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ETHNICITY AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN AFRICA: AN ELITE THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The linkage between ethnicity, religious polarization and electoral violence in Africa has become one of the most recurring theme in the literature on democracy and elections in the continent. The electoral process in these emergent democracies have been observed to be marred by electoral violence which many have blamed on the diversity that characterize the socio-political configuration of these states which were inherited from European colonial powers at independence. In an attempt to explain the electoral violence phenomenon, existing works have limited the depths of their enquiry just below the surface by attributing the phenomenon to ethno-religious diversity which is prompted by competition for power and resource control. This paper makes an invitation for a deeper analysis by making a proposition based on the elite theory- which will serve as a framework for future studies on the subject matter. It proposes that the elite

in Africa derive their support from their ethno-religious enclave and therefore have ethnic-based support structures. Since every society is shaped by the values and preferences of the elite, the demand of an ethno-religious enclave is therefore a reflection of the interest of the elite class in dominance of such enclave. As a result of this, ethnic competition and by extension electoral violence in African democratic experiments are a result of the clash of interest between these ethnic-based elite classes and their failure to harmonize their interest. To this end, we therefore suggest that electoral violence in Africa occurs mainly as 'proxy wars' between ethnic-based elite classes. Based on this assumption we propose that electoral violence is a function of the failure of the elite class from competing ethno-religious enclaves to harmonize their interest in an electoral process, and when harmonization of interest do occur there tends to be a peaceful election as was experienced in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria which was peaceful despite the volatility of the political system at the time. This proposition sustains a new dimension in the debate and therefore provides itself as an analytical framework for future studies to build on.

Keywords

Ethnicity, Religious Polarization, Election, Electoral Violence, Elite, Ethno-Religious Enclaves, Mobilization, Interest

1. Introduction

The post-colonial history of Africa is a history of the quest toward national integration in the face of socio-economic and political challenges and one of these challenges is the sustenance of democracy (Thomson 2004, Schraeder 2004). Supported by strong institutions, one of the pivotal element and indeed pillar of any democracy is periodic election which involves a set of activities leading to the selection of one or more persons out of many to serve in positions of authority in a society (Nwachukwu & Uzodi 2012). But despite different reforms and in some occasion military intervention, the electoral processes in Africa on the average have been characterized by various activities that have marred its credibility (Bayart 1993). One of such activity is electoral violence. Electoral violence according to Fischer (2002) refers to:

Any random or organized act that seeks to determine, delay or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, discrimination, physical assault, forced 'protection', blackmail,

destruction of property or assassination (Fischer 2002:18)

The central purpose of this act is to “delay, disrupt, or derail a poll, and determine the winners of competitive races for political office” (UNDP 2009: 4). This act has been identified by Nwachukwu & Uzodi (2012) and the Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance (2011) to have three key elements. These are:

- Like any form of violence, electoral violence manifests itself in physical forms (kidnapping, killing, and destruction of property) and non-physical forms (threats, intimidation and blackmail).
- Its main goal is to influence the electoral process either by changing the outcome or disrupting the process.
- It occurs at different periods in the election cycle; before, during and after election.

The consistency of the occurrence of electoral violence in African emerging democracies have made some analysts to conclude that election results in this clime come in two separate columns; one records the votes at polling stations while the other records the number of people killed around the time of the election (The Economist 2011). In fact, elections in the continent have always been a ‘turbulent and violent affair’ (International Crisis Group 2014). Two main factors that have been identified by previous studies to promote this dilemma are ethnicity and religious polarization. Blaming this on the colonial heritage of the continent, there exist some degree of consensus among scholars that the foundation of electoral violence in Africa is traceable to European colonial politics which nurtured ethno-religious polarization, while hindering the development of national politics and integration (Thomson 2004, Welsh 1996). Agreeing with this opinion, Blanton et al (2001) blames colonial administrative style for the prominence of ethnicity. This suggestion was captured in Chessman’s own conclusion on the subject when he suggest that:

During the colonial period, (Africans) were allowed only a limited political space, which existed mainly at the local and informal levels. As such, local leaders are forced to carve out political space at the communal level, to form ethnic parties to develop one-party districts, and woo ethnically homogenous supporters (Chessman 2006:13).

The sustenance of these ethnic oriented politics by the colonial powers lasted till

independence. At independence, the new states in Africa quickly degenerated to a “we-versus-them” tussle for power among the major ethnic cleavages. And the electoral process becomes a battlefield for ethnic supremacy in relation to the acquisition, consolidation, and wielding of political power which is seen as essential for ethnic ‘survival’ in the political landscape of these countries. Observing this situation, Nwachukwu & Uzodi (2012) opined that:

The degree of importance of ethnicity in multi-ethnic political systems affects the tendency of losers to mobilize violent protests after elections. If political actors attach an ethnic interpretation to their differences, political competition and conflict will tend to be more comprehensive in terms of issues and population involved. Again, the groups involved in political contest will feel more vulnerable collectively and less able to isolate themselves from political conflicts and their consequences (Nwachukwu & Uzodi 2012: 33).

Like ethnicity, religious polarization plays a key role in electoral violence in Africa. The population of the continent is divided between three main religions; Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions (ATR). This creates another level of competition, hence making the dilemma bi-dimensional. Politicians tend to use ethnicity to draw support from their locality, while using religion to bolster support from those who may not be under their ethnic influence but who share similar religious conviction and affiliation. This power politics along ethno-religious lines have been identified to have ripple effect on the democratic system since it create and sustain political tension and ultimately electoral violence (Egwu 2001; Osinubi & Osinubi 2006; Jega 2002; Salawu 2010). Although there exist extensive body of literature linking ethnicity and religious polarization with electoral violence, there appears to exist little attention to probe beyond the surface and investigate if there exist a catalyst that converts ethnic/religious based competition and tension into violence during an electoral period. Situated within this gap, this paper will extend the frontier of the elitist theory into this debate by developing hypothetical assumptions based on its major tenets that will provide a framework and building blocks for future studies on the subject. But first it is imperative to conceptualize electoral violence, ethnicity, and religious polarization. After this we shall present the core assumptions of the elite theory from which our hypothetical postulation will emanate.

2. Election And Electoral Violence

As a political concept, election is a set of activities leading to the selection of one or more persons out of many to serve in positions of authority in a society (Nwachukwu & Uzodi, 2012). It is the institutional technology of democracy and have the potential to make government both more accountable but also legitimate (Collier 2009). The essence of this concept is that people should have the right to determine who governs them, hold them accountable for their actions and also impose legal limits to the government's authority by guaranteeing certain rights and freedom. Although election is the engine room of a democratic setting, its experiment in Africa have been one of controversy. Rather than serve as a means of political cohesion, it have gradually become synonymous with violence in the continent. Sharing this view, Segun (2013) opined that 'there seems to be a growing body of literature on the relationship between democracy and violent conflict... election an integral feature of democracy have equally generated much controversy'.

Other studies have linked democracy with an increase in the risk of armed conflict in newly democratizing nations (Mansfield & Snyder 2007), it also heighten the probability of violent conflict in post-conflict societies (Jarstad 2008) and increases the risk of political violence in low income countries (Collier 2009). But of these controversies one that is most rampant is electoral violence. To Nwolise (2007) electoral violence refers to:

A form of organized acts or threats – physical, psychological and structural aimed at intimidating, harming (or) blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view of determining, delaying or otherwise influencing an electoral process (Nwolise 2007:133).

In similar vein, Laakso (2007) sees electoral violence as:

An activity motivated by an attempt to affect the results of elections either by manipulating the electoral procedure and participation or by contesting the legitimacy of the results. It might involve voters and candidate's intimidation, killing, attacks against their property, forceful displacement, unlawful attentions and rioting (Laakso 2007: 227-228).

Ojo (2014) conceptualized electoral violence to mean:

Any act of violence perpetrated in the course of political activities, including pre, during and post-election periods, and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process, or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with the electoral processes (Ojo 2014:4).

In his own definition, Anifowoshe (1982) sees electoral violence as:

The use or threat of physical act carried out by an individual or individuals within a political system against individual or individuals/property with the intent to cause injury or death to persons and/or destruction of property; and whose objective, choice of target or victims, surrounding circumstances, implementation and affects have political significance.

It is a form of anomia participation in the electoral process (Elaigwu 2006) done with the intent to ‘delay, disrupt or derail a poll and determine the winners of competitive races for political office’ (UNDP 2009:4). Fischer (2002) operationalized electoral violence to include:

Any random or organized act that seeks to determine, delay or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, discrimination, physical assault, forced ‘protection’, blackmail, destruction of property or assassination (Fischer 2002:18).

It has four main characteristics:

- It occurs in order to achieve a specific political objective which is to affect the various aspects of the electoral process and thus its outcomes (Hoglund 2009:415; FES 2001:1).
- It may occur in any stage of the electoral process. Three of these stages are the pre-election period, the Election Day and the post-election period (Sisk 2008; IPI 2010).
- It provides different actors. These include government forces (police and ministry), political parties (leaders, members and sympathizers) and non-state armed groups like militia, rebels and paramilitary (Laakso 2007; UNDP 2009).
- It includes such activities as threats, coercion, obstruction, abduction, detention, assault, torture, and murder as well as rioting, plundering and destroying properties, distracting campaign activities and destroying materials, disturbing public gathering and educational

activities, shutting down offices, establishing 'no go' areas (Marco 2009; UNDP 2009).

- It is target specific. Usual target includes electorates, candidates, election officers, observers and media groups, electoral materials such as ballot boxes, campaign materials, registration data, polling results, electoral facilities such as voting and tallying stations and electoral events such as campaign meetings and demonstrations (Hoglund 2009; USAID 2010).

Evidence from existing studies shows that electoral violence is a recurring phenomenon, and have become almost an aspect of the electoral process in Africa as the casting of ballot papers. In his study of 57 countries that held elections in 2001, Fischer (2002) observed that violence occurred in 14 of them which represent 24.5% of the poll data. This observation is consistent with Bekoe's later findings that showed that 19-25% of elections in Africa was marred by electoral violence, chief among the affected countries and those that have deep-rooted ethno-religious cleavages with Egypt, Nigeria, Liberia and Zimbabwe topping the list (Bekoe 2012; Sisk 2008; IDEA 2006). Several attempts have been made to explain this phenomenon. To some scholars electoral violence occurs because political office is considered a resource which must be fought for and acquired at all cost, which once acquired is a perpetual gateway for the betterment of the individual consolidating and wielding it, his clan and those that comes from his ethno-religious cleavage. Sharing this opinion, Fortman (2000) posited that:

In the Asian context, political power is considered as a major social good because those who hold it also have a significant control over a variety of other social goods.

So violence becomes inevitable when elections pose a real probability for transforming the prevailing power configuration. Further evidence shows that both ruling and opposition political parties use violence (Mehler 2007) while opposition groups also employ it to express their grievances over the electoral process or outcomes when they loss. The ruling elites are not exemptions to this, studies also indict them. It is suggested that the ruling elites take arbitrary and suppressive measures against their political opponents due to deep-seated fears of losing political power (Mehler 2007; Laakso 2007; Fischer 2002). In sum, this show that competitive elections are prone to conflict and violence due to the stakes involved. The stakes of winning and losing a political office becomes extremely high within the contexts of patronage and identity politics (Sisk 2009) and when the benefits of office is put into consideration (Sisk 2008; Thompson & Kuntz

2006; IDEA 2009; Høglund 2009).

Adolfo et al (2012) in their own study identified two root causes of electoral violence. The first is structural factors which are related to the underlying power structures prevalent in new and emerging democracies, such as informal patronage systems, poor governance, exclusionary politics, and the socio-economic uncertainties of losing political power in states where almost all power is concentrated at the center. Secondly, factors related to the electoral process and the electoral process itself, such as failed or flawed elections, election fraud and weak or manipulated institutions and institutional rules governing the electoral process.

Taking a step further in the attempt to explain electoral violence in Africa, a great body of work have linked electoral violence to ethnicity and religious polarization (Segun 2013; Thomson 2004; Osita 2007; Abbass 2008; Cervellati & Sunde 2011; Jega 2002; Onapajo 2012; Alemika 2001; Obakhedo 2011; Agbehonou 2014; Nwachukwu & Uzodi 2012, Oyugi 2008). This is so because the resources of the state in Africa are concentrated at the center and each ethnic group compete for its control which can only be done legitimately through the acquisition, consolidation and use of state power. As a result of this, political mobilization rather than to have an over-arching nationalistic tone is more of an ethno-religious mobilization. Drawing similar conclusion, Høglund (2009), Seifu (2012) and Oyugi (2000) all posited that existing ethno-religious cleavages within the society in Africa remains the most important factor which determine whether elections become peaceful or violent.

Although the studies on elections and electoral violence in Africa is in the increase, there exist nevertheless gap that needs to be filled. Observing this Osimen & Ologunowa (2013) opined that:

The problem of (electoral) violence seems to be ever more present as complexities of nation-building and democratic development arise... electoral violence and its implications to the democratization process have received less attention from academics, perhaps because large scale political violence is commonly associated with autocratic regimes.

While the literature have identified ethnicity and religious polarization as major causes of electoral violence there exist little work to establish the catalyst of ethno-religious competition and violence during election beyond the idea of resource control. By this, little attention have been paid on the

role of the elite, charismatic leaders et cetera in creating the necessary pre-condition that converts ethno-religious tension into violence during the electoral period.

3. The Elite As 'Catalyst' In The Linkage Between Ethnicity, Religious Polarization And Electoral Violence

The idea that the society is shaped by nothing but the values and preferences of the elite is one of the main pillar of the elite theory (Onuoha 2015) which was popularized by Vilfredo Pareto and Geatano Mosca, and extended into a more generalized theory by Robert Michels, James Burnham, and C. Wright Mills. Presenting a classical analysis of the elitist thesis Mosca (quoted in Ikpe 2010: 149) averred that:

In all societies, from societies that are very meagerly developed and have barely attained the dawns of civilization, down to the most advanced and powerful societies - two classes of people appear - a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous: performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantage that power brings; whereas, the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first, in a manner that is now more or less on legal, now more or less arbitrary and violent.

This theory is anchored on three main tenets these are:

1. In every society power and influence is not distributed equally. This unequal distribution therefore creates two classes. There is the dominant class which is the class that has more power and influence and with it shapes the society by making the rules through which it is governed, and there is the receptive class of the ruled. Elite theorists asserts that the dominant class is made up of a 'significant' minority that 'out-organize' the majority and hence assert itself upon it (Onuoha 2015).
2. The elite are an organized class that is internally homogenous, self-conscious, self-perpetuating and drawn from the very exclusive segment of the society.
3. The elite are essentially autonomous and self-preserving.

It have been suggested that the elite theory cannot be applied in explaining electoral violence in Africa since although the elite controls the political dynamics in the continent the self-preserving nature of the class makes the elite conscious and to avoid 'class suicide' and being homogenous they settle their differences within themselves. While this may be true of the nature of

the elite in developed countries, it is not exactly true in the case of Africa. The reason for this is because the new independent states in Africa are fractured along ethno-religious lines and the long period of colonialization especially the indirect rule system effectively isolated each ethno-religious enclave from the other. The result is that each enclave can be identified with its own elite that draw its significance from the enclave as its power-bloc and without which it becomes obsolete and politically insignificant. Hence there is no over-arching elite at the center, what we have is a loosed interaction of ethnic based elite classes that interact to maintain the status quo for their own individual benefit and by extension to the benefit of the ethno-religious enclave it emanates from, and that jealously preserves its identity. For example, during the first republic in Nigeria Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe a member of the elite from the Igbo ethnic extract of Eastern Nigeria was reported to have suggested to Sir Ahmadu Bello a Hausa/Fulani elite from Northern Nigeria that they should forget their differences in the spirit of nationalism but Sir Ahmadu Bello suggested otherwise that rather than forgetting their differences which to him is tantamount to hypocrisy they should understand and accept their differences. The political elite in Africa therefore as the case of Nigeria is views the state as a mere geographical expression and hence anchor the validity of their class status not on the state but on their ethno-religious enclave and background. Hence, instead of having a 'Nigerian political elite' what we have is ethnic based elite classes like the 'Yoruba political elite' the 'Hausa political elite' et cetera. So when ethnic groups compete for power during the electoral process or resource control it is not the ethnic groups in the social sense of it that compete but rather it is the elite classes of these groups, the enclaves are mobilized simply as 'foot soldiers' or support base through which the aspiration of the elite class is been projected. Therefore the elite cannot be isolated from a discussion of electoral violence in Africa.

Based on the argument above and the tenets of the elite theory, we build our proposition on the linkage between ethnicity, religious polarization and electoral violence on the following assumptions:

Assumption 1: In every African state there exists no over-arching elite class at the national level.

Rather, what exist are autonomous ethnic-based elite classes that interact at the center and attempt to harmonize their interest so as to maintain the status quo and preserve the classes.

Assumption 2: The interest of the ethno-religious enclave is a mere reflection of the values, preferences and caprice of the elite class of that group. The elite class therefore mobilizes the

ethno-religious group it is identified with as enclaves and as its support base to project its own interest during an election.

Assumption 3: These ethnic-based elite classes compete with each other for power, resources and other 'cakes' based on their personal interest and the survival and maintenance of control of their ethnic group since their class status, power and influence is based on the group and without which they will be extinct.

Assumption 4: Electoral violence which involves two or more ethno-religious enclave occurs as 'proxy wars' between the elite classes when there is a clash of interest and discrepancies in the harmonization of the various interests during an electoral process.

From our four assumptions we propose therefore that electoral violence is not directly caused by diversity in the ethnic composition of African states or religious polarization. Neither is it a direct function of poverty nor political mobilization along identity lines rather electoral violence in emerging democracies in Africa is a function of the clash of interest of ethnic-based elite classes in their struggle for power and resources. Electoral violence is only averted when there is a harmonization of interest as was seen at the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria where Goodluck Jonathan a sitting president with strong power base from the ethnic groups in the South-Eastern and South-South zones and a Christian relinquished power to Muhammed Buhari a Muslim with strong power base from the Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba ethnic groups of South-Western and Northern Nigeria. Electoral violence would have broken out as it did in a similar election between the two candidates in 2011 but there was a harmonization of interest between the various ethnic-based elite classes involved.

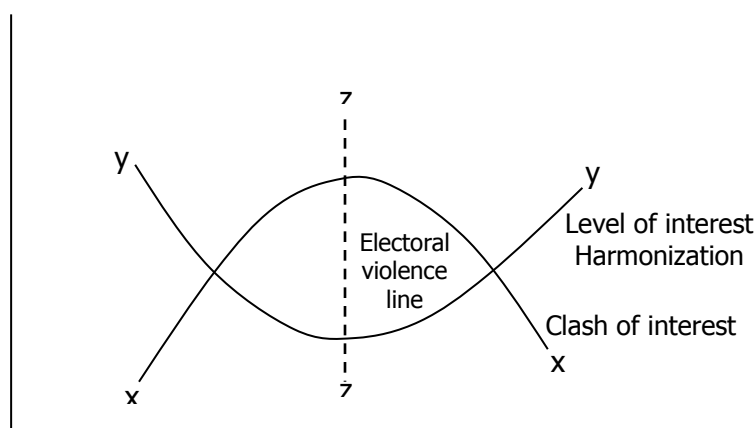


Figure 1: Electoral Violence Curve

Figure 1 above give a graphic expression of our proposition. The graph shows the point in which violence in an election in Africa is most likely to occur. Curve x represent the clash of interest between the elite classes while curve y represents the level of harmonization of interest during an electoral process. Line z is the point in which electoral violence is most likely to occur, here, curve y is at its lowest while x is at its peak.

The logic behind our proposition is that democracy in Africa is still young and with low level of literacy the bulk of the population have low level of political consciousness, especially those in the rural areas. Hence what they feel, see and want out of politics is not beyond what the political structures around them set by the elites to politically socialize them to inculcate into them- these include their political values, preferences and how they see politics generally. And since the political structures are controlled by the elite, the electorate then perceives politics through the kaleidoscope of the elite in such way that the interest of the elite is easily transcended to mean the interest of the group. Hence when the interest of the elite is defeated or in the process of been defeated in an election it is seen by the ethno-religious group as a defeat of its own interest making it possible for its members to be mobilized for action whether legitimate or otherwise. But when there is a harmonization of interest between the elite classes of the various ethno-religious enclave the members of the group also see to that they accept the agreement reached as their own interest and violence is avoided.

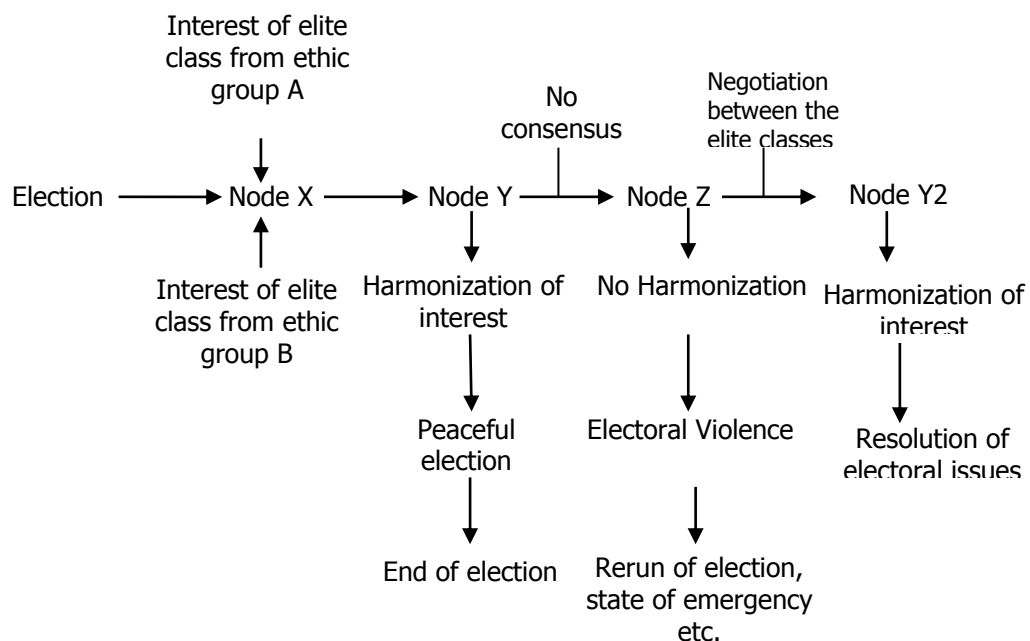


Figure 2: Hypothetical Flow of Activities during a Typical General Election in Africa

Figure 2 above despite the typical flow of an election in Africa. At the beginning of the electoral process in node X, the elite class of the various ethno-religious enclaves involved in the election expresses their interest this may be in form of allocation of resources, candidate choice, zoning of offices, outright competition for position et cetera. The game then moves to node Y, in this point there may be a harmonization of the various interests, if this occur the game ends with a peaceful election. Otherwise there is an uneasy peace as the elite tries to reach consensus. If they do the game advances to node Y2, but if not it moves to node Z were the electoral process degenerates to survival of the fittest and a 'do-or-die' affair. In this situation there is electoral violence and the result could be the outright cancellation of the result, state of emergency, military intervention etc. This clearly shows the dominant role the elite plays in providing the impetus for ethno-religious competition to degenerate to electoral violence. Using this framework, future studies could sufficiently uncover the underpinning issues that make electoral violence almost a phenomenal aspect of the electoral processes in African emergent democracies.

4. Conclusion

Ethnic and religious consciousness is abstract and politically insignificant until it becomes a tool for political mobilization and this is done by the elites that play on this level of sentiment to build support enclaves in their drive to acquire political power. Even in largely homogenous Somalia where there is no clear distinction in terms of language and heritage, political enclaves are established along clan lines and where this tool is absent it is developed and sustained along class lines as seen in the case of the Hutsi and Tutsi in Rwanda. So the problem of electoral violence in Africa does not exist simply because there is diversity in the ethno-religious configuration of African states nor because these identities are used as bases for mobilization rather the catalyst that converts ethno-religious competition into electoral violence is the elite. Whenever there is a clash of interest between the elite from the various enclaves during an electoral process and there is no interest harmonization electoral violence occurs as a proxy war between these classes until the various interests is harmonized else the democratic experiment fails as was the case in the first republic in Nigeria and other African countries where prolonged violence arising from the electoral process or civilian struggle for power have led to military intervention or in some cases state failure. The proxy war in form of electoral violence is fought by the ethno-religious groups that these elite classes have as their enclaves. This postulation will serve as a framework for future

study on the subject matter.

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