ETHNICITY, POLITICAL INTEREST, AND ELECTORAL CONFLICTS IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA, 1999-2015

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ABSTRACT

This article opens a new vista on the nature and praxis of electoral conflicts in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It further interrogates the role of ethnicity and divergent political interests among political gladiators in the stimulation and sustenance of election conflicts, which had come to characterize the democratization process of Akwa Ibom State since 1999, when Akwa Ibom State alongside other federating units reverted to civilian rule. Adopting the conflict theory, as well as a descriptive and analytical methods, findings from the article revealed that electoral conflicts in the state had not only been stirred up by varying resources as the dynamics of the conflicts before, during and after such elections but were indirectly impacted upon by the twin-factors of ethnicity and political interest. Specifically, a paradigm shift is made to show the paces of ethnic sentiments and political interest among the political gladiators of the state in moments of electoral violence.

Keywords: Elections, Electoral Violence, Akwa Ibom State, and Ethnicity
INTRODUCTION

Extant literature on electoral violence in Africa exists. A preponderance of these literatures revealed that the fundamental causes of election violence is firmly rooted in the ‘personal interests of politicians,’ whose interests do no often dovetail with those of the citizens. In the cause of trying to protect their interests during election seasons, a majority of the politicians employ whatever means at their disposal to ensure they twisted the elections to their favour. In the course of twisting these elections, the services of political thugs are employed, thereby stimulating a series of pre-election, election and post-election violence. Beside political interest – serving as a major source of conflicts during election seasons – the Nigerian scenario is further fuelled by its complex statehood structure. These complexities are attributed to the nature of religious and ethnic outlooks, which have also contributed massively to election violence in the country’s history.

Ethnic and religious biases have remained age-long factors in the trajectory of election violence in Nigeria. Evidently, this narrative is still the same even in the context of the Nigerian fourth republic. Several elections held between 1999 and 2019 had proven the persistence of ethnic and religious values in the struggle for political power via the ballot box. The situation is often more critical in those states of the federation, where there are more than one ethnic group. In addition to ethnicity, the interest of senatorial zoning formula is also part of the issues that have continued to stir up election violence.


Taking the foregoing background into perspective, this paper makes a paradigm shift on the question of electoral violence in contemporary Nigeria. In a movement from generality to specificity, the paper paints a link between ethnicity, political interest and electoral violence in Nigeria, using the Akwa Ibom State perspective. Akwa Ibom State – situated in the present-day Niger Delta region – is home to a collection of ethnic groups that share similitudes in their pre-colonial socio-cultural, political and economic institutions.  

As a heterogenous society, Akwa Ibom State is made up of the “Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Eket, Ibuno, Uruan, Andoni, and others.” Home to the aforementioned ethnic groups, Akwa Ibom State has an estimated five million population, with population of 10 million in diaspora.  

Located in the coastal Southern part of Nigeria, between 4° 321 and 5° 331 north, with a longitude of 7° 251 and 8° 251 East, the state is the highest producer of oil and gas. The deposition of these resources makes Akwa Ibom State one of the highest earning states from the federal purse.

UNPACKING SCHOLARLY VIEWS ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

A thorough search for existing literature on electoral violence revealed the preponderance dearth in literature that examined electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State between 1999 and 2015. Nonetheless, there exist a vast body of scholarship on electoral violence that paints both a national and global perspective. Sterck, through empirical and theoretical analysis, provides an insightful argument that holds the views that even before the day of elections, political parties often tactically stimulate violence in order to give them advantage on election days. The idea behind such strategy is either to scare away voters – especially in areas considered as stronghold of an opponent party – or an opposing political party, which might be the favourite among the contenders. Similar occurrences such as what Sterck described are reminiscent with elections experiences in Akwa Ibom State.

Drawing upon data from Bayelsa State, Nigeria, Inokoba and Maliki in their study reveal that youths are major purveyor of violence during elections in Nigeria. Their submissions are built on the fact that a majority of these youths were compelled to engage in...
such nefarious actions due to poor political education, wide-margin in unemployment ratio and the fact that many have very poor socio-economic background thereby making them ever-ready tools in the hands of politicians whose major means to winning elections harps on fomenting violence.

Collier argues that electoral violence is prevalent in African State due to the massive corruption and economic underperformance that is having a field day in those countries. Politicians always instigate violence during electoral seasons as they are convinced that it is the best means to get them into the corridors of power where they would have access to the treasury of the state. In addition, Birch and Muchlinski beyond looking at the root causes and dimensions of electoral violence, argue that several international organizations or institutes have been established to help curb electoral violence across states – mostly in the global South – where democracy is yet to take deep roots. Their findings suggest that in spite of the plethora of organizations tasked with curbing electoral violence, a majority of the States in Africa and other developing economies of the world are still recording massive electoral violence during elections. And this could be attributed to the struggle for scarce resources and weak institutions that exist in those states.

Adesota and Abimbola provide the historical trajectory of electoral violence in Nigeria since the pre-independence era. Their chronological scope, however, centred on Nigeria’s fourth republic (2003-2011). They argued that electoral violence – which of course led in part to the collapse of both the first and the second republics – is still very much threatening the Nigeria’s nascent democracy from its root. Nonetheless, in all of their narratives, Akwa Ibom State was left out and this research will do well to bridge that gap in knowledge. In their effort to understand some of the factors that seem responsible for electoral violence in Africa, Kewir and Gabriel note that the ‘nature of politics in most of African States is major reason why electoral violence might never come to an end anytime soon. Going further, they argued that “the monetisation of politics in neo-patrimonial States in Africa is also a major instigator of electoral violence.” What this means is that the degree of power wielded in top-ranking offices in elective positions – coming with huge benefits – means that the elections become a cut-throat affair for all participants. This in the local parlance is even seen as “it is our time to chop” – when translated means now is our time to eat (definitely from the commonwealth of the people). Though, no attention was paid to Akwa Ibom State, yet it provides a similar trend that could be said to have been in occurrence in the state given the wealth-base of Akwa Ibom State and many who venture into the political arena cannot, of course, deny the fact that they are motivated by the massive wealth that accrue to Akwa Ibom State by way of the statutory allocations and internally-generated revenues.

Birch et al from a global perspective posit that electoral violence is a strategy adopted by politicians before, during and after elections to achieve various political goals.\textsuperscript{18} They argued that key causes of electoral violence include the extent to which the democracy have been established in a particular state, as well as how strong the institutions – such as the court system – are in developing societies. Their findings are reminiscent of Nigeria’s case, where apparently, there are more powerful individuals than powerful societies.\textsuperscript{19} That notwithstanding, their work is crucial as for the present research even when it did not show any instances from Akwa Ibom State. It, however, would prove vital in making the argument of this research more structured.

Some scholars such as Orji have looked at electoral violence as a by-product of new democracies.\textsuperscript{20} Others such as Höglund\textsuperscript{21} have treated election-related violence as a characteristic of conflict-ridden societies. These studies examine the manifestations and consequences of electoral violence for society and for the future of democracy. Writing on Vote buying and violence and Nigerian election campaigns, Bratton addresses the Nigerian case study in this vein.\textsuperscript{22} However, studies that focus on the sources of electoral violence tend to identify causal mechanisms across two or more broad categories with various appellations vis cultural and structural, pent-up and proximate causes. Further, Atoubi contends that “[the cultural perspective presupposes the existence of] a political culture of thuggery that generally predisposes actors to engage in violence and intimidation during political contests, [while the structural explanation suggests that] society and politics are organized in a manner that generates conflict.”\textsuperscript{23}

Taking the foregoing reviews into consideration, this research examines evidence across several elections that have been held in Akwa Ibom State between 1999 and 2015 to contribute to the on-going arguments on electoral violence in Africa and other regions of the world. To do this, the study adopts the conflict theory to help shape and guide the research.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The paper adopts the conflict theory as its methodological framing to help make a strong argument on how the notion of ethnicity and political interest has fostered electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State. Over the years, scholars have attempted to theorize the nature of electoral violence using diverse theoretical paradigms. While many have adopted the concept of class and capitalism by Karl Marx,\textsuperscript{24} others have used either Emile Durkheim’s Anomie theory of normlessness or even that of Ted Robert Gurr – relative deprivation theory. Regardless, in the paper, the conflict theory is adopted. The conflict theory is deemed suitable for this study given that it suits the discourse of electoral violence from the Akwa Ibom State

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid; Birch and Muchlinski, “Electoral Violence Prevention,” pp. 385-403.
perspective. This is because most of the conflicts during, before, and after the election processes are not stirred exclusively by aggrieved electorates and deprived indigenes of Akwa Ibom State, but were also triggered by obnoxious political interests, and ethnic leanings exhibited by the politicians in the state.

Karl Marx further justifies the place for conflict when opposing parties (the favoured and the unfavoured) struggle to attain goals. Marx writes that “the history of all hitherto existing classes is the history of class struggle between the Plebian and the Lord, the Serf and the Noble, the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat.”25 Thus, in that process, conflict becomes an inevitable feature in the social, economic and political strand of any society.

Juxtaposing the theory to the present study, the model of the ‘haves and the have nots, the elite and the masses, as evident in the state is one pointer for violence to occur during elections. Moreover, the desire to enthrone a particular group over another makes for violent reactions as well. Therefore, the existence of divergent political interests and their constant scheming to wrestle power into their domains have been enough excitement for electoral violence in the state.

ETHNICITY, POLITICAL INTEREST AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: WHAT NEXUS?

The creation of a state for the people of Akwa Ibom did not only solve an age-long concern, but also opened new vista of socio-political tussles. Since Akwa Ibom State is a mix of more than two ethnic groups, it was only a matter of time that ethnicity creeps into the socio-political fabrics of the state. The ethnic diversity stimulates power struggle for adequate representation in the political sphere of the state. Moreover, the fact that Akwa Ibom State is naturally endowed with crude oil – which forms one of the major sources of all manners of conflicts in the state, as had over time been recorded in other Niger Delta States of Nigeria, especially since 1999. More so, the fact that most of the youths in Akwa Ibom State, and in many parts of the Niger Delta are not productively engaged has contributed in no small measures towards the employment of youths as political thugs and miscreants who often than not constitute a large fraction of the foot soldiers for the propagation of violence during election seasons.26

Electoral violence began to manifest in the state as early as during the period preceding the elections of 1999. While many parties actually existed that contested during the 1999 elections, and in various elective positions, the case of Akwa Ibom had just two political parties that contested keenly for the gubernatorial elections. These parties were the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), and the All People’s Party (APP). The PDP designated its gubernatorial ticket to Arc. (Obong) Victor Attah. Attah who hails from the Uyo Senatorial District contested the gubernatorial elections with, Obong Akpan Isemin, a former governor (1992-3) of Akwa Ibom State, who ran under the platform of the APP.27 The elections were

dotted with some hitches as Attah was considered as an Ibibio man who have spent most of his formative years in the diaspora as against Isemin, whom many believed had contributed much to the growth and development of the State. The situation then became difficult for Isemin, as certain influential personalities such as Atuekong Donald Etiebet, Etukudoh Ekpo, and more played alongside Attah. These persons lent supports to Attah because they had envisaged that Attah had accumulated so much exposure and experience in Lagos, and with such experience, he was definitely a better candidate. Except for some irregularities in many polling units, not much was recorded as violent reactions along party lines.

Beyond violence at polling units, Attah’s administration had its first test of internal rancour. This rancour had to do with who becomes the State Chairman of the ruling party, the Peoples Democratic Party. This was an issue because like many other governors, Attah wanted to install a party chairman, whose interest aligned with his. Although Attah succeeded in installing one Chief Tony Emenyi, as the PDP state Chairman, certain PDP state members such as Atuekong Etiebet felt disgruntled and cross-carpeted to the All Nigerian People’s Party (ANPP). While he moved, most of his supporters remained within the PDP and invariably constituted an opposition within the PDP. Hence, the internal opposition metamorphosed with the Chief Edet Isong (chairman) PDP factional group.

This splinter group within the PDP had their opposing activities transcended beyond just the party lines. They ensured that the then struggle for the resource control was a bit of a herculean task for the state governor. Rather than collaborated with the governor, this splinter group, “The Abuja Front” aligned with the then federal government of President Olusegun Obasanjo and frustrated the efforts of Akwa Ibom State. During that time, Senator John James Akpan Udo-Edehe, who was representing the Uyo senatorial district was equally one of those who frustrated Attah’s struggle all because of party politics.

Attah won his second term bid against Ime Umana and Otuekong Idongesit Nkanga, who contested on the platforms of ANPP and Nigeria Democratic Party (NDP) respectively. Towards the twilight of his second term in office, another round of conflict ensued given the influence of the “Abuja Front.” Attah’s intention was to renew Chief Tony Emenyi tenure as the PDP state chairman. This of course is not far-fetched from the politics of installing a successor-governor. His moves, however, were countered by party members. Therefore, in the place of Emenyi, Arch. Otu Ita Toyo was appointed, state chairman of the PDP whose appointment was said to have been influenced by a former Secretary to the Federal Government, Obong Ufot Ekaette. The situation left cracks on the fabric of the PDP state structure, as political interests collided.

There were political attacks and reprisals. Insecurity in the state aggravated. In all of these moments of trials, the PDP presented its party’s gubernatorial flag to Barrister Godswill Akpabio. Before then, Godswill Akpabio had served as Honourable Commissioner for Petroleum and Natural Resources under the then Governor, Obong Victor Attah. Between 2002 and 2006, Akpabio served as a Commissioner in three key ministries: Petroleum and Natural Resources, Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, as well as Lands and

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 It was later confirmed that the appointment of arch. Toyo frustrated Attah’s earlier desire to install his son-in-law, Udoma Ekarika as his successor. Undoubtedly, this change in aspiration was not without some rancour.
Housing. Akpabio eventually emerged the governor of Akwa Ibom State, with Engr. Patrick Ekpotu – also a former Commissioner in the Obong Attah’s Administration – as the deputy governor of the state.

By 2015, the process that produced Godswill Akpabio as the governor of Akwa Ibom State was faulted in 2015 by Governor Udom Emmanuel’s aide on media, Mr. Samson Akpan. Reacting to a live interview programme hosted by Planet 101.1FM radio, Uyo, where a former PDP state party Chairman Toyo was making certain comments on Udom’s credibility as a governor, Samson Akpan mused “…the 2006 Akwa Ibom PDP governorship primaries conducted under Mr. Toyo’s leadership. Even people that were not accredited members of PDP, some okada riders, were forced into Ibom Hall to nominate the former governor”.

On a general note, the 2007 general elections in Akwa Ibom State had been reported as hitch-free, given the ease by which Godswill Akpabio won the gubernatorial elections. The ease is said to be due to the massive support he garnered from the PDP stalwarts in the state. The PDP political caucus were so determined to frustrate Attah’s ambition that their solidarity paved Akpabio’s way to victory at the poll. Although there were cases of negative trends that followed in the wakes of the elections. After the 14 April 2007 governorship elections in Akwa Ibom State, the Action Congress Party (AC) and its governorship candidate, Chief James Iniaima challenged the victory of Godswill Akpabio at the electoral tribunal in Uyo. After months of judicial proceedings, the election tribunal affirmed the victory of Godswill Akpabio. Unsatisfied with the rulings of the tribunal, the AC and Chief James Iniaima proceeded to the Court of Appeal in Calabar. Regardless, the Court of Appeal reaffirmed Akpabio’s victory.

Thereafter, Governor Godswill Akpabio was left to face Sen. Udo-Edehe given their divergent political interests. Senator Udo-Edehe had earlier rooted for Akpabio during the elections of 2007, but changed his position in the wakes of the 2011 elections, when Akpabio sought for second term as the Akwa Ibom State governor. Akpabio’s strong links to the presidency then made Udo-Edehe’s opposition ineffectual as it was during the days of Obong Attah. To rejig his forces, Udo-Edehe swung from the PDP to the All Progressive Congress party, which he emerged as a vitriolic opposition to the PDP.

As the 2011 elections drew close, political permutations created tense atmosphere in the state. It was in this process that former governor Attah publicly endorsed the candidature...


36 By this time, Udo-edehe was a federal Minister under the President Umaru Musa Yar Adua’s administration.
of Udo-Edehe as a possible replacement for the PDP’s governorship flag bearer in Akwa Ibom State in 2011. Moreover, Udoma Ekarika – Attah’s son-in-law – was appointed as Udo-Edehe’s campaign manager. Indeed, the 2011 general elections in Akwa Ibom State attracted quite a plethora of academic and non-attention write-ups. This is because the 2011 elections were not only dubbed as the most violent election the state has experienced, but due to how ethnic fault-lines manifested itself in the electioneering processes. The two major contenders were from both the Annang (Godwills Akpabio) and Ibibio (Udo-Edehe) extractions. Hence, people perceived that election as a fierce competition between the Annang and Ibibio peoples. Although Dode and Edet argue that even when it appeared as though the gubernatorial elections of 2011 had assumed some ethnic colourations, “this was just a contest of superiority between two politicians: Godswill Akpabio and John Udoedehe and not an ethnic war between Ibibios[ sic] and Annangs[ sic]”.  

Before the kick-off to the 2011 gubernatorial elections, several events unfolded. For instance, one “…Richard King was assassinated; Governor Akpabio sacked 3 Royal Fathers and Voter registration ends in the State with 1, 714, 781 as tentative voters, 1, 616, 873 as actual persons registered and 8, 738 as duplicates, also display of claims and objectives in[ sic] made in the state from February 14th – 19th. Moreover, there was the failed kidnap attempt made on one Udonwa, who returned from the United States of America to contest in the governorship elections. “Udonwa narrowly escaped death but his mother, Mrs. Philomina Udonwa was kidnapped, raped, killed and her corpse dumped by the roadside because of her overseas based son dared to vie for the governorship of his state.”

Further, the face-off between the PDP governorship candidate – Godswill Akpabio – and the ACN’s Udo-Edehe’ during the pre-election seasons led to much carnage in the state. It was reported that “Nigerian authorities say that more than a dozen people have been killed in a fight between supporters of the ruling Peoples’ Democratic Party [PDP] and the opposition Action Congress [AC] during a political rally in the southern state of Akwa Ibom. Police also reported extensive property damage, including the burning of several gas stations and homes and the campaign office of President Goodluck Jonathan. The clash is the latest incident in increasing election-related violence countrywide.”

Amid the blame game that emanated from the election violence, one Mr. Paschal Bafyau, a member of the Contact and Strategy Committee of the Goodluck Jonathan campaign organization stated that the opposition (AC) was to be blamed for the whole violence. In Bafyau’s own words, “Usually, people who do not have hope of winning elections are in the habit of disrupting anything constructive that would lead to peaceful

38 Ibid.
elections…so, they are these pockets of disgruntled elements that try to disrupt campaigns”. Although contrary to the opinion of Mr. Bafyau, the opposition party – ACN – disagreed that the opposition are mostly responsible for every violence during campaigns. Thus, the party held the view that “young supporters of the PDP routinely invade opposition campaigns to attack candidates.” Taking a neutral position, the NPF espoused that “most of the attacks are carried out by well-armed youths”. Thus, there were three perspectives to the incidence of Akwa Ibom State, the incumbent party, the opposition, and that of the security operatives.

Governor Akpabio’s victory was not devoid of litigations. Udo-Edehe proceeded to the election tribunal, but his petition was swiftly knock out on grounds that he failed to file his case properly before the mandatory 180 days. Thereafter, Udo-Edehe was arrested for the destruction of public property. Besides the Udo-Edehe-Akpabio tussle, there was also the Obong Frank Okon’s scenario. Frank Okon contested for the PDP primaries against Akpabio, but was not declared the winner to represent the PDP at the poll during the gubernatorial elections. Consequently, Frank Okon approached the court and asked that the court declare him the rightful winner of the primaries.

Beside Uyo, several communities across the 31 LGAs experienced electoral violence as well. In Ibiaku-Itam Village, Itu LGA, some of the polling units were fraught with miniature electoral violence among party agents and voters. An informant at the Ibiaku-Itam area confirmed that there were skirmishes during voting process in 2011. Indications were that the attacks at Ikot Ekpene were more-or-less imbued in ethnicity. Udo-Edehe, an Ibibio man, alongside many Ibibio sons and daughters were attacked on Annang soil. Prior to the arrival of those who had gone to Ikot Ekpene, the information was sent to Uyo, that Ibibio sons and daughters who went for campaign at Ikot Ekpene had been attacked. Immediately, sporadic attacks began in many parts of Uyo. It was reported that not even the security agencies – Police, Army, among others – could placate the angry mob. However, it took a concerted effort from the various security personnel and pleas from top government officials and politicians to halt the on-going violence that engulfed the entire Uyo town.

Beside the AC-PDP campaign imbroglio, many other cases of alleged political assassinations and maiming equally erupted across the state. There was this case of one Pastor Oyong Asuquo, former Commissioner for Youths and Sport, who was reported to have died out of some schemes orchestrated by his political opponents. Sources state that Pastor Asuquo had garnered so much popularity among the youths of Oron, and appeared to be a big

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43 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
threat to his political opponents. On the contrary, official sources stated that Pastor Asuquo died after he had an auto crash. He had travelled from Uyo to his home town – Oron – where he went to make arrangements for the local government primaries in his council area.

Table: Some Cases of Electoral Violence in Akwa Ibom State between 1999 and 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Associated Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>April 2012</td>
<td>Abak LGA</td>
<td>Two people reportedly killed during the LGA PDP primaries</td>
<td>PDP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>April 2015</td>
<td>Ini LGA</td>
<td>Five people killed during election</td>
<td>Unspecified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>22 March 2011</td>
<td>Ikot Ekpene</td>
<td>Two persons killed during Action Congress Campaign Rally</td>
<td>PDP/AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>23 March 2011</td>
<td>Uyo</td>
<td>Over 500 tricycles and 200 cars burnt</td>
<td>PDP/AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2008-2012</td>
<td>Ini</td>
<td>25 fatalities reported in 3 incidents</td>
<td>PDP/AC/ACP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Ubongabasi E. Israel, 2021.

Other cases of electoral violence in the state played out in the form of abductions prior to 2015 elections. Some of the most notable ones were those of Sam Ewang – a former military administrator of Ogun and Rivers States, and the then All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), governorship hopeful whose wife was kidnapped by unknown gunmen in Uyo. It might be recalled that Sam Ewang was the second gubernatorial aspirant who intended to contest against Godswill Akpabio but was kidnapped after the Udonwa case. There were also the Mbota brothers who were equally kidnapped based on the fact that they were perceived to be a major supporter of Senator Udo-Edoedehe. In addition, Michael Bush’s wife was also kidnapped, and a ransom of one billion naira demanded by the abductors before they could release the woman. It was revealed that Mr. Bush had allowed opposition to use his media platform – the Bush House Media – to canvass for political support from the people.

As Akpabio’s second term in drew close, the politics of succession took form. In 2013, Governor Godswill Akpabio fired his Secretary to the State Government, Mr. Umana Okon Umana. The governor fired his secretary after a heated argument between them on issues of succession. One year earlier, the deputy governor of Akwa Ibom State, Obong Nsima Ekere, had tendered his resignation on the 31 day of October 2012. Though, the resignation stated that Nsima Ekere was resigning on personal grounds, other sources had alleged that his resignation letter would not have been unconnected with certain conflicts of

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48 Ibid.
interest between Ekere and Akpabio. More so, the resignation came in some hours before the State House of Assembly was set to impeach Ekere.52

Moreover, several other intra-party conflicts occurred. A large percentage of this conflict were not devoid of the idea that governor Akpabio decided to make his new Secretary to State Government, Mr. Udom Gabriel Emmanuel, his anointed candidate for 2015 gubernatorial elections. This move encountered some microcosm of soft violence among the PDP faithful. First, there was this resentment among top-ranking members of the party, whose view on Udom’s presentation by governor Akpabio contradicted the idea that an intending candidate must have served the party for some reasonable period of not less than two years.53

The Vanguard daily captured the whole drama in very succinct manner thus:

The issue of whether or not one of the leading aspirants in the 2015 Akwa Ibom Governorship race in Akwa Ibom State, Mr Udom Emmanuel, is eligible to contest in the 2015 governorship race on the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was, weekend, laid to rest as the party confirmed that the aspirant has met all the requirements to contest on its platform. Speculations were rife that the aspirant did not meet the party’s requirement for the office, a development powered by those opposed to his candidature; but the party’s Zonal Screening Committee dismissed the speculation in Port Harcourt on Saturday and cleared the former Zenith Bank executive director to contest in the primary elections of the party in Akwa Ibom State. The party’s governorship primaries is [are] scheduled for December 8, 2014. Emmanuel was accompanied to the zonal secretariat by party elders, stakeholders and campaign coordinators. The immediate past secretary to the Akwa Ibom State Government arrived at the party office at about 10.55am and was warmly received by a large crowd of party faithful and supporters. The immediate past Secretary to Government of the state is from the Eket Senatorial District which is favoured to produce the next governor for the state.54

Irrespective of his victory at the party primaries, Mr. Udom Emmanuel faced a more-vitiolic opposition from other top politicians in the state. Some of those that were in for the race of the governorship seat included: “former Secretary to State government, Umana Okon Umana; former Finance Commissioner, Albert Akpan…the rest are former deputy governor, Nsima Ekere; Senator Helen Esuene; Senator Udo Udoma; Honourable Okpolum Etteh; Bishop Samuel Akpan; Larry Esin; Benjamin Okoko and Honourable Effiong Abia”.55 Some of those aforementioned personalities dropped their gubernatorial ambitions after series of political consultations prevailed. The contestants were reduced to Mr. Udom Emmanuel (PDP), Umana Okon Umana, All Progressive Party (APC), Bishop Samuel Akpan of Accord Party (AP) and Obong Godwill Okon Richman (JP) of the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA),

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55 For more details of this, See: (https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/10/akwa-ibom-pdp-men-woman-akpabios-job/)
Among others. At the end, the election of 2015 assumed a two-horse race between the PDP and APC.57

Between 2014 and 2015 (prior to the gubernatorial elections) several violent cases occurred. Some of those notable ones were:

…On 13 March 2014, a local PDP leader, Albert Ukpanah, was reportedly strangled to death in Abak: associates say opponents within the party eliminated him amid a dispute over eligibility for political offices in 2015. On 7 May, a PDP leader, Eshiet Usung-Inwang, was shot dead at Ikot Uso Ekong, near Eket, allegedly by rivals over competing claims to the gubernatorial nomination. On 12 May, gubernatorial aspirant Chief Umana Okon Umana petitioned the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to investigate Governor Godswill Akpabio’s alleged role in the assassinations and kidnapping of some PDP leaders in the state. On 13 May, Don Etiebet, a permanent member of the PDP’s board of trustees, also petitioned the inspector general of police, alleging the governor’s agents were planning to eliminate him. Akpabio denies all the allegations.58

Even so, governor Akpabio had sometime in July 2014 “threatened opposition politicians (and dissident members of his party [PDP]): ‘those who want to take power through the back door will die. They will die! And the PDP will continue’”.59 At some quarters, the PDP and its agent were accused of employing various nefarious strategies to clinch victory during the 2015 polls in Akwa Ibom State. Before the elections, some candidates were reported to have been murdered by un-identified gunmen, while others were maimed.60

Indeed, barrage of accusations and counter-accusations by the APC against the PDP sprout forth. The APC accused the PDP of using hoodlums, and inducing the security agencies and its political thugs to truncate the elections in favour of the PDP candidates. The opposition parties in the state claimed that there was no election, and that the PDP rigged the elections. The state chairman of the APC Mr. Ahmadu Attai petitioned the then Chairman of INEC, Professor Attahiru Jega on grounds of mass-irregularities in the state which included connivance with INEC officials and police to rig elections, caused missing result sheets, and more.61 In addition, a PDP card-carrying member, and a former governor of the state (1999-2007), Obong Victor Attah agreed that there was wide-spread electoral violence, especially with issues of ballot box snatching, Smart Card Reader (SCR) snatching, among others. Former governor, Attah equally lamented the high state of electoral irregularities when he mused that “…except for the people who came out to vote I did not see any INEC staff. The

57 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
story I got is not a matter of hijacking on the way to this unit by, but at the distribution centre that people came with guns and machetes and shot in the air and carted away all the materials and I said including even your card readers? … it is now I am beginning to understand why Akwa Ibom was regarded as battle ground. But I didn’t come to fight. I came to do election.\(^\text{62}\)

Further, The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue reported that “contrary to expectations, Akwa Ibom experienced several violent incidents. In Uyo, thugs snatched ballot boxes…especially in areas where the opposition had support. Inlbesikpo Asutan, it was reported that INEC did not deliver election materials. Several people were allegedly killed across the state.\(^\text{63}\) Moreover, “a reporter of the Radar Newspaper was abducted and released the next day by suspected PDP thugs. [amidst other concerns] most interviewees in Akwa Ibom believed that abuses of the electoral process were perpetrated by the PDP, INEC and security agencies (especially the police).”\(^\text{64}\) A composite view of the entire analysis has revealed that the series of electoral violence in Akwa Ibom cannot be detached entirely from the tapestry of ethnicity and divergent personal interest exhibited by the politicians in the state.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the analyses so far, the article has explored the nexus between ethnicity, political interest and electoral violence in Akwa Ibom State. It argued that Akwa Ibom State has become a flashpoint for electoral violence given the interplay of ethnicity and political interest in election seasons. Moreover, while the youths of the state were major players of the violent scenarios, the political gladiators have been the major drivers of these conflicts in the state. The build-up to the 2011 gubernatorial elections that were fiercely contested between the incumbent governor Godswill Akpabio and Senator James Udo-Edehe. This contest stimulated one of the most devastating moments in the state, given that after much analyses, it was uncovered that both human lives and property were lost in that process.


\(^{64}\) Ibid.
Bibliography


