prominent stage with a high tendency for electoral violence)
- ❖ Election day violence (it manifests in the forms of burning of election offices and material including ballot boxes and papers, intimidation of voters, snatching of ballot boxes, rigging, and diversion of election materials)
- ❖ Post-election day violence (violence can also occur hours and days after the election, it can emanate from a dispute over election results and the inability of the judiciary system to handle election disputes. How an election result announced might also lead to electoral violence.

Falade (2014) Noted that Nigerian political history has been unstable. Electoral violence in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial era. Violence has become a regular character in an election include the democratic process as well as values. Institutions prevented from developing because power is gain and retained through violent acts like the proliferation of small arms and peddling of hate speeches sustains the culture of intolerance and electoral violence in Nigeria (Orji 2012). We observed what electoral violence in Nigeria manifest in forms of killings, looting, destruction, and damage of property: assault and death threats; bombings/forceful dispersion of political rallies; destruction of campaign billboards; fighting among political parties; violent street protest and hooliganism; others are arbitrary detentions and arrests without a warrant. These manifestations threaten democratization in

Nigeria. Electoral violence directly linked to electoral fraud and ethnicity in Nigeria, which generates because of hate speech (Ejiofor 2007)

Voter Education

Voter education means providing citizens of democracy with information about participating in elections (Enem, 2006). Voter education often provides through the National Electoral Commission; as such, the organ must remain politically non-partisan. The focus of voter education is often on how to vote rather than whom to vote for during elections. Appropriate voter education should provide citizens with knowledge regarding:

- ❖ How to register to – vote most democracies require citizens to first register as a pre-requisite to voting in elections or referenda.
- ❖ How to complete ballot papers- incorrect filling out ballots can mean an individual's vote misrepresented in the final count.
- ❖ The electoral system – citizens should know how their votes will contribute to the result in an election (Falade, 2014).

Geys (2006) noted that voter education means the combination of activities to help voters make rational choices about candidates and ballot measures, and then carry out these choices accurately, effectively, and orderly when voting. It involves informing voters about the candidates, what a ballot looks like others are how to use voting machines, and how to cast their votes properly to record free and fair election that leads to political stabilization.

Role of Voter Education in Curbing Hate Speech and Violence in Nigeria

Election in Nigeria like other places is a serious venture. One of the cardinal preparatory steps to having a smooth election is educating the electorate on what to do and how to go about ensuring of electing a democratic leader. However, election cannot be genuinely democratic, unless voters know and understand the lifestyle, plans, and programs of various contestants that in turn will equip them to cast informed votes (Uchendu, 2012). It will not be out of place to ask for intensified voter education to direct the people rightly on their choice of leadership, as well as attract those who already fees indifferent to the entire situation.

Voter education empowers us to be well-informed, active citizens and gives them the opportunity to change the world around them. It is a vital part of any democracy and equips ordinary people with knowledge about democracy and or the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Voter education teaches electorates what an individual can do to protect and support democracy. It enables people to understand their role and responsibility as active citizens especially since democracy has been in practice for about 20 years. There is we need for voter education for citizens to know how they can use this in empowering the political system.

Apathy, a situation of difference exhibited by the electorate does not help. Voter education would help electorates to troop out en-masse to elect those they perceive to have performed.

Ejiofor (2007) affirmed that those who see political office as a way of amassing reason, siphoning public treasury, embezzlement, and those protecting their economy, should not be given such power. Those desperate for power and go to the extent of heating the polity with hate speech at all cost, not minding what people think about, needs to be stopped via electoral process too; it should only be done through voter education.

Religious groups can help in enlightening the voters; they should teach their faithful who are the voters, that collecting money from politicians would make them appear like beggars. Voter education helps the electorates to drum into the ears of the politicians, that the politicians need them more than they need the politicians once this is done things will eventually change for the better. Thus, they will not sell their votes for a plate of porridge and start regretting when things go sour (Yakubu 2002).

Voter education is a viable instrument for achieving political stability and natural development. When the citizens or the masks are properly oriented on political involvement or elective process through direct or indirect outreach, it enhances their political participation, which results in a good democratic process and political stability. Direct outreach to the masses could be by person-to-person contact during the electioneering campaigns (Nwolise, 2007).

The election in a democratic system offers a unique opportunity to the electorates to exercise their franchise by voting the candidates of their choice into office. Since the attainment of independent electoral fraud and violence has remained a difficult issue that emanates because of hate speech. For example, 1999 and 2015 general elections that heralded the current democratic dispensation reportedly characterized as widespread and monumental electoral malpractices and irregularity. Since the enthronement of the current democratic order, there has not been enough emphasis on educating the Nigerian electorate on voter's education. Orji (2012) observed that almost all the elections in Nigeria were characterized by huge electoral violence, intimidation, manipulation of electoral commissions, staff, security agencies as well as election rigging, multiple voting, hijacking of ballot boxes, and vote buying. Voter education is a very essential in any democratic system as the proper orientation of

the electorates on the essence of casting one's vote and involvement in the democratic system of Nigeria, will not only bring about a high level of motivation, encouragement in the electorates but will also make them have confidence in the government. This method will no doubt lead to a sustenance democratic system in our country, Nigeria.

Majechodinmi and Adejuwon (2012) opined that successful voters' education ensures that voter is ready, willing, and able to participate fully in the electoral process. Voter's education is essential in ensuring voters are well informed and can effectively exercise their voting rights and express their political will on Election Day.

Raise awareness and educates voters. Public information campaigns and voters education dispels myths and misconceptions among the electorates. Such efforts can help voters' identity and address intolerance in their own lives and recognize, and resist hate speech purveyed by officials, candidates, and their supporters and the media. Long-term voter education is also important in raising voters' literacy levels and reducing the public's vulnerability to hate speech and calls for violence.

Voter education raise awareness plays a necessary role in helping the electorate understand what constitutes hate speech, to recognize it when it occurs, and to better appreciate the harm done not only to individuals and groups but to whole communities, democratic institutions, and society at large. Such an effort can combat "negative stereotypes of, and discrimination against, individuals on the basis of protected characteristics.

Conclusion

Voter education focuses on the role of the citizen as a voter. These include knowledge around several issues, including the duties and obligations of a voter, voting procedures political parties and candidates, electoral offenses. Others are counting procedures, the responsibility of the election management body, and mandate protection. Hate speeches directed at gaining political power leads to electoral violence. Nigeria's background of intolerance provides ample grounds for the use of hate speech. Electoral violence generally refers to violence that directly or indirectly connected to protest against an election. However, prevalent forms of political violence in Nigeria exude in political assassinations, arsons, violence-pruned campaigns, thuggery, election-related, related ethno-religious crisis, snatching of ballot boxes, and so on and so forth. In conclusion, the only mechanism in curbing hate speech and electoral violence which seed has eaten deep in the life of the electorates is voter education. Indeed, voter education designed to equip citizens with knowledge about the entire electoral process.

Suggestions

The following are the suggestions made:

- ❖ Creating awareness surrounding an issue through direct condemnation and calls for statements withdrawal
- ❖ People should always respond to a dangerous speech made by high-profile public figures by organizing a press conference, calling on partners and their civil society organizations to do the same, and asking media houses to form a critical mass around the issue to compel the individual concerned to denounce or reverse their comments before the public.
- ❖ Dissemination of positive messages through campaigns against hate speech and electoral violence, this may include peace platforms on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and the use of social media trackers to help track those dangerous hate speeches.
- ❖ People should not wait for the government, those who love Nigeria, elders of the country, and people whom God has blessed in the country should dedicate their time to healing this nation.
- ❖ The government should create massive sensitization through voter education, as it will help to prevent the menace of hate speeches in the country.
- ❖ In the general education system, voter education should be introduced in order to inculcate democratic culture and prepare the young for political and electoral participation in the future
- ❖ The government should establish other mechanisms that would address the menace of hate speech and electoral violence in the country before it leads to more violence and shatters the stability and peace of the nation.
- ❖ Voter education should start early, be systematic and continuous throughout the electoral process.
- ❖ The public should understand that any message they receive on any platform of social media, be verified to be sure of its authenticity before it is made available for public consumption.
- ❖ Interactive radio programs focusing on key peace-oriented messages can act as meaningful compliments.

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