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THE HAND OF ESAU AND THE VOICE OF JACOB: STATE-BACKED ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND THE POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIC POWER REPRODUCTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Elections constitute the foundation upon which democratic governance is built, which helps in the peaceful transfer of political power from one legitimate government to another. The electoral process in Nigeria has been plagued by persistent violence which undermines electoral integrity, public trust, and the consolidation of democratic institutions. While existing scholarship has extensively examined the causes, manifestations, and consequences of electoral violence, comparatively less attention has been paid to the indirect role of state actors in facilitating, enabling, or sustaining such violence as a strategy for political power reproduction. Rather than viewing electoral violence as a spontaneous by-product of political competition, this paper argues that it increasingly functions as a strategic instrument through which political elites acquire, retain, and reproduce state power while distancing themselves from the direct execution of violence through proxy actors, thus it examines how the dynamics of state-backed electoral violence have played a key role either in installing or removing of political office holders. Drawing on State Capture Theory and Zero-Sum Politics, the study adopts a qualitative content analysis of scholarly literature, official documents, election observer reports, judicial materials, and other credible documentary sources to examine the mechanisms through which political elites influence electoral outcomes while maintaining plausible deniability through proxy actors. The study introduces the concept of "Hand of Esau and the Voice of Jacob" and contributes to a deeper understanding of how visible perpetrators of electoral violence differ from its hidden beneficiaries, and how state-backed electoral violence leverages captured state institutions, thugs, agberos, cultists, kidnappers, mobs, religious fanatics, hired assassins and other criminal structures to preserve or reproduce political power in Nigeria. The study recommends that addressing electoral violence requires not only electoral reforms but also institutional reforms capable of insulating public institutions from political capture and strengthening democratic accountability.

Key words: Electoral Violence, Democratic Governance, State Actors, State Capture, Political Violence, Election Security, Nigeria.

Introduction

The All Progressives Congress (APC) presidential candidate Bola Ahmed Tinubu said during the 2023 presidential campaign,

> "Political power is not going to be served in a restaurant. They don't serve it a la carte. At all cost, fight for it, grab it and run with it," (Peoples Gazette, 2022).

The statement, although politically controversial, reflected the intense winner-takes-all logic. And ironically the unfolding events that followed were one of the most violent election seasons ever experienced in Nigeria electoral history (Oyewole, 2022). In the absence of free and fair elections, democracy is plunged into jeopardy; this is because a core principle of democracy is the freedom of the people to select their leader by themselves. The Government of the People, by the People and for the People principle will fail the litmus test if interference occurs during the process by which the people choose their leaders.

Violence has remained one of the recurring features of Nigeria's electoral history and democratic trajectory since independence in 1960 because political competition is frequently perceived as an existential struggle for access to political power, public office, and state resources, making electoral processes particularly susceptible to coercion, intimidation, and violence (Bekoe, 2019; International IDEA, 2023). Violence has increasingly evolved into a strategic instrument within Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy, through which political elites acquire, retain, and reproduce political power while distancing themselves from the direct execution of violent acts by employing political thugs, criminal networks, and other proxy actors (Onapajo, 2020; Matfess, 2023). This phenomenon may be conceptualized as state-backed electoral violence, referring to situations in which individuals or institutions vested with public authority deploy state resources, institutional influence, or coercive capacity to manipulate electoral outcomes through intimidation, coercion, or violent disruption (LeVan & Ukata, 2024; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Unlike conventional forms of electoral violence perpetrated solely by non-state actors, state-backed electoral violence derives its effectiveness from the asymmetrical power relationship between incumbents and political challengers and from the capacity of governing elites to instrumentalize state institutions including security agencies, electoral bodies, and administrative structures for partisan advantage (Bratton, 2023; LeVan & Ukata, 2024).

Electoral violence constitutes one of the greatest threats to democratic governance because it undermines electoral integrity, erodes public confidence in democratic institutions, weakens political legitimacy, and diminishes citizens' willingness to participate in democratic processes (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2022; International IDEA, 2023). Across many emerging democracies, elections are frequently characterized by varying levels of intimidation, coercion, and violence before, during, and after polling (Höglund & Jarstad, 2021). Nigeria remains one of the most prominent examples of this pattern. According to Oyewale (2022), electoral violence assumes multiple forms and motivations, including suppressing or neutralizing political opponents, disrupting opponents' mobilization efforts, preventing electoral participation,

contesting unfavourable election outcomes, and manipulating or delegitimizing the electoral process.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined the causes, patterns, and consequences of electoral violence in Nigeria, linking the phenomenon to ethnic mobilization, poverty, youth unemployment, political intolerance, weak democratic institutions, electoral malpractice, and the activities of political thugs and criminal networks (Onapajo, 2020; Matfess, 2023; LeVan & Ukata, 2024). However, comparatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the institutional mechanisms through which political elites utilise state structures, public institutions, and proxy actors to facilitate, sustain, or benefit from electoral violence as a strategy for preserving political dominance (Bratton, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Drawing on the biblical metaphor of the **"Hand of Esau and the Voice of Jacob"** (Genesis 27:22), this paper conceptualizes electoral violence as a strategic instrument of political power acquisition in which the hidden beneficiaries deliberately distance themselves from the visible perpetrators, who serve as the direct executors of coercive acts. The metaphor captures the disconnect between the public face of electoral violence and its concealed political sponsors, illustrating how powerful actors manipulate democratic processes while maintaining plausible deniability. Through this mechanism, political elites are able to acquire, retain, and reproduce political power either directly or indirectly through loyal political surrogates (LeVan & Ukata, 2024; Matfess, 2023).

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manipulate democratic processes while maintaining plausible deniability. Through this mechanism, political elites are able to acquire, retain, and reproduce political power either directly or indirectly through loyal political surrogates (LeVan & Ukata, 2024; Matfess, 2023).

According to Sambo et al. (2024) electoral violence has been among the most devastating kinds of violence in Nigeria for many decades. It has been observed that electoral violence was a forerunner to the collapse of the First, Second, and Aborted Third Republics, and the phenomenon has not spared the present Fourth Republic. Politicians and their associates have repeatedly been linked to the mobilization of political thugs, hate speech, incitement, and intimidation directed at opponents and their supporters. In some instances, allegations have also emerged regarding the involvement of state institutions and security agencies, either through direct participation, selective law enforcement, institutional protection, or covert support for particular political interests.
Drawing upon State Capture Theory and Zero-Sum Politics, the study examines how political elites exploit captured institutions, patronage networks, and proxy actors to shape electoral outcomes while maintaining plausible deniability regarding the visible manifestations of violence. This paper concludes that electoral violence is not merely a consequence of political competition but an instrument through which political competition itself is structured, managed, and controlled.

Theoretical Framework, Concept Clarification and Political Economy of Electoral Violence in Nigeria

This study is anchored on **State Capture Theory**, **Game Theory (Zero-Sum Politics)**, and the proposed **Hand of Esau and Voice of Jacob Analytical Model**. State Capture Theory explains how powerful political and economic elites manipulate public institutions, laws, appointments, and state resources to advance private interests rather than the public good (Dávid-Barrett, 2023; Morgenbesser, 2025). Within electoral politics, captured institutions—including security agencies, electoral management bodies, and public officials may be used to intimidate political opponents, selectively enforce laws, suppress dissent, and influence electoral outcomes while protecting political allies (Dávid-Barrett, 2023;). The theory therefore explains why those who benefit most from electoral violence are often insulated from direct participation.

Game Theory, particularly the zero-sum game, explains Nigeria's winner-takes-all political culture in which electoral victory provides access to political power, patronage, and state resources, while electoral defeat often results in exclusion from political influence and economic opportunities (Bhuiyan, 2016; Oke, 2022). Such a political environment encourages politicians to perceive elections as battles for survival, making violence a rational strategy for securing victory, suppressing opponents, and preserving political dominance. Weak institutions and ineffective accountability mechanisms further reduce the perceived costs of electoral violence, thereby increasing its attractiveness as a political strategy (Höglund & Jarstad, 2021;).

The study further advances the **Hand of Esau and Voice of Jacob Analytical Model**, adapted from Genesis 27, to explain the disconnect between the visible perpetrators of electoral violence and its hidden beneficiaries. The "Hand of Esau" represents political thugs, criminal gangs,

compromised security personnel, and other proxy actors who physically execute acts of violence, whereas the "Voice of Jacob" represents politicians, financiers, political godfathers, and influential elites who sponsor, direct, or benefit from violence while maintaining plausible deniability (Oyewole, 2023; Fubara, 2026). This model complements State Capture Theory by explaining how political elites strategically distance themselves from violent acts while enjoying the political benefits generated by them (Fubara, 2026).

Election extends beyond polling day to encompass electoral laws, party registration, campaigns, media activities, voter registration, election administration, dispute resolution, and result declaration (Iyayi, 2005; International IDEA, 2023). Democracy similarly requires competitive elections, the rule of law, protection of civil liberties, institutional accountability, and meaningful citizen participation in governance (International IDEA, 2023). Electoral violence refers to the use or threat of physical, psychological, economic, or institutional coercion to influence electoral processes or outcomes before, during, or after elections by either state or non-state actors (Bekoe, 2012; Bardall, 2020). Such violence undermines electoral integrity, reduces voter turnout, weakens public confidence in democratic institutions, and erodes political legitimacy (Höglund & Jarstad, 2021; International IDEA, 2023). One of the most common manifestations of electoral violence in Nigeria is voter intimidation, involving threats, harassment, hate speech, ethnic profiling, misinformation, and coercion designed to influence voting behaviour (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2023; Roberts et al., 2025). Reports from the 2023 general elections documented widespread intimidation of voters, attacks on electoral officials, destruction of electoral materials, and institutional failures by security agencies to prevent or respond effectively to violence, thereby reinforcing concerns about state capture and declining electoral integrity (Frontiers in Political Science, 2025; Roberts et al., 2025).

Electoral violence in Nigeria increasingly functions as a deliberate political strategy rather than spontaneous disorder. Political actors deploy violence to suppress voter participation, disrupt polling and result collation, intimidate electoral officials, and manipulate electoral outcomes. Within Nigeria's winner-takes-all political environment, violence becomes a calculated political investment because weak institutions and limited accountability reduce the likelihood of punishment (Höglund & Jarstad, 2021; Fubara, 2026). The political economy of electoral violence reveals that politicians, political parties, and political godfathers are frequently identified as its principal sponsors and beneficiaries. Because political office provides access to public resources, patronage networks, and economic opportunities, some political actors resort to hate speech, political thuggery, and electoral manipulation to retain power (Adetula, 2015; Ogedi, 2024). Political parties often exploit unemployed youths and criminal networks as agents of electoral violence, while influential godfathers finance and coordinate violent activities to safeguard their political and economic interests (Adetula, 2015; Ibeogu & Nwusulor, 2020).

The principal executors of electoral violence include political thugs and, in some instances, compromised security agencies that intimidate voters, attack political opponents, disrupt polling units, and interfere with electoral administration (International Crisis Group, 2023; Oni et al., 2025). Consequently, addressing electoral violence requires holding accountable not only the visible perpetrators but also the political sponsors, financiers, and institutional networks that organise, facilitate, and benefit from violence. Ultimately, the major victims remain voters,

electoral officials, party agents, political contestants, and democratic institutions, making institutional independence, accountability, and electoral justice indispensable for Nigeria's democratic consolidation (ACLED, 2023; Ezikeudu et al., 2025)

Method

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using documentary and doctrinal research designs to examine the relationship between electoral violence and democratic governance in Nigeria. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth exploration and interpretation of existing evidence, legal frameworks, institutional practices, and scholarly perspectives relating to electoral violence. The documentary design enabled the systematic review of published and unpublished documentary materials, while the doctrinal research design provided a framework for examining constitutional provisions, electoral laws, judicial decisions, and policy instruments governing elections in Nigeria.

Data for the study were obtained exclusively from secondary sources. These comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, government publications, reports of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), reports of domestic and international election observer missions, publications of international organizations, judicial and policy documents, reputable newspaper reports, and other relevant academic and institutional documents on electoral violence and democratic governance in Nigeria.

The study employed qualitative content analysis as the primary method of data analysis. The documentary materials were systematically reviewed, coded, categorized, and interpreted to identify recurring themes relating to the causes, manifestations, consequences, and institutional drivers of electoral violence. Particular attention was given to evidence concerning the involvement of political elites, state institutions, security agencies, and other stakeholders in the perpetuation of electoral violence and their implications for democratic governance. The findings from the documentary sources were synthesized and interpreted within the broader context of Nigeria's electoral experiences from the country's return to democratic rule in 1999 to the 2023 general elections. The interpretation of the findings was further guided by State Capture Theory and the Hand of Esau and Voice of Jacob Theory, which provided the analytical framework for explaining how institutional manipulation and hidden political actors contribute to the persistence of electoral violence and the erosion of democratic governance in Nigeria.

Discussion

Credible elections constitute one of the most fundamental pillars of democratic governance because they provide citizens with the opportunity to freely choose their political representatives under conditions of equality, transparency, and fairness (International IDEA, 2023). Credible, free, fair, and acceptable elections are often used interchangeably to describe electoral processes conducted in accordance with established legal frameworks without intimidation, manipulation, or undue advantage to any contestant (Ayogu et al., 2019). Such elections guarantee equal participation, protect political rights, and enable voters to make genuine electoral choices free from

coercion or fear (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021). Consequently, electoral violence represents a direct assault on electoral credibility because it compromises the principles of political equality, freedom of choice, and democratic legitimacy (Birch & Muchlinski, 2020). Violence before, during, or after elections distorts electoral competition by replacing persuasion with intimidation and coercion, thereby undermining the very essence of democratic governance (Höglund, 2009).

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature indicating that electoral violence remains one of the greatest impediments to democratic consolidation in Nigeria (Onapajo, 2014). Elections in established democracies such as the United States, Canada, and several Western European countries have largely become institutionalized mechanisms for ensuring peaceful political competition and orderly transfer of power (Norris, 2022). In contrast, elections in many emerging democracies continue to be characterized by violence, intimidation, vote suppression, and political manipulation (International IDEA, 2023). These practices weaken electoral institutions and reduce citizens' confidence in democratic processes (Norris, 2022). The persistence of electoral violence in Nigeria reflects broader institutional weaknesses, including ineffective law enforcement, weak accountability mechanisms, and the politicization of security agencies (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2023).

Evidence from the 2023 Nigerian general elections further illustrates the destructive consequences of electoral violence on election credibility (EU EOM, 2023). Analysis conducted by the Centre for Collaborative Investigative Journalism (CCIJ) revealed that election results from thousands of polling units were either cancelled or excluded because of violence, disruption, and other electoral irregularities (CCIJ, 2023). Government election documents reportedly indicated that violence constituted the leading cause of cancelled polling-unit results, affecting more than 2,000 polling units nationwide (CCIJ, 2023). The European Union Election Observation Mission similarly documented widespread incidents of voter intimidation, attacks on polling officials, ballot-box snatching, and disruptions that significantly affected the integrity of the electoral process (EU EOM, 2023). These developments demonstrate that electoral violence suppresses voter participation and compromises the credibility and acceptability of election outcomes (EU EOM, 2023).

The findings can further be explained through the lens of State Capture Theory. The theory suggests that political elites manipulate state institutions and public resources to preserve political power rather than promote democratic accountability (Hellman et al., 2000). Such manipulation transforms elections from genuine democratic contests into mechanisms for protecting entrenched political interests (Innes, 2014). The use of security agencies and administrative institutions for partisan purposes encourages electoral violence as a political strategy (World Bank, 2017). This institutional manipulation weakens public confidence in electoral management bodies and erodes trust in democratic governance (Norris, 2022). Similarly, the Hand of Esau and Voice of Jacob Theory explains that perpetrators of electoral violence are often sponsored by influential political actors who remain insulated from prosecution (Albert, 2007). The inability of Nigeria's criminal justice system to investigate and prosecute these sponsors reinforces a culture of impunity that encourages the recurrence of electoral violence (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Another important implication of electoral violence is its negative influence on voter turnout and political participation (Birch & Muchlinski, 2020). Fear remains one of the strongest deterrents to electoral participation in conflict-prone environments (Höglund, 2009). Human Rights Watch (2011) reported that many eligible Nigerian voters deliberately avoided polling stations because they feared losing their lives during elections. Tonwe et al. (2017) similarly observed that insecurity discourages electoral participation and weakens democratic representation. Consequently, elections conducted under conditions of violence may satisfy constitutional requirements but fail to reflect the genuine preferences of the electorate (Norris, 2022).

Electoral violence also undermines the legitimacy of elected governments and the quality of democratic governance (Birch & Muchlinski, 2020). Governments that emerge from elections characterized by intimidation and coercion often struggle to secure public confidence because citizens question the authenticity of their electoral mandates (UNDP, 2021). Declining public trust contributes to political apathy and reduces citizens' willingness to participate in subsequent elections (International IDEA, 2023). Ebiziem (2015) argued that electoral violence adversely affects electoral outcomes and governance by encouraging corruption, insecurity, and institutional instability. Likewise, Mollah and Jahan (2018) observed that incumbents frequently employ violence as a political strategy to manipulate election outcomes and retain power, thereby undermining democratic accountability.

Beyond the electoral process itself, persistent political violence generates wider socioeconomic consequences (United Nations, 2022). Electoral violence contributes to insecurity, poverty, unemployment, corruption, and political exclusion, with women, children, and young people bearing a disproportionate share of its consequences (UNDP, 2021). Nigeria's democratic experience since 1999 has consistently witnessed political assassinations, election-related killings, voter intimidation, political thuggery, and violations of the rule of law despite several electoral reform initiatives (Onapajo, 2014). Although the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society organizations, and development partners have intensified voter education, peace campaigns, and election monitoring initiatives, electoral violence remains a recurring feature of Nigerian elections (EU EOM, 2023).

Human Rights Watch (2011) further observed that election-related violence rarely ends with the declaration of election results. Armed groups recruited by political actors frequently evolve into criminal networks that continue to perpetrate violence long after elections have concluded (International Crisis Group, 2023). In several Nigerian states, political sponsors have eventually lost control over these groups, resulting in sustained insecurity and widespread human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2011). These developments demonstrate that electoral violence extends beyond electoral cycles and poses long-term threats to democratic stability and national security (United Nations, 2022). Therefore, strengthening democratic governance in Nigeria requires credible electoral management, effective prosecution of electoral offenders, independent democratic institutions, professional security agencies, and sustained civic education to promote peaceful political participation (International IDEA, 2023).

Conclusion

Credible elections remain indispensable to democratic governance because they confer legitimacy on political authority and provide citizens with meaningful opportunities to determine their leaders through peaceful political participation. This study demonstrates that electoral violence in Nigeria is not merely an episodic disruption of elections but a recurring strategy employed to influence electoral outcomes, sustain political dominance, and weaken democratic institutions. Guided by State Capture Theory, Zero-Sum Politics, and the Hand of Esau and Voice of Jacob analytical model, the study argues that addressing electoral violence requires greater attention to the political sponsors and institutional structures that facilitate impunity rather than focusing solely on the visible perpetrators. Strengthening democratic governance therefore requires independent electoral and security institutions, impartial enforcement of electoral laws, effective prosecution of offenders regardless of political status, and sustained efforts to address the socioeconomic conditions that fuel political violence. Ultimately, Nigeria's democratic consolidation will depend on its ability to conduct elections that are peaceful, credible, inclusive, and reflective of the genuine will of the electorate.

Recommendations

Addressing electoral violence in Nigeria requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach that combines legal, institutional, political, security, and socioeconomic interventions. Sustainable democratic governance can only be achieved when all electoral stakeholders discharge their responsibilities with transparency, accountability, professionalism, and respect for the rule of law. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC): Strengthen institutional capacity through transparent electoral administration, effective regulation of political parties, and strict compliance with electoral laws. INEC should also establish robust early warning and rapid response mechanisms to identify and address potential electoral flashpoints while intensifying voter education and civic awareness campaigns through traditional and digital media.

Security Agencies: Maintain political neutrality and professionalism throughout the electoral process. Security personnel should protect voters, electoral officials, and electoral materials without intimidation or partisan interference. Electoral offenders should be investigated and prosecuted promptly, irrespective of their political affiliations or social status.

National Assembly and Electoral Justice Institutions: Strengthen the enforcement of electoral laws by establishing effective mechanisms for investigating and prosecuting electoral offences. Greater emphasis should be placed on identifying, prosecuting, and sanctioning not only the direct perpetrators but also the sponsors, financiers, and beneficiaries of electoral violence.

Political Parties: Promote internal democracy, political tolerance, and issue-based campaigns while discouraging hate speech, political thuggery, and ethnic or religious mobilization. Political parties should sanction members who engage in or sponsor electoral violence.

Civil Society Organisations and the Media: Intensify civic education, election monitoring, voter mobilization, and public advocacy for peaceful elections. The media should provide accurate, balanced, and conflict-sensitive reporting while avoiding misinformation and inflammatory content capable of inciting violence.

Government and Development Partners: Address the structural drivers of electoral violence, particularly youth unemployment, poverty, and political exclusion, while supporting institutional reforms, electoral technology, capacity building, and international collaboration to strengthen Nigeria's democratic institutions and electoral integrity.

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