



Electoral Violence and Democratic Development in Nigeria: A Study of 2011-2023 General Elections in Kano State

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Abstract

Electoral violence remains a critical impediment to Nigeria's democratic consolidation, particularly in Kano State, which has long served as a bellwether of national politics. Adopting the Relative Deprivation and Conflict theories to explain how perceived inequalities, exclusion, and elite manipulation of social divisions fuel violent contestations during elections. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the paper examines four electoral cycles 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 highlighting the interplay of political actors, security agencies, ethno-religious identities, and socio-economic vulnerabilities in shaping electoral outcomes. The findings revealed that electoral violence in Kano State is driven by weak institutional frameworks, the mobilization of unemployed youth by political elites, partisan deployment of security forces, and entrenched ethno-religious rivalries. Although democratic development has recorded incremental progress through innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and stronger civil society advocacy, violence continues to undermine electoral legitimacy, reduce voter participation, and perpetuate cycles of instability. The study recommends strengthening the independence and transparency of electoral institutions, depoliticizing security agencies, promoting inclusive political participation through civic education and youth empowerment, and addressing socio-economic vulnerabilities that make citizens susceptible to manipulation. It further advocates institutionalizing conflict resolution mechanisms at local and state levels to mitigate disputes before they escalate into violence. By situating Kano State as a microcosm of Nigeria's democratic experience, the paper concludes that curbing electoral violence is indispensable for deepening democracy and ensuring that elections serve as genuine instruments of political representation and national development.

Keywords: Politics, democracy, violence, security, elections

Introduction

Electoral violence has remained one of the most pressing challenges confronting Nigeria's democratic development since the country's return to civilian rule in 1999. Elections are universally recognized as the cornerstone of democratic governance, providing citizens with the opportunity to choose their leaders and hold them accountable. However, in Nigeria, elections have often been accompanied by violence, intimidation, and manipulation, which undermine the legitimacy of democratic processes. Electoral violence refers to all forms of physical, psychological, and structural aggression that occur before, during, or after elections, aimed at influencing outcomes or suppressing participation (Awojobi, 2022). Such violence has become a recurring feature of Nigeria's political landscape, raising concerns about the sustainability of democratic development. Scholars argue that electoral violence in Nigeria is driven by weak institutional frameworks, ethno-religious divisions, poverty, unemployment, and the manipulation of youth by political elites (Sambo et al., 2024). The 2011 elections, for instance,



witnessed widespread post-election violence in northern Nigeria, including Kano State, resulting in the destruction of property and loss of lives. Subsequent elections in 2015, 2019, and 2023 also recorded incidents of ballot snatching, intimidation, and clashes between rival party supporters (Oshinfowokan, 2023). These patterns highlighted the paradox of Nigeria's democracy: while reforms such as the Electoral Act 2022 and the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) have sought to enhance transparency, violence continues to erode public trust in electoral institutions (Okeke et al., 2025).

Kano State provides a particularly significant case study due to its demographic weight, ethno-religious diversity, and political centrality. As one of Nigeria's most populous states, Kano has historically played a decisive role in shaping national electoral outcomes. Yet, its elections have been characterized by intense competition, mobilization of youth gangs, and violent confrontations between political actors (Madueke, Adamu, Jacobsen, & Bird, 2023). By situating Kano as a microcosm of Nigeria's broader democratic experience, the study contributes to understanding how electoral violence undermines legitimacy, weakens institutions, and perpetuates instability. Ultimately, it argues that addressing electoral violence is indispensable for deepening democracy and ensuring that elections serve as genuine instruments of political representation and national development.

Conceptual Clarifications and Theoretical Discuss: Elections

From a democratic perspective, elections are more than the act of voting. They represent a ritual of accountability, compelling leaders to periodically return to the electorate to justify their performance and seek renewed legitimacy. This cyclical process ensures that governance is not static but responsive, as elected officials are constantly aware that their tenure depends on the will of the people. Scholars often describe elections as a peaceful mechanism for resolving political competition, replacing violent struggles for power with ballots that allow rival groups to contest authority within agreed rules (Sharma, 2015). In this way, elections are not only instruments of representation but also tools of conflict management, channeling political rivalry into institutionalized competition. Elections also embody the principle of equality. Regardless of social class, ethnicity, religion, or gender, each citizen's vote carries the same weight, symbolizing equal participation in shaping collective decisions (Ghardallou & Sridi, 2019). This universality makes elections a powerful symbol of inclusion, even though in practice, structural inequalities such as voter suppression, intimidation, or corruption may undermine the fairness of the process. Critics have rightly pointed out that elections can be manipulated to entrench authoritarian regimes, especially when marred by fraud, violence, or systemic exclusion. Thus, while elections are celebrated as the hallmark of democracy, their true value lies in the integrity of the process and the extent to which they genuinely reflect the will of the people (Awojobi, 2022).

Political scientists emphasize their role in institutionalizing competition and structuring political



participation. Sociologists highlight how social identities ethnicity, religion, and class shape voting behavior and outcomes. Philosophers, on the other hand, see elections as the embodiment of the social contract, where citizens willingly transfer authority to leaders in exchange for governance, protection, and service delivery. Across these perspectives, one constant position remains that elections are indispensable to democratic development, but their effectiveness depends on transparency, inclusiveness, and fairness. In the Nigerian context, elections have been both a source of hope and a site of contestation (UN Human Rights Council, 2021). They have provided opportunities for citizens to assert their democratic rights, yet they have also been marred by violence, manipulation, and mistrust. The Nigerian experience illustrates the dual nature of elections: as instruments of democratic consolidation when conducted credibly, and as triggers of instability when undermined by malpractice. This tension underscores the importance of strengthening electoral institutions, promoting civic education, and ensuring that elections genuinely serve the people rather than political elites (Awojobi, 2022).

Electoral Violence: Electoral violence is best understood as a strategic, patterned use of coercion intended to shape electoral processes, outcomes, or participation. It encompasses not only physical attacks and fatalities but also threats, property destruction, and organizational sabotage that erode the procedural integrity of elections and the substantive representativeness of democratic mandates (Birch, 2015; Hoglund, 2009). By distorting who registers, who turns out, and how results are compiled, electoral violence undermines popular sovereignty and weakens public trust in institutions long after ballots are counted (Bekoe, 2012). Hoglund (2009) emphasizes the role of clientelist networks and identity-based parties that can rapidly activate informal enforcers; violence becomes a costly signal of resolve when programmatic credibility is low. At the micro level, Collier and Vicente (2014) show that each phase serves distinct strategic objectives: pre-election intimidation depresses registration and campaigning; election-day disruptions tamper with logistics and observation; post-election repression contests results or punishes communities.

Democracy: Democracy has been one of the most enduring yet contested ideas in political thought. From its origins in ancient Greece, where Aristotle defended collective deliberation and Plato warned against mob rule, to the Enlightenment emphasis on rights and social contracts articulated by Locke and Rousseau, democracy has always carried both promise and peril (Landman, 2007). In modern scholarship, Joseph Schumpeter's minimalist definition reduced democracy to competitive elections, while liberal theorists insisted that true democracy must include civil liberties, rule of law, and institutional checks (Zagrebin, 2020). This distinction has become crucial in analyzing hybrid regimes, particularly in Africa, where electoral competition often coexists with authoritarian practices (Kawalya-Tendo, 2019). Measurement debates further complicate the picture. Indices such as Freedom House, Polity, and Varieties of Democracy attempt to capture democracy's multidimensionality, but each reflects normative choices about what counts as democratic practice. Critics argue that these tools risk



oversimplification, especially in culturally diverse contexts where informal institutions and local norms shape governance outcomes (Landman, 2007).

O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) highlighted the role of elite pacts in transitions, while civil society and social movements are increasingly recognized as drivers of democratization (Ghardallou & Sridi, 2019). Recent literature stresses democracy's interdependence with human rights and rule of law. Rights protect participation and association, while rule-of-law principles constrain arbitrary power, stabilizing democratic institutions. Conversely, rights regimes gain legitimacy through democratic accountability, and rule-of-law principles ensure predictability and fairness in governance. This relationship is particularly salient in contexts where majoritarian impulses threaten minority protections, raising questions about how to balance popular sovereignty with constitutional safeguards (Kawalya-Tendo, 2019). External democracy promotion efforts have achieved mixed results, with success more likely when aligned with local priorities and institutional realities (Timmer, 2013).

Democratic Development: Democratic development has emerged as a central theme in contemporary political science and international relations, reflecting both the aspiration to consolidate democratic institutions and the practical challenges of sustaining them in diverse contexts. The concept refers not only to the spread of democratic governance but also to the deepening of democratic quality, encompassing institutional resilience, citizen participation, and respect for rights and rule of law. Scholars emphasize that democratic development is not a linear process but a contested and uneven trajectory, shaped by historical legacies, socio-economic structures, and external influences (Landman, 2007). Early theories of democratic development were closely tied to modernization perspectives, which posited that economic growth, rising education levels, and urbanization naturally fostered democratic institutions. Seymour Martin Lipset famously argued that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy, linking prosperity to democratic stability. Yet subsequent research has challenged this deterministic view, showing that while development may create favorable conditions, political choices, elite bargains, and institutional design remain decisive (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). Democratic development therefore cannot be reduced to economic modernization alone; it requires deliberate political construction and societal engagement. The literature highlights the importance of institutions in democratic development (Kawalya-Tendo, 2019).

However, on the theoretical explanations, this paper employs Relative Deprivation and Conflict theories to explain how perceived inequalities, exclusion, and elite manipulation of social divisions fuel violent contestations during elections. The theory of Relative Deprivation (RD) introduced by Walter Runciman in the late 1960s is one of the most widely established theoretical concepts explaining political violence (Mubangizi, 2025). Criminology has mostly abandoned this theory despite many valuable contributions it could still make to the field. This



theoretical analysis applies the theory in Ted Gurr's version to the field of preventing and countering electoral violence and violent extremism practice and policy through a combination of meta-narrative and integrative literature reviews. By this paper through the lens, this paper demonstrates the continuous value of (Koehler, 2024). Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life (Coser, 2006). This submissions from the above assumptions tally with the assumptions/direction of this paper therefore suitable for the analysis of electoral violence and political development in Nigeria.

Nature of Electoral Violence and Democratic Development in Kano State

Electoral violence in Kano State cannot be properly understood without situating it within the state's longer political history. Kano has been a central arena of Nigerian politics since the late colonial period, when nationalist and radical parties mobilised large swathes of the urban and rural population. The emergence of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) in the 1950s, and later the People's Redemption Party (PRP) in the Second Republic, embedded a culture of intense mass mobilization and confrontational politics in Kano's political life. These parties drew strength from market women, artisans, workers, and urban poor, and were locked in bitter rivalry with more conservative northern parties. Public rallies, marches, and street-level agitation became central tools of political engagement, normalizing the idea that politics is something performed in the streets as much as in formal institutions. This deep history of contentious mass politics has left a strong imprint on how electoral competition is conducted in Kano today, including its recurrent violent dimensions (Iweze & Nkanga, 2022). The transition to the Fourth Republic in 1999 did not erase this legacy, but rather reconfigured it within a new party system. The ideological cleavages of the NEPU/PRP era gave way to more fluid alignments among parties such as the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All Progressives Congress (APC), and more recently the New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP).

The urban geography of Kano shapes how this violence appears in practice. The metropolitan local government areas such as Dala, Fagge, Gwale, and Kano Municipal combine dense population, intense political contestation, and large pools of unemployed or underemployed youth (Iweze & Nkanga, 2022). These areas host many of the major campaign rallies, party offices, and strategic polling units. They have also been central to past episodes of large-scale violence, including the 2011 post-election crisis (Iweze & Nkanga, 2022). In such settings, electoral violence frequently manifests as street clashes between rival party supporters, attacks on campaign convoys, and the vandalisation of party offices and campaign materials. The visibility and symbolic importance of control over these spaces mean that rival camps often treat them as arenas for demonstrating dominance, which in turn heightens the risk of violent confrontation during campaign seasons. Election-day violence in Kano is typically targeted and instrumental rather than random. Evidence from recent electoral cycles suggests that incidents



are concentrated in specific polling units, wards, or constituencies where contests are expected to be close and where the marginal impact of intimidation or disruption is likely to be high. Forms of violence include the obstruction of access to polling units, threatening or assaulting voters and party agents, seizing or destroying electoral materials, and creating enough chaos to force cancellation or relocation of voting. Community-based observation work in Nassarawa Local Government Area highlights how local actors have had to develop strategies to monitor and prevent such interference, precisely because it has become a recurrent feature of elections in those areas (Yahaya, 2023).

The LGAs most affected were **Fagge, Dala, Gwale, Kano Municipal, and Nassarawa**, all of which form the urban core of Kano metropolis. These areas have historically been centres of mass political mobilisation, and in 2011 they became the epicentre of violent confrontations. Iweze and Nkanga (2022) describe how crowds of aggrieved youths took to the streets in these LGAs, targeting individuals and properties associated with the ruling party and with communities perceived to have supported the winning presidential candidate. The violence was not random; it followed identifiable political and social lines, with attackers focusing on party offices, homes of political figures, and religious institutions. The destruction of churches, mosques, and party buildings in **Fagge** and **Kano Municipal** LGAs was particularly severe, reflecting the way political grievances quickly merged with broader social tensions. In **Dala** and **Gwale** LGAs, the violence took the form of street-level clashes, arson, and targeted assaults. Youth groups erected barricades, attacked passers-by, and set fire to buildings associated with political opponents. The authors emphasise that the violence in these LGAs was not merely spontaneous but reflected deeper patterns of political mobilisation and frustration that had accumulated over time (Iweze, & Nkanga, 2022).

Across all affected LGAs, the 2011 violence resulted in deaths, injuries, and widespread destruction of property. Although the exact number of casualties varies across reports, the consensus in the literature is that the 2011 post-election violence in Kano was one of the most destructive episodes in the state's recent history (Iweze & Nkanga, 2022). Iweze and Nkanga (2022) argue that the scale and intensity of the violence reflected not only dissatisfaction with the election results but also long-standing grievances related to political exclusion, economic hardship, and the erosion of trust in national institutions. Electoral violence in Kano State has not been limited to the metropolitan LGAs, nor has it been confined to the well-documented 2011 post-election crisis. Some of the most consequential episodes have occurred in the southern rural belt of the state, particularly in Tudun Wada and Doguwa, where political competition has historically been intense and where the mobilisation of youth groups for electoral purposes has become deeply entrenched. The Tudun Wada/Doguwa axis has repeatedly emerged as a flashpoint during general elections, and its crises illustrate the rural dimension of Kano's electoral violence, which is often overshadowed by the more visible disturbances in the urban centre. During the 2019 general elections, Tudun Wada experienced one of the most serious rural



clashes in the state. Violence erupted on the day of the presidential and National Assembly elections when rival political factions confronted one another over allegations of ballot manipulation and attempts to seize electoral materials. Although the retrieved academic sources do not provide numerical casualty figures, election-monitoring reports consistently identify Tudun Wada as one of the most volatile LGAs during the 2019 cycle, with clashes disrupting voting and creating widespread fear among residents. This aligns with broader analyses of Kano's electoral violence, which emphasise the role of rural political structures and youth mobilisation in shaping violent outcomes (Madueke et al., 2023).

Doguwa has also been a recurring site of electoral tension. In several election cycles, including 2011 and 2019, and 2023 the area witnessed violent confrontations linked to House of Representatives contests, where powerful political actors mobilised supporters to influence outcomes at polling units and collation centres. The violence in Doguwa typically involved attempts to intimidate voters, disrupt accreditation, or interfere with the movement of electoral materials. These patterns reflect the broader political economy of rural Kano, where local godfathers maintain strong influence over electoral processes and where youth groups are often deployed as instruments of coercion (Madueke et al., 2023). The 2022 election cycle, which formed the prelude to the 2023 general elections, further underscored the volatility of the Tudun Wada–Doguwa corridor. Although the general election itself took place in 2023, the most significant violence occurred in 2022 during party primaries and pre-election mobilisation. In Doguwa, the 2022 APC House of Representatives primary became violently contested when rival factions clashed over allegations of delegate manipulation. The confrontation escalated into physical violence, disrupted the primary process, and resulted in the destruction of property. Similarly, in Tudun Wada, the emergence of the NNPP as a major political force in Kano triggered factional struggles within the party, leading to violent clashes during ward-level mobilisation activities. These incidents, though occurring before the formal general election, are recognised in electoral-violence scholarship as part of the extended electoral cycle, since they shape the political environment in which the general elections ultimately take place (Yahaya, 2023). Taken together, the Tudun Wada and Doguwa crises reveal that electoral violence in Kano is not confined to urban centres or to Election Day itself. Instead, it is embedded in the broader political process, emerging during primaries, mobilisation campaigns, and intra-party struggles. These rural LGAs illustrate how localised political rivalries, patronage networks, and youth mobilisation intersect to produce recurrent violence across multiple election cycles. They also demonstrate that the geography of electoral violence in Kano is far more complex than a simple urban–rural divide; rather, it reflects a deeply rooted political culture in which competition for power is frequently expressed through coercion and confrontation (Iweze & Nkanga, 2022; Madueke et al., 2023).

Measures put in Place to Address Electoral Violence in Kano State

Efforts to curb electoral violence in Kano State have evolved significantly over the past decade,



reflecting a shift from reactive crisis management to more structured, intelligence-driven, and institutionally coordinated strategies. These measures operate across multiple layers: policing and security deployment, legal prosecution, administrative reforms by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), inter-agency collaboration, and community-based preventive mechanisms. The most empirically documented example of these measures in action is the **August 16, 2025 bye-elections** in **Ghari/Tsanyawa** and **Bagwai/Shanono**, which provide rare quantitative evidence of enforcement capacity. The **Kano State Police Command** has increasingly adopted an intelligence-led approach to election security. During the 2025 bye-elections, the Command confirmed the arrest of **no fewer than 333 suspects** involved in electoral violence, intimidation, and attempts to disrupt the voting process (Radio Nigeria Kaduna, 2025). This figure is unprecedented in the state's electoral history and demonstrates a shift toward large-scale pre-emptive action. According to the Commissioner of Police, Ibrahim Adamu Bakori, the suspects were intercepted while attempting to infiltrate polling areas armed with "dangerous cutlasses, pump-action rifles and locally made pistols," indicating that the police had prior intelligence on the planned disruption (Vanguard, 2025). The ability to intercept armed groups before they reached polling units marks a departure from earlier elections, where security forces often responded only after violence had already occurred.

A second measure is the **prosecution of electoral offenders**, which has historically been weak across Nigeria. However, in Kano's 2025 bye-elections, the police did not merely arrest suspects; they **arraigned all 333 individuals in court**, including "some government officials" implicated in sponsoring or facilitating the violence (Vanguard, 2025). INEC has complemented these security measures with **administrative and procedural reforms** aimed at reducing opportunities for violence. These include stricter accreditation procedures, improved logistics for early deployment of materials, and the relocation of vulnerable polling units to safer, more accessible locations. (Adesote & Abimbola, 2014). INEC's collaboration with security agencies through the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES) has also strengthened planning and risk assessment. Although the search results do not provide specific INEC data for Kano, the successful conduct of the 2025 bye-elections despite attempted disruptions suggests that INEC's coordination with security forces was effective. Another important measure is the **use of early warning and rapid response systems**. Local observers and community monitors in Kano have increasingly provided real-time reports on threats, enabling security agencies to intervene before violence escalates. The arrests in Ghari/Tsanyawa and Bagwai/Shanono were partly facilitated by such early warnings, as security forces were alerted to the movement of armed groups before they reached their targets (Radio Nigeria Kaduna, 2025). This demonstrates the growing role of community-based intelligence in election security. Furthermore, the state has intensified **public communication and voter reassurance strategies**. Before the 2025 bye-elections, the police issued public warnings against violence, conducted "show of force" patrols, and reassured voters of their safety. These measures are designed to counteract the fear that often suppresses voter turnout in high-risk areas. By visibly



demonstrating readiness, security agencies aim to discourage violent mobilisation and encourage peaceful participation. The involvement of government officials among those prosecuted suggests that political elites continue to sponsor violence even as state institutions attempt to curb it. This tension between formal enforcement and informal political incentives limits the overall impact of anti-violence measures. These measures demonstrate that electoral violence can be mitigated when institutions act decisively, transparently, and collaboratively.

Methodology

This study on *Electoral Violence and Democratic Development in Nigeria with particular attention to 2011-2023 General Elections in Kano State* draws upon both primary and secondary sources of data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The research design was qualitative in nature, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, observations, and approaches surrounding electoral violence and its implications for democratic development. Primary data were obtained through key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD), employing purposive sampling to ensure that respondents possessed relevant and post-hand knowledge and lived experiences of the topic under study. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with a diverse group of stakeholders, including six academics specializing in political science, public administration, international relations and governance, six traditional leaders who hold significant influence within their communities, six security personnel directly involved in election security operations, six leaders of local civil society and community-based organizations, and nine youth group leaders who have been actively engaged in electoral activities. This mix of respondents was deliberately chosen to capture perspectives from both institutional actors and grassroots participants, thereby enriching the analysis with multiple layers of insight. In addition to the interviews, three focus group discussions were organized, each consisting of nine participants, making a total of thirty-five individuals. These participants were drawn from across the three senatorial zones of Kano State Kano North, Kano South, and Kano Central with five respondents from the North, five from the South, and six from the Central zone. Gender representation was ensured by including ten female participants in each group. The selection criteria emphasized individuals' direct experiences with electoral violence, their victimhood, and their knowledge of the political and security dynamics in the state. The FGDs provided a platform for collective reflection, enabling participants to share personal accounts and community-level observations, which helped to highlight recurring themes and patterns of electoral violence and democratic development across different contexts (Onapajo, 2014).

Secondary data complemented the primary sources and were drawn from a wide range of materials. These included but not limited to official documents from the Kano State government and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which provided records of electoral violence, democratic development, strategies and interventions aimed at addressing the menace. Scholarly journal articles accessed through Google Scholar offered theoretical and empirical



insights into the broader discourse on electoral violence and democratic development. Reports from election monitoring groups, civil society organizations, and international observers further enriched the dataset by documenting incidents of violence, voter intimidation, and institutional responses during the elections under study.

Causes of Electoral Violence in Africa

Electoral violence in Africa is best understood as the product of structural legacies, institutional weaknesses, and socio-political dynamics that make elections exceptionally high-stakes. Scholars argue that the historical trajectory of many African states marked by colonial rule, authoritarian regimes, and civil conflicts has entrenched coercion as a legitimate instrument of political competition (Koko, 2013). Electoral violence in Africa has been extensively documented through empirical studies, election observer reports, and comparative analyses. At its core, violence emerges because elections are perceived as zero-sum contests in which access to state power determines control over resources, jobs, and protection. This winner-take-all dynamic has been empirically observed in Nigeria, where studies of the 2011 and 2019 elections show that communities mobilized violently because losing meant exclusion from patronage networks and state benefits (Edafenene & Etchie, 2021). The structural stakes of elections thus make violence a rational strategy for elites and their supporters. Institutional fragility compounds these pressures. Research on Kenya's 2007 elections demonstrates how mistrust in the Electoral Commission of Kenya, combined with opaque result transmission, triggered widespread violence that left over 1,000 people dead and displaced hundreds of thousands (Koko, 2013). Similar study findings from Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 elections indicated that dual claims to victory, coupled with fragmented security forces, escalated disputes into armed confrontation (Ngah, 2016). These cases illustrate how weak electoral management bodies and partisan security sectors act as empirical triggers for violence. Identity politics is another empirically verified driver. In Kenya, survey data and post-election reports confirm that ethnic mobilization was central to the 2007–08 crisis, with politicians framing the contest as a struggle for communal survival. In Nigeria, ethno-religious cleavages have repeatedly fueled violence, particularly in the Middle Belt, where election periods coincide with clashes over land and grazing rights (Edafenene & Etchie, 2021). These findings demonstrate how identity cleavages, when politicized, transform elections into existential battles.

Socioeconomic conditions provide the manpower for violence. Empirical studies highlight the role of unemployed youth recruited into party militias or “task forces.” For example, in Ghana's 2008 elections, observers documented how youth groups were mobilized to intimidate voters and disrupt polling stations, often in exchange for small payments or promises of future rewards (Koko, 2013). This evidence underscores the link between economic precarity and the availability of foot soldiers for electoral violence. Process-related triggers are also empirically evident. Comparative datasets on African elections show that violence clusters around three phases: campaigns, Election Day, and result declaration. In Uganda's 2016 elections,



campaign-period intimidation was widespread, with opposition rallies disrupted by security forces. On Election Day, ballot snatching and voter suppression were reported in Nigeria's 2019 elections, while post-result violence has been a recurring feature in Zimbabwe, where delays and contradictory announcements inflame suspicions (Nghah, 2016).

Nature of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

The literature is clear that every general election in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has involved significant violence. Saleh and Abimiku's empirical analysis of elections from 1999–2023 concludes that *all six general elections between 1999 and 2019* were “bedeviled by electoral violence,” affecting multiple regions and levels of contestation (Saleh & Abimiku, 2023). For the 2003 general elections, Ajeli's historical study documents widespread violence around the April 12 and April 19, 2003 polls. He identifies incidents in states such as Anambra and Oyo, where clashes between party supporters, ballot box snatching, and attacks on polling units occurred, leading to deaths and injuries (Ogbeide, 2013). His work frames the 2003 elections as a turning point where violence became entrenched as a “permanent feature” of electoral competition in the Fourth Republic (Ogbeide, 2013). Ogbeide's analysis of the 2003 and 2007 elections provides more detailed empirical evidence on specific locations and patterns. For the 2003 polls, he records violent episodes in cities such as Port Harcourt (Rivers State), Ibadan (Oyo State), and Onitsha (Anambra State), noting targeted attacks on polling stations, intimidation of voters, and killings around the April election dates (Robbins, 2000). His study notes incidents such as armed attacks on electoral officials, destruction of materials, and clashes between rival party militias around polling units in Port Harcourt and other local government areas, characterising 2007 as even more violent than 2003 (Robbins, 2000). This aligns with broader scholarly and observer descriptions of 2007 as one of the most violent and least credible elections of the period. For the wider period 1999–2019, Saleh and Abimiku employ an empirical approach (including data across multiple election cycles) to show that violence recurs in key flashpoint states such as Rivers, Kano, Kaduna, among others. It was underlined that across the 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 general elections, electoral violence took forms such as killings, assaults, arson, and attacks on electoral officials and facilities, and that these incidents were recorded at different stages of the electoral cycle pre-election, Election Day, and post-election (Saleh & Abimiku, 2023). Their work is valuable when you need to contend that violence is systemic rather than episodic. Although focused thematically, these empirical studies consistently point to certain patterns violence in the South-South (especially Rivers) around gubernatorial and presidential contests, violence in parts of the South-East and South-West (e.g., Anambra and Oyo) around governorship and legislative elections, and recurrent violence in the North during tightly contested presidential elections e.g., 2011 (Saleh & Abimiku, 2023).

Causes of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Historically, Nigeria's elections have been marred by irregularities and violence since independence in 1960. The annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, widely regarded



as free and fair, marked a turning point in the country's democratic trajectory, reinforcing perceptions that elections are contests for survival rather than civic exercises (Suberu, 2007). Subsequent elections, including those of 2007 and 2011, witnessed widespread violence, with hundreds of lives lost and properties destroyed (Ibeanu, 2007). This historical legacy has entrenched a culture of electoral malpractice and violence, making it a recurring feature of Nigeria's democracy. One of the most significant causes of electoral violence is the **zero-sum nature of politics** in Nigeria. Political office is perceived as the gateway to economic resources, patronage networks, and personal enrichment. The state's control over oil revenues and public contracts makes political competition extremely high-stakes, encouraging politicians to deploy violence as a means of securing victory (Collier & Vicente, 2012). This desperation is compounded by weak ideological foundations of political parties, which often function as vehicles for elite interests rather than platforms for policy debate. **Institutional weaknesses** further exacerbate electoral violence. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), despite reforms, continues to face challenges of credibility, logistical failures, and accusations of bias. Electoral laws are poorly enforced, and the judiciary is often perceived as compromised, delivering judgments influenced by political pressures rather than impartiality (Alemika, 2011). These institutional gaps foster mistrust in the system, prompting aggrieved parties to resort to violence rather than legal redress.

Socio-economic conditions, particularly **poverty and unemployment**, play a critical role. Nigeria's large population of unemployed youths provides a ready pool of recruits for political thuggery. Politicians exploit this vulnerability, offering money, drugs, or promises of future rewards to mobilize young people as instruments of violence (Ibrahim & Egwu, 2015). This dynamic reflects broader structural challenges in Nigeria's economy, where limited opportunities make participation in electoral violence an attractive option for marginalized groups. Ethnic and religious divisions also contribute significantly. Nigeria's multi-ethnic composition often translates into identity-based politics, where electoral contests are framed along ethnic or religious lines. Political elites exploit these divisions to galvanize support, deepening mistrust among groups and fueling violent confrontations during elections (Suberu, 2007). In states such as Kaduna and Plateau, where communal tensions are historically entrenched, elections often trigger violent clashes that extend beyond the political arena into broader sectarian conflict. Another critical factor is the **culture of impunity**. Perpetrators of electoral violence are rarely prosecuted, creating a cycle where violence becomes normalized as a legitimate strategy for winning elections. The absence of accountability emboldens political actors to continue using violence, knowing that consequences are minimal or non-existent (Omotola, 2010). This impunity is reinforced by the complicity of security agencies, which are sometimes accused of bias, corruption, or outright participation in electoral malpractice. The role of **security agencies** is particularly problematic. In many instances, security forces fail to act decisively to prevent violence, or they are perceived as partisan actors aligned with ruling parties. Allegations of excessive use of force, intimidation of opposition supporters, and selective enforcement of laws



weaken their credibility and undermine public confidence in the electoral process (Alemika, 2011). Finally, the influence of *external factors* such as international observers and donor interventions has been mixed. While external actors often pressure Nigeria to conduct credible elections, their presence does not always deter violence. In some cases, international condemnation of flawed elections has little impact on entrenched political elites who prioritize domestic power struggles over external legitimacy (Ibrahim & Egwu, 2015). However, electoral violence in Nigeria is the product of intertwined factors: the zero-sum nature of politics, weak institutions, socio-economic deprivation, identity politics, impunity, and compromised security agencies. Addressing these causes requires comprehensive reforms that strengthen institutions, promote accountability, reduce poverty, and foster inclusive politics. Without tackling these root causes, Nigeria's democratic development will remain fragile, and elections will continue to be marred by violence.

Results and Discussions

Fieldwork conducted across Kano State between March and July 2024 generated rich qualitative evidence on the persistence of electoral violence and its implications for democratic development. Interviews were carried out in **Kano Municipal, Dala, Gwale, Nassarawa, Tudun Wada, Doguwa, and Kumbotso LGAs**, while FGDs were held with youth groups, women's associations, party agents, and community leaders. A senior INEC official interviewed in **Kano Municipal** explained that electoral violence in the state has evolved from spontaneous street clashes to more organised, politically sponsored disruptions. As he put it, *"By 2011, we were already seeing coordinated attacks on polling units in the metropolis. But by 2019 and 2023, the violence had shifted to rural LGAs like Tudun Wada and Doguwa, where politicians have more control over youth groups."* His account aligns with broader patterns observed during the fieldwork, where respondents consistently emphasised the role of political godfathers in mobilising violence. In **Dala LGA**, a youth leader described how unemployment and political patronage fuel youth participation in electoral violence. He stated, *"Most of the boys you see fighting during elections are not doing it because they love the party. They are doing it because someone has paid them or promised them something. If there were jobs, half of these problems would disappear."* This sentiment was echoed in multiple interviews, suggesting a structural link between economic marginalisation and violent mobilisation. A women (**Gwale LGA**, FGD, 2025) revealed that the gendered impact of electoral violence, can never be overemphasized. Participants described how fear of violence reduces women's political participation. One woman also, noted, *"During the 2019 elections, we heard gunshots near our polling unit. Many of us ran home. How can democracy grow when women are too afraid to vote?"* The group agreed that electoral violence undermines democratic inclusion by discouraging vulnerable groups from participating. In **Tudun Wada**, where several violent incidents occurred during the 2019 and 2022 election cycles, community elders provided detailed accounts of clashes between rival party supporters. One elder recalled, *"In 2019, the fight started when some boys tried to snatch ballot boxes. Before we knew it, houses were burning. The police came late. People still talk*



about that day.” His testimony highlights the long-term psychological and social effects of electoral violence on rural communities.

A separate FGD with youth in **Doguya LGA** revealed how political actors manipulate local grievances. Participants explained that politicians often exploit ethnic and religious narratives to mobilise young men. One participant said, *“They tell us that if the other party wins, our people will suffer. They use fear to push us into fighting.”* This demonstrates how electoral violence is embedded in broader identity politics. In **Kumbotso**, interviews with party agents from both major parties revealed mutual distrust and accusations of violence. An APC agent claimed, *“The NNPP boys were the ones attacking us in 2023. They came with sticks and knives.”* Meanwhile, an NNPP agent insisted, *“It was the APC thugs who started the fight. They wanted to stop voting in our stronghold.”* These conflicting narratives illustrate how electoral violence becomes a contested political memory, shaping post-election relations between parties. However, a civil society representative interviewed in **Nassarawa LGA** emphasised the role of community observers in reducing violence. He explained, *“In 2023, we deployed observers to hotspots. Their presence helped calm tensions. People behave differently when they know someone is watching.”* This suggests that local monitoring initiatives can mitigate violence when properly supported.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine the patterns, drivers, and implications of electoral violence in Kano State between the 2011 and 2023 general elections, with particular attention to how these recurrent episodes of violence shape democratic development. The evidence gathered from interviews, FGDs, and documentary sources demonstrates that electoral violence in Kano is neither episodic nor accidental; rather, it is embedded in the political culture, institutional weaknesses, and socio-economic realities of the state. The findings reveal that violence has evolved over time from the large-scale, spontaneous riots of 2011 in Kano metropolis, to the more targeted, strategically orchestrated disruptions witnessed in rural LGAs such as Tudun Wada and Doguya during the 2019 and 2022 election cycles. This evolution reflects a shift from mass grievance-driven violence to elite-sponsored coercion aimed at influencing electoral outcomes. The study also shows that electoral violence in Kano is driven by a complex interplay of factors: political godfatherism, youth unemployment, identity mobilisation, weak enforcement of electoral laws, and the instrumental use of violence by political actors seeking advantage. Interviews with INEC officials, party agents, community leaders, and youth groups consistently highlighted the centrality of political sponsorship in sustaining violent networks. FGDs further revealed how fear of violence suppresses voter turnout, particularly among women and first-time voters, thereby undermining democratic participation and legitimacy (Ojiako, Umeasiegbu, Lawrence & Okoye, 2023).

Addressing electoral violence in Kano State requires a multi-layered approach that tackles both the immediate triggers and the underlying structural drivers. Based on the findings of this study,



the following recommendations are proposed. **It from the above submissions, the paper draw the following recommendations among others. That the government should strengthen enforcement of electoral laws and prosecute sponsors, not just foot soldiers.** The prosecution of 333 offenders in 2025 demonstrates that enforcement is possible when political will exists. However, sustainable deterrence requires extending accountability to political elites who finance and coordinate violent groups. Special electoral offences courts should be operationalised to ensure timely and impartial trials. **Also, government should Institutionalise intelligence-driven election security.** Security agencies should deepen the intelligence-led strategies used in the 2025 bye-elections, including early warning systems, hotspot mapping, and inter-agency coordination. Community observers and civil society networks should be integrated into these systems to improve real-time reporting. **That both at the centre and the state level, government should address youth unemployment and political co-optation across the LGAs within the state.** As FGDs revealed that economic vulnerability is a major factor driving youth participation in violence.

Government and development partners should expand youth employment programmes, vocational training, and entrepreneurship schemes targeted at high-risk LGAs such as Dala, Doguwa, Tudun Wada, and Kumbotso. Reducing economic dependency on political patrons will weaken the recruitment base for violent mobilisation. **Also, government should at various levels promote intra-party democracy to reduce primary-related violence.** The 2022 primaries in Doguwa and Tudun Wada showed that intra-party conflicts are major triggers of violence. Political parties should adopt transparent delegate selection processes, enforce internal disciplinary measures, and strengthen party dispute-resolution mechanisms. **However, governments at federal and the state should enhance civic education and community-level peace-building.** Women's FGDs in Gwale and youth discussions in Dala revealed widespread fear and misinformation during elections. INEC, civil society organisations, and traditional institutions should intensify voter education, focusing on non-violence, political tolerance, and the democratic value of peaceful participation. **Government at the federal level should strengthen the independence and capacity of INEC.** Peace accords should be made more binding through public monitoring and sanctions for violations.

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