Peace-building strategies and electoral stability in Nigeria: A study of the 2015 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of peace-building strategies and electoral stability in Rivers State, focusing on the context of the 2015 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State. Through a qualitative approach based on secondary data, the research examines the challenges and issues that unfolded during this pivotal electoral events. The discussion unveils a multifaceted landscape, encompassing voter intimidation, election-related disinformation, inadequate voter education, political interference, weaknesses in electoral infrastructure, and challenges in post-election dispute resolution. Voter intimidation and violence emerged as significant hurdles, compromising the peaceful conduct of the election. The pervasive spread of election-related disinformation further complicated the landscape, distorting public perception and heightening tensions. Inadequate voter education, especially in rural areas, contributed to confusion and disenfranchisement, undermining the inclusivity of the electoral process. Allegations of political interference and partisan bias within electoral institutions raised doubts about the impartiality of the electoral process. Weaknesses in electoral infrastructure, including logistical challenges and technical glitches, added to the perception of inefficiency. To address these challenges, a set of recommendations is proposed. These include strengthening security measures, combating disinformation, enhancing voter education programs, ensuring impartiality, improving electoral infrastructure, streamlining dispute resolution, engaging civil society and media, promoting inclusivity, sustaining institutional reforms, and fostering international collaboration and monitoring.

Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of a nation's democratic journey, the intersection between electoral stability and peace-building emerges as a linchpin, shaping the course of governance and societal harmony. The democratic landscape of Nigeria, exemplified by the 2015 and 2023 general election, provides a compelling case study for unravelling the nuanced relationship between peace building strategies and electoral stability. As scholars emphasize the importance of trust in democratic processes and institutional legitimacy (Powell & Tucker, 2014), the interface between election stability and peace-building becomes a focal point in understanding not only the prevention of election-related violence (Collier, 2009) but also its profound implications for social cohesion, national unity (Norris, 2014), and the consolidation of democracy (Magaloni&Kricheli, 2010). The credibility of electoral processes serves as a fundamental pillar for fostering peace and stability in post-election periods. In examining the context of the 2015 and 2023 General Election in Nigeria, it is imperative to delve into the historical backdrop of elections and the consequential post-election violence that has posed significant challenges to peace-building efforts. Nigeria, like many other nations, has experienced instances where electoral integrity has been compromised, leading to outbreaks of violence and social unrest (Anifowose, 2006).

In previous electoral cycles, such as the 2011 and 2015 elections, Nigeria witnessed widespread irregularities and disputes, often resulting in post-election violence that undermined efforts for reconciliation and peace-building (Akinboye&Amuwo, 2017). These episodes of violence not only inflicted harm on individuals and communities but also eroded trust in democratic institutions and processes, exacerbating existing social divisions (Onuoha, 2019). Against this backdrop, understanding the intricate relationship between electoral credibility and peace- building becomes paramount. The extent to which elections are perceived as free, fair, and transparent directly impacts the legitimacy of elected officials and the acceptance of electoral outcomes by citizens (Brancati, 2018). Moreover, compromised electoral processes can serve as catalysts for grievances, further fuelling tensions and contributing to post-election violence (Ibhawoh, 2016). In light of these challenges, it becomes evident that ensuring the credibility of electoral processes is not merely a matter of democratic principle but a crucial precondition for fostering peace and stability in the aftermath of elections. This

study seeks to explore the dynamics between peace-building strategies and electoral stability efforts in the context of Nigeria's 2015 and 2023 General Election, with the aim of offering insights into strategies for mitigating post-election violence and advancing sustainable peace. Through a comprehensive analysis of past experiences and current trends, this research endeavours to shed light on the critical nexus between peace-building strategies and electoral stability in Nigeria's democratic landscape.

This discussion navigates through the multifaceted dimensions of this interface, examining how the credibility of electoral processes intricately weaves into the fabric of peace-building. From mitigating grievances and disputes (Sisk, 2017) to fostering good governance and the consolidation of democracy, each aspect contributes to the broader narrative of how credible elections serve as catalysts for building and sustaining peace in the aftermath of democratic exercises.

Research Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between peacebuilding strategies and electoral stability in Rivers State.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between peacebuilding strategies and sustainable democracy in Rivers State.

Literature Review

The concept of Peace Building

In the world of politics today, is a place of contact and every place of contact is a place of conflict. Thus, politics of today is marred by conflicts, violence, and discord, the concept of peace building emerges as a beacon of hope. Peacebuilding aims to create sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of conflicts and fostering reconciliation and cooperation among political actors and spectators. It goes beyond simply ending violence; it focuses on building the foundations for long-term peace and stability. Muriithi (2007) claims that peace building is an all-encompassing procedure that deals with issues on many fronts. The endeavor is to surmount the systemic, interpersonal, and cultural inconsistencies that serve as the foundation for conflict in order to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of peace. The process of encouraging social reforms and reconciliation is also

known as peace building. This intervention aims to decrease violence and promote social justice (Sodipo, 2013). It employs advocacy, awareness-raising, and campaigns to avoid and manage violent confrontations. According to Onigu-Otite and Albert (1999), it entails developing people's ability to cope with and treat the local underlying causes of hostilities and conflicts. The idea that force cannot bring about or maintain peace is the foundation for peace building. Only comprehension will lead to its discovery (Ofuoku & Evwierhurhoma, 2018).

The term "peace building" also describes strategies or tactics intended to advance social change, defuse conflict, and improve harmony within society. It sometimes includes sensitization, education, advocacy, enlightenment campaigns, and awareness-raising. In the context of this study, "peace building" refers to conflict management, prevention, andresolution, especially those meant to guarantee long-term peace during power struggles inside political parties. Deep polarization is a common feature of politics in conflict- affected situations, and how parties respond to this polarization is crucial in determining the likelihood of peace. This is especially true in situations where animosities and grievances based on identity have fueled conflict. In these situations, identity-based parties are very important. These often have strong support from their constituents and may be able to guarantee that minority groups' views are taken into account during peace negotiations. But rather than playing divisive identity politics, their capacity to articulate a national vision or speak for their communities' interests in national institutions will determine how much they can contribute to peace (Castillejo, 2016). “Inadequate representation of people' interests is the greatest detrimental effect of weak political parties, claims. Assembling and representing the interests of various groups in bargaining processes between the state and society over the nature of the post-conflict political settlement, both during peace negotiations (where parties can access or influence negotiations) and in post-conflict political life, is arguably the most important role that parties can potentially play in peacebuilding” (Carothers, 2006:16). However, parties in such situations are most obviously failing in their duty as links between the state and society (Wild & Foresti, 2010). In fact, parties in many conflict-affected environments essentially serve as front organizations for armed groups or as means of gaining power and access, with little motivation to carry out broader interests-aggregation and representation tasks.

The Interface between Peace Building and Election Stability

Electoral stability, defined as the perceived fairness, transparency, and legitimacy of electoral processes,is intricately linked to peacebuilding efforts in post-election contexts (Onuoha, 2019). This relationship is multifaceted, with credible elections serving as a crucial precondition for fostering peace and stability in diverse sociopolitical environments (Sisk, 2014). Firstly, credible elections contribute to the legitimacy of elected governments and institutions, thereby reducing grievances and the potential for violent conflict (Brancati, 2018). When citizens perceive electoral processes as fair and transparent, they are more likely to accept electoral outcomes, even in cases of electoral defeat. This acceptance enhances political stability and reduces the risk of post-election violence (Norris, 2014). Moreover, credible elections can facilitate inclusive political participation and representation, addressing underlying grievances and promoting social cohesion. Inclusive electoral processes provide avenues for marginalized groups to voice their concerns and aspirations, thereby reducing tensions and promoting reconciliation (Ibhawoh, 2016). Conversely, flawed elections characterized by exclusionary practices or electoral fraud can exacerbate existing societal divisions and fuel conflict dynamics (Hyde, 2011).

The credibility of elections is foundational to trust in democratic processes and institutional legitimacy. As Powell and Tucker (2014) argue, citizens' trust in electoral institutions and the democratic system is essential for maintaining political stability. When elections are perceived as credible, they reinforce the legitimacy of the government, contributing to the acceptance of election outcomes and reducing the likelihood of post-election conflicts. Credible elections play a crucial role in preventing election-related violence. When citizens believe that the electoral process is fair and transparent, it reduces the incentive for engaging in violent behaviours triggered by perceived electoral irregularities (Collier, 2009). Thus, election credibility acts as a preventive measure against violence, fostering a peaceful environment. Election credibility contributes to social cohesion and national unity. In diverse societies like Nigeria, where ethnic and regional affiliations often influence political dynamics, a credible electoral process helps build a sense of national identity. When citizens perceive the electoral process as fair, it promotes unity and reduces the potential for post-election conflicts rooted in identity politics (Norris, 2014).

Credible elections provide a structured and legitimate avenue for political competition. When electoral processes are perceived as fair, losing candidates and their supporters are more likely to accept defeat, reducing the likelihood of prolonged disputes (Sisk, 2017). This acceptance of electoral outcomes is crucial for the peaceful transition of power and the consolidation of democratic norms. Election credibility is intertwined with the consolidation of democracy and good governance. As Magaloni and Kricheli (2010) posit, credible elections contribute to the creation of accountable and responsive political institutions. The establishment of such institutions is a cornerstone for long-term peace-building, fostering an environment where citizens trust the government to address their grievances and uphold their rights. The interface between election credibility and peace-building is intricate and multidimensional. Credible elections serve as a catalyst for trust in democratic processes, the prevention of violence, the promotion of social cohesion, the mitigation of disputes, and the consolidation of democracy. Understanding and addressing the dynamics at this interface are essential for fostering lasting peace in societies emerging from electoral processes.

Theoretical Perspective

Democratic Peace Theory

In international affairs, the Democratic Peace Theory postulates that democracies are less likely to resort to military confrontation with one another. It claims that democratic countries are more likely to choose diplomacy and collaboration over violent ways of resolving disputes. The globe is moving more and more towards democracy, and over 120 nations have had general elections that have been deemed to be fair and free. A negotiated peace that includes an electoral process to create political structures that are acceptable to all parties and an agreement by the parties themselves to deliver on a sustainable peaceful settlement through a democratic transition is the outcome of many internal conflicts (Gerald Ekenedirichukwu Ezirim, 2009; Harris & Chapman, 2004). Fundamental to the liberal paradigm of conflict resolution and management in Africa are democracy and elections (Abubakar & Gorondutse, 2013; Fayemi, 2009; Kaur, 2007). These notions are drawn from Western socio-historical and political experience. Theorists of liberal political science have made certain generalizations about how democracies relate to one another.

As a mechanism, democracy offers the structures, rules, channels, and procedures that allow different groups to peacefully pursue their goals and reduce the likelihood that they would turn to the more expensive and unlawful tactic of revolt, which might lead to violence. A democratic government offers a structure that is deemed acceptable for the selection of leaders via regular, nonviolent elections that are competitive (Abubakar & Gorondutse, 2013). As a result, the Democratic Peace Theory postulates that democracies are less likely to clash militarily with one another. It suggests that since democratic nations share many institutions, procedures, and principles, their interactions tend to be more harmonious. According to the notion, democratic governments have a greater stake in preserving peace since they are answerable to their constituents. Additionally, democratic countries often have mechanisms in place for resolving disputes peacefully, such as mediation and diplomacy. The theory provides a useful framework for understanding the potential benefits of democratic governance. Several explanations have been proposed to understand why democracies tend to be more peaceful. One argument is that democratic governments are accountable to their citizens, who bear the costs of war both in terms of human lives and economic resources. As a result, leaders in democracies are more cautious and are less likely to engage in unnecessary conflicts. Another explanation is based on the idea that democracies have institutions and processes in place that promote peaceful resolution of conflicts. For instance, democratic nations often have strong legal systems, independent judiciaries, and free press. These institutions provide a platform for peaceful negotiation and dispute resolution, reducing the likelihood of resorting to violence. While the Democratic Peace Theory has gained significant support, it is not without its critics. One criticism is that the theory only applies to liberal democracies, which have a specific set of values and principles. It does not account for non-liberal democracies or countries with different cultural or historical contexts. Another criticism is that the theory does not explain the instances when democratic nations have engaged in armed conflict. Critics argue that there have been numerous examples where democracies have gone to war, such as the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War or the invasion of Iraq. These examples challenge the notion that democracies are inherently peaceful.

Methodology

This presents the methodology that was used in carrying out the research work. It therefore discusses the research design, area of study, sample size and sampling technique, data collection technique/source of data, and data processing and analysis. In the choice of a design for this study, descriptive and correlational research designs are considered suitable. This is because the study will make an attempt to describe: peace building and election stability. The study also describes the interplay between the variables. The study covers Rivers State, a state in South-South Nigeria. The information gathered was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Tables, charts, figures, and percentages were among the descriptive statistics used. Inferential statistics used were correlation analysis for testing hypotheses 1 and 2 at 0.05 level of significance through the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0. In terms of scoring both questionnaires (PBSQ) and (IDQ), all positively worded items for the Likert-type of instruments were scored in this order:

Strongly Agree (SA), = 4
Agree (A), = 3
Disagree (D) = 2
Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1
However, the reverse was the case for the negative worded items.

Results and Discussion

Test of Hypotheses

Table 1: Correlation Showing Relationship Between Peacebuilding Strategies and electoral stability in Rivers State

		Conflict Transformation	Internal Democracy
Peacebuilding Strategies	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 279	005 .744 279
electoral stability in Rivers State	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.005 .744 279	1 279

The result of the test performed indicates that there is a very weak, positive and non- significant relationship between peacebuilding strategies and electoral stability in Rivers State, Nigeria (r = .004, N = 289, ϱ > 0.05). The implication of this is that peacebuilding strategies in terms of conflict transformation positively influence electoral stability Rivers State to a very low extent. But the result shows that the peacebuilding strategies in terms of conflict transformation do not statistically significantly determine electoral stability in Rivers State. The null hypothesis is not rejected; hence, there is no significant relationship Between Peacebuilding Strategies and electoral stability in Rivers State.

Table 2: Correlation Showing Relationship Between Peacebuilding Strategies and sustainable democracy in Rivers State, Nigeria

		Conflict-sensitive policies	Internal Democracy
Conflict-sensitive policies	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 279	.637 .000 279
Internal democracy	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.637** .000 279	1 279
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Table 2 shows that that there is a positive, moderate and significant relationship between peacebuilding strategies and sustainable democracy in Rivers State (r = .537, N = 289, ϱ < 0.05). This implies that peacebuilding strategies in terms of conflict-sensitive policies do significantly influence sustainable democracy in Rivers State. Therefore, the hypothesis which states that there is no significant relationship between peacebuilding strategies and sustainable democracy in Rivers State, Nigeria is rejected. Peacebuilding strategies and conflict transformation play a pivotal role in promoting and enhancing democracy. These approaches not only address the root causes of conflict but also lay the foundation for sustainable peace and the establishment of democratic institutions. By

fostering dialogue, reconciliation, and participation, peacebuilding and conflict transformation contribute to the development of robust democratic systems. One key way in which peacebuilding strategies and conflict transformation influence democracy is by promoting inclusive and participatory decision-making processes. During periods of conflict, power imbalances often prevail, and marginalized groups are excluded from decision-making structures. Peacebuilding efforts aim to rectify this by creating spaces for dialogue and negotiation, where diverse voices can be heard and taken into account (Jega, 2018). By involving all stakeholders in decision-making, peacebuilding fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment, leading to more democratic outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Peacebuilding strategies and conflict transformation contribute to the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law. In conflict-affected political arena, institutions are often weakened or corrupted, undermining the democratic process. By promoting accountability, transparency, and good governance, peacebuilding initiatives help rebuild and strengthen institutions necessary for democratic functioning. This includes establishing independent judiciaries, promoting free and fair elections, and ensuring the protection of human rights (Smoljan, 2010). Conflict-sensitive policies are designed to address conflicts in a way that minimizes their negative impact and maximizes their potential for positive change. When implemented effectively, these policies can transform conflicts into opportunities for growth, improve the overall functioning of political parties, and contribute to the broader democratic landscape.

The recommendations that followed were based on the findings:

To enable a long-term, sustainable democratic process, party politics must have a strong, fair, and decentralized method for settling conflicts. Although conflict cannot be avoided, its impacts may be mitigated by managing, controlling, and reducing it.

Deeply embedded democratic procedures are necessary for sustainable democracy. Internal democracy among political parties encourages due process, fair play, equality, and moral rectitude when it comes to party management. Furthermore, internal democracy will allow for inclusiveness and decentralization

in party institutions, preventing powerful members from taking control of the party.

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