



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Inclusive or Exclusive Democracy? Interrogating Structural Violence in Elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Election is primate to democracy to the extent that it serves as a benchmark for evaluating a country's democratic quality. The recognition, acceptance and respect of the right to vote and be voted for is thus highly fundamental in a democratic system. However, the electoral sphere in Nigeria, since the country's return to democracy in 1999, has been marred by systemic issues that amount to structural violence. This includes gross violations of political rights, the marginalization of women and youths, and widespread manipulations and inconsistencies. These troubling aspects not only hinder the democratic process but also perpetuate inequalities and injustices within the system. With the overall objective of interrogating structural violence in Nigeria's electoral system, this study adopted a qualitative approach using secondary data sources and thematic analysis. Findings of this study revealed the structural limitations and inequalities prevalent in the country's elections. Since Nigeria's return to democracy, structural violence has taken different forms and has had significant implications for the country's electoral system. This study concludes that structural violence in the electoral process is detrimental to the country's democratic quality, social cohesion, and long-term stability.

INTRODUCTION

The core essence of democracy in any nation hinges upon the recognition, respect, and acceptance of the rights of its citizens to freely exercise their voting rights and participate as candidates in a fair and transparent election. The electoral process serves as the litmus test for evaluating a country's democratic values (Obakhedo, 2011). It provides a crucial platform for citizens to equally engage in the democratic process, elect representatives of their choice, and instill confidence in the consolidation of democratic institutions, especially in developing nations (Aluaigba, 2016).

However, in contemporary times, there is a growing global concern about the effectiveness of electoral systems in truly reflecting the will of the people. One significant factor contributing to this disconnect between elections and popular sentiment is the pervasive influence of unequal power dynamics and resource distribution, systematically creating and perpetuating socioeconomic and political conditions that foster inequality, marginalization, victimization, and barriers in electoral processes (Parvin, 2022). As a result, the voices and concerns of ordinary citizens are often overshadowed or marginalized (Norris, Cameron, & Wynter, 2018). This influence distorts the electoral landscape, tilting it in favor of candidates or political parties aligned with specific interests. Despite their pivotal role in democratic societies, elections in numerous countries face various challenges that undermine their fairness and impartiality, exemplifying the dominance of structural violence.

In this context, structural violence in elections refers to the entrenched pattern and condition of social and political inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization systematically perpetuated in the electoral process (Murithi, 2008; Braveman et al., 2022). Since Nigeria's transition to civilian rule in 1999, structural violence has become a prevalent aspect of the country's electoral process (Ibok & Ogar, 2018). The democratic dispensation in Nigeria has been marked by unequal opportunities for political participation and restricted access to voting for socio-economically disadvantaged groups, including women, youth, rural populations, and persons with disabilities. A significant number of citizens face physical, geographical, and infrastructural barriers, as well as inadequate polling facilities, which limit their access to the polls. Despite Nigeria's diverse ethnic composition, ethnic minority groups continue to be underrepresented in government appointments, elected positions, and the electoral process itself, often leading to heightened conflicts during elections. Consequently, achieving a free, fair, and legitimate electoral process has become increasingly challenging at all levels of government (Adeola, 2012). This reality raises profound uncertainties about the extent to which electoral outcomes genuinely represent the voices and preferences of the citizenry. Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine the extent of structural violence within Nigeria's voting process in the fourth republic and evaluate its implications for inclusive democracy.

Democracy and Structural Violence in Electoral Process: A Theoretical Nexus

The goal of a democratic society equality and accessibility of all citizens in the decision-making process (Chando, 2014). Democracy is founded on a conviction that all people are of equal value and as posited by Setälä (2010), individual equality and liberty is central to democratic ideals. A good description of democracy is that it should be inclusive, participatory, representative, accountable and transparent (Rai, 2000).

A major fundamental of democracy is election conducted regularly and in a free and fair manner, allowing all citizens of a country regardless of their social, economic, or political status to choose their leaders without fear of intimidation or coercion (Bogaards, 2007). Election is pivotal to democracy that it is inconceivable to envisage a democratic government without it. In fact, there is now a genuine risk of confusing the conduct of regular, generally contested, and transparent elections with democracy (Hounkpe & Gueye, 2010). In contemporary democracies where people are governed through their representatives, election appears to be the most appropriate widespread mechanism for selecting people's representatives who will be responsible for governing on behalf and for the people. As Wojtasik (2013) observed, election central to democratic systems, enabling citizens to exercise their right to vote, legitimizing the government in power, providing a mechanism for peaceful transfer of power, fostering civic engagement, and providing feedback to political leaders. Through free and fair elections, the people can express their preferences, ensuring that the government represents and reflects the will of the people, thereby promoting political stability. Today, a political system that does not choose its leaders through competitive, free, and fair elections can scarcely be called a democracy.

In reality, many democratic societies are plagued by structural violence, which can limit the ability of marginalized groups to participate in the democratic process and can result in policies that perpetuate inequality and harm (Vaidya, 2018). Dilts et al., (2012) observed that structural violence can impact democracy through the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. Limited access to education, healthcare, or employment opportunities may lead to differential ability to participate in the democratic process as those who have more resources, resulting in policies that disproportionately benefit the interests of those who have more power and influence, rather than those who are most in need. Furthermore, the use of force, coercion, violence or threat of violence by the political leaders to suppress dissent or opposition can limit the ability of citizens to participate in the democratic process.

The dominance of structural violence describes how structural arrangements constrain people to the point of infringing on their rights (Ho, 2007). Lee (2016) observed that the limitation or denial of this right by individuals at the helm of political power is structural violence. According to Leander (2012), structural

violence has a stronger hold on state politics, which is marked by greater destruction, because people are denied political and voting rights due to structural deficiencies in society. As a form of societal harm, structural violence is perpetuated through the structures and institutions of the society (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2016). This type of violence is often invisible, but have significant impact on the electoral process.

Braveman et al., (2022) observed that, one of the most common ways in which structural violence manifests in the electoral process is through voter suppression tactics. Voter suppression refers to any efforts that are taken to prevent or discourage people from voting, particularly those who belong to historically marginalized or underrepresented groups. One of the most widely used tactics of voter suppression is the implementation of strict voter ID laws (Hajnal et al., 2017). These laws require voters to present a government-issued photo ID in order to cast their ballot. While this may seem like a reasonable requirement, it can create significant barriers for certain groups of people who may not have access to these forms of identification. For instance, low-income individuals may not be able to afford the fees associated with obtaining a government-issued photo ID, or they may not have the necessary documentation to apply for one. Similarly, elderly voters or those living in remote areas may face difficulty in obtaining a government-issued ID due to mobility issues or lack of transportation (Smith, 2016). Another instance of voter suppression tactics is the reduction of polling stations in certain areas. This was seen in the 2018 elections in Georgia, where many polling stations were closed in predominantly African American communities, leading to long lines and wait times for voters (Stephens, 2021). This can discourage people from voting, particularly those who cannot afford to take time off work or who have other responsibilities that prevent them from waiting in line for hours. Moreover, ensuring difficulty in voters' registration is another common tactic of voter suppression. This can take the form of strict registration deadlines, onerous requirements for proof of residency or citizenship, or the purging of voter rolls (Hajnal et al., 2017).

Gerrymandering is another form of structural violence which can impact the electoral process. Gerrymandering refers to the process of redrawing electoral district boundaries in a way that gives one political party an advantage over the other. This is typically done by manipulating the boundaries of the districts so that one party's supporters are concentrated in a small number of districts, while the other party's supporters are spread out across a larger number of districts. By doing this, the party in power can effectively "pack" the opposition's voters into as few districts as possible, thus diluting their overall voting power (Marcuse, 2020). This can have a significant impact on the electoral process, as it can result in unequal representation and a lack of political power for certain communities. Similarly, gerrymandering can also impact the electoral process by perpetuating systemic inequalities and discrimination. For example, in the United States, the history of racial segregation and discrimination has led to the concentration of certain communities in specific geographic areas. By redrawing district boundaries in a way that ignores these historical patterns, gerrymandering can effectively silence the voices of these communities and perpetuate their marginalization (Whittemore, 2017).

Structural inequality is another form of structural violence that can impact the electoral process. In many societies, certain groups are disproportionately impacted by poverty and may not have the same level of access to political power as more affluent communities. This can result in these groups being marginalized and underrepresented in the electoral process, which perpetuates systemic inequalities (Thai, 2017). One way in which structural inequality can impact the electoral process is through economic barriers. For example, if individuals do not have access to basic necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare, they may not have the resources to participate in the electoral process. This can include the ability to take time off work to vote, or the ability to afford transportation to a polling station. Furthermore, the high fees for nomination forms which technically deny some class of people the right to be voted for is a clear indication of structural violence. This is because only a handful of individuals will be able to purchase this form while the rest are doomed to accept the fate of never having the opportunity to contest for any political position. In addition to economic barriers and concentration of political power, another form of structural violence in the electoral process is discrimination and marginalization. If certain groups, like the female gender, are

systematically discriminated against or marginalized, they may not have the same level of access to political power as other groups.

As observed by Ziller & Schubel (2015), in most cases, the collective will of the public is in contrast with the will of some of the nations' top brass and elites. There is usually a competition between those who wish to gain political power and those who are likely to lose it. In purposefully influencing the processes and outcome of elections, coercive measures are often adopted (Fischer 2002; Nwolise 2007; Hoglund, 2009; Omotola 2010; Bekoe, 2012; Harish & Toha, 2019). Additionally, such illegal and coercive measures are used to keep citizens' choices unacknowledged (Adeola, 2012; Shelly, 2019). This could happen at any point of the electoral cycle; party primaries, voters' registration, election and announcement of election results. In such situations, the rights of the nationals to decide for themselves their choice of leadership is ignored and denied. Their ability to participate in the country's decision-making process through a credible, free, and fair election is compromised by the activities of persons in the state, who seek to impose their will on the public, even at the cost of many lives. It is on the basis of this that Ron (2001) contends that the intensity and level of destruction sustained in an attempt to deny nationals of their right to vote and be voted for during elections is worth recognizing as structural violence rather than inequality or social injustice because structural violence in voting could generate significant casualties and possibly devolve into a situation of civil war. This position was supported by Farmer (2005) and Lee (2016). According to Farmer (2005), the number of casualties sustained due to various structural limitations justify its description as structural violence rather than inequality because the term inequality does not reflect the magnitude of damage it portends. This reality therefore underscores the level of danger structural violence permits and its magnitude of destruction. Okeke-Ogbuafora, Grayb, and Steada (2018) averred that structural violence in the area of politics impedes the achievement of what is termed as a government of, by, and for the people. The essence of such a government is to establish and promote the cores of democracy through elections in which the public's popular voice is heard and the newly recognized government is a representation of the collective will of the public.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Elite theory is a political theory that posits that power in society is concentrated in the hands of a small group of individuals or organizations who possess significant economic, social, or political resources (Lopez, 2013). Pakulski (2018) holds that this group of elites wields influence over political decisions and shapes public policy, often at the expense of the wider population. The elite class is thought to maintain their power through various mechanisms such as media control, lobbying, and campaign financing. Furthermore, they are believed to be motivated primarily by self-interest rather than the interests of the general population, and may use their resources to maintain their position of power even if it means limiting the rights and opportunities of others (Lopez, 2013).

In the context of democracy, elite theory can be applied to evaluate the extent to which political power is concentrated among a select few and how this concentration of power affects the democratic process. For instance, elites may manipulate elections, limit the representation of marginalized groups, and shape public opinion through media control or other means.

Critics of elite theory assert that it oversimplifies complex power structures, disregards the potential for resistance and agency among marginalized groups, and fails to acknowledge the ways in which social movements and activism can challenge elite power. Nonetheless, elite theory provides a useful framework for understanding the concentration of power and wealth in society and its impact on democratic processes (Higley, 2010).

The application of elite theory provides an analytical framework for evaluating the concentration of power and resources in Nigerian politics and its impact on the inclusiveness of the democratic process. The Fourth Republic of Nigeria has witnessed structural violence at its peak, attributable to the influence of powerful elites who seek to maintain their hold on political power. Elite theory posits that these elites exploit their economic and social resources to manipulate the political process in their favor, often at the expense of

marginalized groups. For instance, influential politicians in Nigeria employ their resources to sway the outcome of elections by rigging the vote, intimidating opposition supporters, or controlling the media (Boboye, 2017). Such actions hinder the inclusiveness of the democratic process, making it challenging for marginalized groups to participate and express their views.

Moreover, elite theory contends that the concentration of power among a small group of elites increases the likelihood that they prioritize self-interest over the broader population's interests. Consequently, policies and practices that benefit the elites may be prioritized over those that promote inclusiveness and equality.

METHODS

In achieving the objectives of this study, qualitative approach was employed using secondary data sources and thematic analysis. The use of secondary data was considered appropriate for this study as it allowed for the collection of existing data relevant to the research topic. The data sources for the study included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, reports, newspaper articles and other relevant documents obtained from academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, EBISCOhost, ProQuest and Google Scholar. Thematic analysis was utilized as technique for analyzing the data for the research. This technique allowed for the identification and examination of patterns, themes, and concepts within the data relevant to the research objectives. The analysis process began by familiarizing oneself with the data and identifying key concepts and themes. The themes were then interpreted in relation to the research objectives and used to generate meaningful conclusions and recommendations.

The limitations of this study include the potential for bias in the selection of data sources and the possibility of overlooking important themes due to the subjective nature of thematic analysis. To address these limitations, efforts were made to select a diverse range of data sources and employ a rigorous and systematic approach to the thematic analysis process.

Legal Framework for Conduct of Elections in Nigeria

Stringent laws govern the conduct of elections in every country where democracy exists. However, because elections determine who holds specific elective public seats, politicians and parties may turn to ugly and dishonest techniques to win elections. As a result, it is in the best interests of any political institution to establish norms and laws that all stakeholders in the electoral process must follow. These regulations also outline the penalties that will be imposed on erring individuals that partakes in electoral misconduct.

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Electoral Act of 2022, as amended, describes the legal framework in Nigeria that regulates how elections are to be conducted. The 1999 Constitution primarily addresses structures required for the conduct of elections for various political offices in Nigeria, as well as the establishment of the electoral body and election tribunals. Furthermore, sections 131, 132, 133, and 134 of the 1999 Constitution, as they pertain to the office of the President dictates that any candidate who wishes to become president of Nigeria must be a citizen of the country by birth, be forty years and above, must belong to and be sponsored by a particular political party and must possess at least school leaving certificate. Sections 177, 178, and 179 detail the requirements for candidates seeking election to the office of State Governor. Such candidate must be a citizen of the country by birth, must have attained the age of 35 years, must belong to and be sponsored by a particular political party and must possess at least school leaving certificate. Section 285 provides for the formation of Electoral Tribunals at both federal and state level to address disputes arising from elections for the aforementioned offices. Sections 14 and 15 of the Constitution's Third Schedule, Part I, deal with the establishment of INEC, the qualities of its chairman, functions and powers. Sections 76, 77, and 78 of the 1999 Constitution, for example, detail the procedures for choosing members of the National Assembly as well as the qualifications of Nigerians eligible to vote in National Assembly elections. The election of any member of the National Assembly should not be earlier than 60 days before the date on which the House stands dissolved. All Nigerians residing in Nigeria within the age range of 18 and above at the time of registration is entitled to vote in the election. In terms of electoral offenses. Impersonating another voter while ineligible to vote is a

crime under Section 122, while offences related to bribery and conspiracy are addressed in Section 124. Crimes like voting while unregistered, unruly behavior during elections, election day offenses, un-due influence, and voter intimidation are all specifically addressed in the constitution. In contrast, The Electoral Act of 2022 offers precise descriptions of electoral malpractices as well as the penalties associated with them, it further clearly outlines the offenses and consequences for buying or selling voter IDs, as well as crimes committed during voter registration. Section 22(c) of the Act, for example, stipulates that anybody who "buys or offers to purchase voters' cards on his behalf or on behalf of any other person commits an offence and shall be liable, on conviction, to a fine not exceeding Five Hundred Thousand Naira or imprisonment of not more than two years, or both." Section 23 (2c) states that anybody who prevents another person from registering as a voter has committed an offence, punishable by a fine of Five Hundred Thousand Naira or imprisonment for a duration of 5 years. This slew of legal restrictions is intended to keep electoral fraud at bay while also increasing the legitimacy and integrity of Nigerian elections.

Nature of Structural Violence in Nigeria's Electoral System

Nigeria, no doubt has a robust legal framework for the conduct of a free and fair elections with all qualified citizens able to exercise their political rights. Elections in Nigeria however, continues to witness individuals and groups with access to greater resources, including money, media coverage, and political influence, manipulating the electoral process in their favour. This includes buying votes, marginalization of women and youths in political sphere, bribing officials, or using their influence to suppress opposition candidates or parties. As observed in the run-up to the 2019 general elections, there were reports of politically motivated violence in several parts of the country. In Kogi state, for instance, two prominent opposition figures were attacked and killed, while in Lagos state, there were reports of political thugs disrupting campaign rallies and attacking opposition supporters (Abdulazeez Alao, 2021). More recently, the Lagos state gubernatorial election of 2023 witnessed the disruption of the electoral process, denial of opportunity to vote on the basis of ethnicity, intimidation and the use of violence against voters by thugs (The African Report, 2023).

In Nigeria's political landscape, women continue to occupy a secondary position within the male-dominated sphere, despite the country's return to democracy. Although there have been some gradual advancements in women's political participation, the focus has largely been limited to achieving numerical representation. Women remain underrepresented in various levels of government, with limited progress in attaining decision-making roles. Data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for the April 2007 elections illustrate the significant marginalization faced by women in Nigerian politics. Out of the 7,160 candidates who contested in those elections, only 628 were women. Furthermore, among the 25 candidates running for the presidency, only one was a woman, and there were just five women vying for the vice-presidency. In terms of legislative representation, only nine out of the 109 senators were women, and there were only 25 female members in the House of Representatives. The underrepresentation of women in the state houses of assemblies was striking, as evidenced by the meager count of 54 female members (Vanguard, 2011). The 2011 presidential election in Nigeria served as a poignant illustration of the patriarchal nature inherent within the political system, where Sarah Jubril emerged as the solitary female candidate among the three contenders in the People's Democratic Party (PDP) presidential primary (All African, 2011). Recognizing the imperative to address gender disparities in Nigerian politics, Senator Abiodun Olujimi, a woman of prominence, presented the Gender and Equality Opportunities Bill to the Senate in March 2016 (Policy and Legal Advocacy Center, 2016). This bill aimed to outline comprehensive measures that would ensure women's unrestricted rights to participate in political activities. Alas, the bill encountered staunch resistance from the predominantly male Senate, as it was voted down on grounds that invoked religious and cultural justifications for its rejection. Furthermore, a male senator took it upon himself to elucidate the reasons behind the bill's perceived unacceptability, cautioning his colleagues with the following admonition: "We should not give women too much opportunity. They will come here, and one day you will find all these women in this chamber, and they will mess up" (Sahara Reporters, 2018). This disconcerting

statement encapsulates the deeply entrenched gender biases and discriminatory attitudes that impede progress towards achieving gender equality in Nigerian politics.

Current statistics indicate that women represent only 11.2 percent of both chambers of the Ninth National Assembly, with seven female senators and eleven female members in the House of Representatives. A report by the Women in Politics Forum (WIPF) titled "Research on Interrogating the Policy Interventions to Increase Women's Participation in Governance in Nigeria" revealed that out of a total of 4,259 contestants for the presidential and National Assembly seats in the 2023 elections, only 381 are women. This report underscores the ongoing marginalization of women in Nigeria's political space. Among the 18 political parties, only the Allied People's Movement (APM) fielded a female presidential candidate (Tribune Online, 2023).

The Senate's analysis shows that out of the 1,101 candidates vying for the 109 senatorial seats, only 92 are women, accounting for 8.35 percent. In the House of Representatives, 288 women are contesting out of a total of 3,122 candidates. State-by-state analysis reveals that five states (Kano, Sokoto, Taraba, Yobe, and Zamfara) did not field any female candidates for the Senate, while Jigawa did not field any female candidates for the House of Representatives. Consequently, even without conducting elections, 13.5 percent of states lacked female representation in the Senate, while 2.7 percent of states had no female representation in the House of Representatives (Premium times, 2023).

Additionally, Nigeria's democratic system of government is characterized by a notable disruption of a fundamental democratic characteristic established by the 1999 Constitution—an age barrier that disqualifies individuals below the ages of 40 and 30 from participating in presidential elections, as well as seeking membership in the House of Representatives and State Assemblies (Resolution Law Firm, 2022). As a result, a recurring pattern emerges in successive elections since 1999, particularly at the federal level, where familiar faces resurface. This pattern reflects a system that faces significant challenges due to the actions, inactions, and reactions of aging political leaders in the country. Their dominance in policymaking and implementation has undeniably resulted in the marginalization and limited political engagement of the younger generation. However, the "Not Too Young to Rule" movement called for a review of the age qualification for the Senate and governorship positions, urging political parties to address campaign expenditure limitations and the cost of securing party nominations through electoral reform bills. President Muhammadu Buhari officially signed the Not Too Young to Run bill into law, marking a significant milestone in Nigerian politics (The Guardian, 2022). This legislation effectively lowered the age requirements for aspiring political positions, specifically reducing the age qualification for the office of President from 40 to 30 years, and for the House of Representatives and State House of Assembly from 30 to 25 years. It is important to note that the age qualifications for governorship and the Senate remained unchanged at 35 years (Dataphyte, 2022).

The issue of exorbitant fees associated with the acquisition of nomination forms for individuals aspiring to contest political positions represents a significant manifestation of structural violence within Nigeria's electoral system. Criticism has been directed towards the All-Progressive Congress (APC) for imposing a requirement of N100 million on each member seeking the presidential ticket in the forthcoming 2023 elections (Premium Times, 2023). This considerable financial burden, which has experienced a notable escalation over time, poses a substantial impediment to the active participation of young individuals in the electoral process, thereby undermining the advancements accomplished through the "Not Too Young to Run" campaign.

The financial demands imposed by these exorbitant fees present a formidable barrier for numerous Nigerian youths, who lack the financial resources to meet such substantial sums. Compounded by the prevailing inclination of donors and political patrons to favor older male candidates, whom they perceive as having a higher likelihood of electoral success, young individuals are inherently marginalized in the political landscape. Consequently, while the notion of "Not Too Young to Run" appears viable in theory, the practical reality is that youth often find themselves trapped in a state of being "Too Poor to Run," grappling

with the dilemma of mobilizing adequate funds to meet the financial criteria for eligibility and representation.

Senator Ken Nnamami, a former president of the Senate, criticized the current nomination fees imposed by parties and advocated for INEC to establish guidelines on nomination costs and campaign expenses (Vanguard News, 2023). However, despite the existence of laws governing campaign expenses and appropriate penalties, these guidelines are often disregarded. These circumstances raise concerns as they reinforce the prevalence of money-based politics and gerontocracy, undermining Nigeria's democratic progress. Efforts must be made to reevaluate nomination fees, create more inclusive political environments, and address the systemic barriers that hinder women and young people from actively and meaningfully participating in the electoral process.

Implications of Structural Violence in Nigeria's Electoral Process on Democracy

Nigeria's democratic culture is characterized by assassination, manipulation, lawlessness, illegalities, rigging, oppression, manipulation, marginalization and violence. Other issues are male dominated party executives labelling money politics and innumerable social, cultural and religious factors. The issue of structural violence in Nigeria's electoral process has far-reaching implications for the country's political, economic, and social development. Aliyu, Olawoyin, and Bamidele (2020) note that structural violence is a significant impediment to the attainment and maintenance of a stable constitutional democracy in Nigeria. The principle of free and fair elections is a cornerstone of democracy, and its importance cannot be overstated. Elections serve as a mechanism for citizens to choose their leaders and hold them accountable for their actions (Fischer, 2016). However, when structural violence occurs in the electoral process, it undermines the principles of free and fair elections and threatens the functioning of democracy in Nigeria. Systematic exclusion or disadvantage of certain groups from participating in the electoral process, for instance, undermines the legitimacy of the election outcomes. This is because the exclusion or marginalization of certain groups prevents them from having a say in who governs them, thus making the electoral process unfair and undemocratic (Madanipour, 2015). This explains why Nigeria has never been governed by a woman either in the capacity of president, vice president or senate president. The remark made by the former President Muhammadu Buhari in a joint press briefing with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, where he described his wife as only belonging to his kitchen and the other room further exacerbates the patriarchal system of Nigeria (Reuters, 2016). Nigeria does not operate a gender inclusive political system and this could have a damning effect on how the country itself is perceived by other countries in the world.

Furthermore, the domination of the political sphere by older men who have refused the youths the opportunity to rule has a negative consequence on the democracy of Nigeria, as it appears that rulership is only reserved for a select few and the right all of citizens to be voted for is a mere illusion and just exists on paper. What then becomes of Nigeria's democracy if every of its tenants only exists on the constitutional sheet?

Table 1: BREAKDOWN OF AGE RANGE OF NIGERIAN LEADERS FROM 1999-2023

	Head of State	Date of birth	Date of assuming office	Age of assuming office	End of term	Age at end of term
1	Olusegun Obasanjo	5 th of March 1937	29 th of May 1999	62 years	29 th of May 2007	70 years
2	Umaru Musa Yar'Adua	16 th of August 1951	29 th of May 2007	55 years	5 th of May 2010	58 years

3	Goodluck Jonathan	20 th of November 1957	6 th of May 2010	52 years	29 th of May 2015	57 years
4	Muhammadu Buhari	17 th of December 1942	29 th of May 2015	72 years	29 th of May 2023	80 years
5	Bola Tinubu	29 th of March 1952	29 th of May 2023	71 years	(incumbent)	(incumbent)

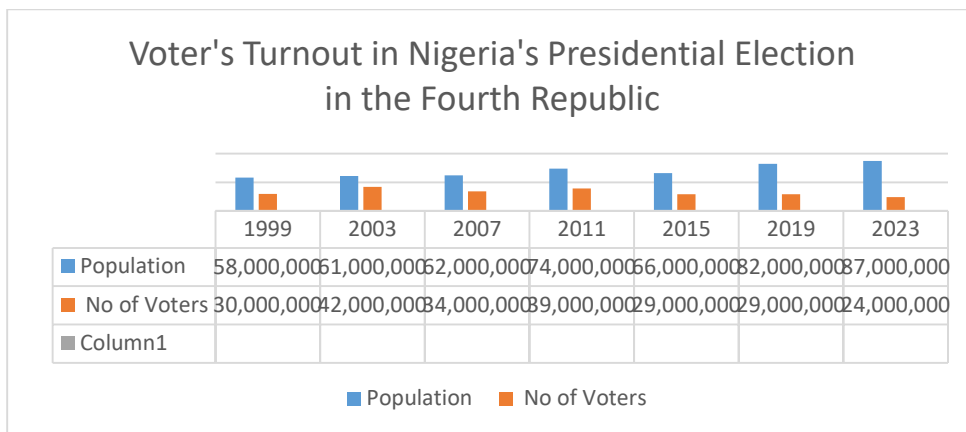
Source: Office of the Secretary of the Government of the Federation (2023)

Upon examination of the table above, it becomes apparent that Nigerian youths have encountered limited opportunities for engagement in the political leadership of their country. Despite the enactment of the "Not Too Young to Run" bill, the exorbitant cost of nomination forms for political candidates presents a significant financial barrier, rendering only a privileged few Nigerian youths capable of meeting these financial requirements. Furthermore, the prevalent preference among donors and political patrons for older male candidates, whom they perceive as having higher chances of electoral success, naturally excludes young individuals from the political process, leading to their disenfranchisement. Consequently, this scenario undermines the fundamental essence of democracy as a government by and for the people, impeding its realization within the Nigerian context and perpetuating the marginalization of youths in political affairs.

Evidently, Nigerians have experienced a decline in their faith and trust in the ability of democratic principles to be upheld, resulting in widespread voter apathy. The recent 2023 presidential election, which ushered President Bola Ahmed Tinubu into power, serves as a vivid illustration of this phenomenon, characterized by an abysmal voter turnout, the lowest since Nigeria's independence. Across all 36 states, less than half of the eligible population exercised their voting rights, with no state surpassing a turnout rate of 40 percent. The states with the highest voter registrations, namely Lagos, Kano, and Rivers, witnessed participation from less than one-third of their eligible population. Of particular concern is the woeful 15.6 percent voter turnout in Rivers State, which, despite its historical significance in previous elections, reached its nadir during the most recent electoral process. Overall, the national turnout rate stood at 29 percent, marking the lowest participation rate recorded in the six decades since Nigeria gained independence. Out of the 93.4 million registered voters, only 24.9 million individuals exercised their voting rights on election day. Notably, a mere 9 million individuals cast their votes in favor of President-elect Bola Tinubu, who will now govern a populace of 220 million Nigerians (Premium Times, 2023).

This decline in voter turnout has been a consistent trend since 2011 (The Guardian, 2023). Prior to the 2023 election, the 2019 election registered the lowest voter participation rate, with only 34.75 percent of eligible voters exercising their franchise. In 2019, a mere 28.6 million votes were cast, despite an eligible voter population of 82 million. The eventual winner, President Muhammadu Buhari, secured just over 15 million votes in a country with over 200 million citizens. It is important to note that more than half of the country's population falls within the voting age range. The 2019 turnout rate represents the lowest among recent elections conducted on the African continent. Data compiled by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (I-IDEA), an intergovernmental organization promoting sustainable democracy worldwide, reveals that the voter turnout in Nigeria's 2019 election was the second lowest in the history of elections across African countries, only marginally higher than the 32.3 percent recorded in Zimbabwe's 1996 presidential election (I-IDEA, 2023). Consequently, the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria now holds the unfortunate distinction of having the lowest turnout rate among all African nations (Premium Times, 2023).

Table 2: Voter's Turnout in Nigeria's Presidential Election in the Fourth Republic



Source: Premium Times (2023)

In light of this development, it is imperative to consider the insights provided by Idayat Hassan, the esteemed director of the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), regarding the observed low participation rate. Ms. Hassan astutely posits that this phenomenon could be attributed to the perceived inadequacy of democracy in effectively facilitating societal progress. She contends that the failure of democratic systems to fulfill developmental aspirations has resulted in a waning enthusiasm among individuals to actively engage in the electoral process. Moreover, Ms. Hassan discerningly highlights the pernicious impact of violence and voter suppression, which have evidently contributed to the considerable erosion of voter turnout (Premium Times, 2023).

Potential Avenues for the Curtailment of Structural Violence in Nigeria's Electoral Process

Nigeria's Fourth Republic has been plagued by a range of challenges that have undermined the inclusiveness and fairness of its electoral process. These challenges have been attributed to a variety of factors, including the influence of powerful elites, weak institutional frameworks, and inadequate enforcement of electoral laws. In light of these challenges, electoral reforms represent a critical avenue for promoting more inclusive and democratic elections in Nigeria. A multi-stakeholder approach that involves the government, civil society, the media, and marginalized groups such as women and youth can help promote more inclusive and democratic elections in Nigeria.

Strengthening institutions: Strengthening the institutions responsible for organizing elections, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), can help to reduce structural violence in the electoral process. This can be done through reforms that increase the independence of electoral bodies, promote transparency, and enhance the effectiveness of election monitoring. Another way to strengthen institutions is by promoting transparency in the electoral process. This can be done by making election-related information publicly available, such as voter lists, electoral procedures, and results. By increasing the transparency of the electoral process, citizens can have greater confidence in the fairness and legitimacy of elections, which can help to reduce the potential for violence and other forms of electoral malpractice.

Also, enhancing the effectiveness of election monitoring can also help to reduce structural violence in the electoral process. This can be done by ensuring that election monitoring bodies have the necessary resources and independence to effectively monitor and report on electoral processes. By doing so, they can provide early warning of potential threats to the integrity of the electoral process and take appropriate action to address them.

Encouraging political participation: Encouraging political participation involves increasing the participation of marginalized groups, such as women, youth, and minority groups, in the political process. This can be achieved by providing incentives for political parties to promote inclusiveness, such as quotas

for marginalized groups or public funding for parties that promote diversity. In addition, promoting the involvement of civil society in the electoral process can help to reduce structural violence by ensuring that elections are monitored and that electoral malpractice is reported and addressed. Civil society organizations can play a key role in promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in the electoral process by monitoring election results, reporting any irregularities or violence, and advocating for electoral reforms. Furthermore, efforts to increase political education and awareness can encourage greater participation in the electoral process and reduce the likelihood of violence and electoral malpractice. This can be done through civic education programs that promote democratic values, civic engagement, and political participation, as well as through the media and other forms of public discourse. Ultimately, encouraging political participation can help to create a more inclusive and representative democracy that is less prone to violence and electoral malpractice.

Addressing impunity: This is concerned with holding individuals and institutions accountable for their actions and ensuring that there are consequences for those who engage in malpractices or incite violence. This is an important step towards reducing structural violence in the electoral process, as it creates a sense of deterrence among potential offenders and strengthens the rule of law. Prosecuting these individuals sends a strong message that such actions will not be tolerated. This can be done through the establishment of specialized electoral offenses tribunals, which can speed up the prosecution process and ensure that electoral offenders are held accountable. Furthermore, ensuring that electoral offenders are punished is a key element in addressing impunity. This can be done through the implementation of strict sanctions for electoral offenses, such as disqualification from running for office or fines, and by ensuring that these sanctions are enforced. By doing so, individuals who engage in electoral malpractice or violence will be less likely to do so in the future, leading to a more peaceful and inclusive electoral process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Nigerian electoral process has been characterized by structural violence. The concentration of power and resources in the hands of a few elites has limited the inclusiveness of the democratic process, thus making it challenging for marginalized groups to participate and be heard. The solution to the issue at hand requires the strengthening of institutions responsible for organizing elections, encouraging political participation, addressing impunity, and addressing socio-economic inequalities. Such measures can help to reduce structural violence in the electoral process and promote a more democratic and inclusive system in Nigeria.

It is crucial for Nigeria to take practical steps towards tackling these issues and promote a more transparent, fair, and inclusive electoral process. The failure to do so may result in sustained violence and instability that could hinder the country's progress and development. By fostering a more democratic and inclusive electoral process, Nigeria can create a more stable and prosperous future for all its citizens.

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