Managing the Incidence of Electoral Violence in Ghana's Fourth Republic

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Original Research Article	

ABSTRACT

Since the inception of the fourth republic in 1992 [1], Ghana has gone through seven major successive general elections and has received numerous commendations all over the world. Incidentally, all these elections were associated with electoral violence. This study aimed at studying the causes, nature, and effects of electoral violence in the Volta Region of Ghana. The objective of the study included how electoral violence affects the credibility of the electoral system and what measures the Electoral Commission (EC) and the stakeholders in the conduct of elections have put in place to address the occurrence of electoral violence in the Volta Region in particular. The study identified two broad factors as responsible for the occurrence of electoral violence. The first factor is the process factor that serves as immediate cause of an eruption of electoral violence. The second is the external factors which, also serve as fertile grounds for electoral violence to occur. The study used qualitative research design in gathering data. The study used purposive sampling technique. In-depth interviews were conducted as the primary sources of data collection while secondary sources were gathered through existing documents, reports, textbooks, and internet search. The study recommended that EC should be professional in their electoral activities so that their actions would not serve as a spark of electoral violence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In every democratic system of governance, election is the only legitimate determinant entrance to political office or leadership, and it is an important element for facilitating good governance practices and consolidation of democracy. Elections provide an avenue for the electorate to express their will and sovereignty and give legitimacy to their political leaders. Election periods (campaigns and engagements) provide opportunity for the electorate to assess not only the performance of the party in power but indicate their expectations of any future government. Hence, the power to rule or to lead emanates from the electorate.

Article 21 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that, "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government as expressed in periodic and genuine elections". Furthermore, Article 42 of the 1992 constitution of Ghana states that "every citizen of Ghana of 18 years of age or above and of sound mind has the right to vote and is entitled to be registered as voter for the purposes of public elections and referenda". Therefore, voting in an election is both a political and civic right for every citizen in a country of origin to exercise when it is due. Elections all over the world are contested by political parties and candidates who demonstrate their capabilities and articulate policies and programmes that they believe reflect the aspirations of the people. However, the outcomes of these elections in some countries are not desirable and call for greater concerns for all. In Africa, countries like Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Chad, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Zambia have all been characterised by election violence. The incidence of election violence in Africa is so high that even an election that is considered as being free, fair and transparent, the outcome may not have been free of violence. Elections in Africa are periods in which the stability and security of African states hangs in the balance, due to the threat of election violence.

Indeed, in Ghana like other African countries, the 1992 constitution has made provisions towards the attainment of democracy. The constitution has spelt out designed structures of an integrated democratic state and the qualifications of citizens to take part in any election. Articles 43-46 of the 1992 constitution spells out the establishment, composition, qualification, terms of office, conditions of service, functions and the independence of the electoral commission that sees to the day to day management of the electoral administration.

Since 1992, Ghana has conducted seven successive competitive elections with power alternating on three consecutive times in 2001, 2009 and 2017. These achievements have been applauded by democratic nations, institutions and personalities in the international system. These elections have been described as free and fair elections and made Ghana the beacon of democracy in Africa. All these elections were contested by the major political parties and candidates in Ghana.

A review of these elections in Ghana since 1992 highlights the importance of democracy in legitimising the exercise of political power held and transferred of such power from a defeated government to another elected government. All the seven elections mentioned above were described by observers both internationally and locally as credible, free and fair (1992-2008 Election Reports). The elections illustrate positive features of a democratic country which, although slowly, is steadily maturing into consolidating of democracy. Election violence, however minor, has been reported in almost all elections conducted in Ghana since 1992.

Like some African countries and elsewhere around the globe, Ghana is not an exception in terms of electoral violence. Violence has characterized the Ghanaian electoral system since the inception of the fourth republic. All the elections held in the fourth republic from 1992 to 2016 have witnessed some form of electoral violence. Comparing those elections to other Asian and African countries in terms of death, injuries, and destruction to property, Ghana is far ahead of them in the elections management and continues to receive commendations from democracy lovers all over the world. However, from 1992 to 2016, the occurrences of electoral violence are on the increase and taking various dimensions. The incidences of electoral violence are real as at least there were issues of intimidations, injuries, loss of lives, and damage to property through electoral processes [2].

According to Aning [3], most acts of electoral violence in the country are perpetrated through open confrontations, death threats, mob action, intimidation, molestations, abductions, lynching and murder. Properties worth millions of

Ghanaian cedis owned by political parties and their supporters as well as government property got vandalised by disgruntled party supporters and elements of unscrupulous political opponents. The trend of the electoral violence is very complex as it manifests when least expected. In the Volta Region which is the study locality, similar cases of electoral violence have been recorded in some communities. For example at Deme, a border town in the Ketu North Municipality, violence erupted leading to injury to people (Elections 2016 Report, 2017). Supporters of the two leading parties in the 2016 elections, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) reportedly clashed at Deme, a border community in Dzodze in the Ketu North constituency. Similar cases of electoral violence have been reported in some communities within the study locality. The problem however, is that, these reported electoral violent cases are not empirically proven hence given room too much rumour mongering among the populace in analysing the persistent nature of electoral violence in Ghanaian politics. This has necessitated an empirical study to investigate the nature of electoral violence in three constituencies in the Volta region namely; Ketu North Constituency, Hohoe, and Agotime-Ziope and its implications for voter confidence in the electoral system of Ghana.

Against this backdrop, this work is motivated to examine the immediate causes and nature of electoral violence in the Volta region. It seeks to assess how electoral violence affect voter confidence in the electoral process in the region and the measures the Electoral Commission of Ghana and stakeholders have in place to tackle electoral violence.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study include the following:

1. To determine the immediate causes and nature of electoral violence in the Volta region.
2. To examine whether covert conflicts create a fertile ground and in some cases trigger the eruption of electoral violence.
3. To determine how electoral violence affect voter confidence in the electoral process in the Volta region
4. To evaluate, measures the Electoral Commission of Ghana and the stakeholders have in place to tackle electoral violence.

2. BRIEF REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

2.1 Electoral System

Electoral system consists of rules, laws, rights, institutions, roles, responsibilities, processes, and formulas relevant to the preparation and conduct of elections and the declaration of results [4]. The electoral system is a crucial concept as it determines the 'rules of the game' under which elections are held. Such rules, importantly, determine strongly who will be included and excluded in governing coalitions following electoral events. The electoral system spells out how votes are translated into seats in parliament and how the president is elected. According to Reynolds et al. [5], the electoral systems translate the votes cast in general elections into seats won by parties and candidates. The electoral system determines whether a country is practising the concept of winner takes all or all inclusive. It is about the mathematical formulae used in allocation of seats either through the Plural Majority System, List Proportional, and Mixed system or through other systems. A number of factors usually influence the choice of the formula adopted for the electoral system of a country. Reynolds et al. [5] argue that the choice of a particular system is essentially accidental, the result of an unusual combination of circumstances, of a passing trend, or of a quirk of history, with the impact of colonialism and the effects of influential neighbors often being especially strong. Ghana for instance practices first-past-the-post (simple majority) for parliamentary and absolute majority for presidential, bequeathed to the country by the British (colonial masters).

The electoral system consists of demarcation of electoral boundaries, registration of voters, exhibition of voters register, recruitment and training of temporary staff, filing of nomination, campaign, voter education, voting, counting and declaration of the final results. A very good and effective electoral system helps to determine whether the voter cast his/her votes for a party, a candidate or the voter expresses a single choice of a candidate or more choices in an election. According to Oquaye [6], the method of selecting rulers by the free choice has necessitated a viable electoral system with a number of political parties from which the electorate can make a choice. A very good electoral system helps to minimize the occurrence of violence associated with elections despite the existence of hidden

social conflicts. If the purpose of election is to select leadership, then the best electoral system will be the most selective; the one that best provides for the electorate a qualitative choice of leaders. This means that where fraud and other malpractices prevail: or where "money politics" dictate who a leader should be, choking out the less wealthy and polluting the elective principle, then democracy falls into real danger.

The electoral system again, aids in the momentum of political change, encourage popular participation, and enable the emergence of legitimate representatives who are capable of handling a wide range of needs and expectations, both immediate and in the future. It must also build understanding and trust not only among politicians and election administrators, but also among civil society organisations, among commentators, and above all among the citizens of a country undergoing democratic reforms.

It can be argued that elections are supposed to be used to consolidate democracy, good governance and a means of constructively managing differences. However, bad electoral system may end up in violence leading to loss of human lives, property, and retardation of economic development, marginalization and poverty.

2.2 Electoral Violence

When an election process is perceived as unfair or corrupt, its political legitimacy is compromised. This may motivate stakeholders involved to go outside the laid down institutional norms to achieve their objectives which may spark the occurrence of electoral violence. Fischer [7] defined electoral violence as "any random or organised act that seeks to determine, delay, or otherwise influence electoral processes through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, misinformation, physical assault, forced 'protection', blackmail, destruction of property or assassination. Here Fischer looked at electoral violence from two perspectives: electoral violence that emanate from organisers of the elections and the one which emanates from outside the environment of the election. On the perspective of electoral administrators, Fischer tried to look at the lapses that could affect the legitimacy of the leader elected while at the external environment, the eruption of physical violence as a result of politicians or people trying to win an election at all cost.

Meadow [8] also defined electoral violence as "acts that are used to harm, intimidate, exploit, disrupt, determine, hasten, delay, or reverse electoral processes or outcomes, and acts that occur between the registration of a voter and the inauguration of a political regime". The above writer emphasized that, electoral violence is not only physical but also psychological in nature which may affect the voter's confidence and the credibility of the elections results. In the words of Olawale [9] electoral violence is "all forms of organized acts or threats – physical, psychological, and structural – aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view to determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process." Electoral violence from Olawale's point of view is that political violence that targets political opponents during electoral process. It aims at winning political competition or power through violence, subverting the ends of the electoral and democratic process. Election violence occurs not just at election time, but in periods leading to and after elections, such as registration and counting of ballots.

From the definitions above, it can be inferred that electoral violence can be physical and coercive intimidation as well as psychological and the inducement of fears by one of the contending parties to gain an undue advantage over the rest in an electoral processes. Physical electoral violence manifests where harm is caused to anybody, premise, and materials either involved directly in the electoral processes or not. Physical electoral violence is characterised by the use of physical force on candidates, electoral officials, elections observers, security operatives, or any other persons before, during or after election. Physical forms of violence include rough handling, beating or flogging, inflicting other types of injuries and even election-related assassination Bombande [10]. For example, in Ghana the use of macho-men like the famous Azoka boys associated with the NDC, the Bamba boys also associated with NPP and their use of threat, inflammatory language, and any act that seems to affect the "will choice" of the electorate constitute electoral violence.

The structural type of electoral violence manifests more especially when there are instruments of political exclusion of some sections of society from public offices. In the view of Bombande [10], structural violence refers to "the creation of institutional or legal framework

targeted at opponents or individuals either disenfranchise or keep them away from political relevance." The legal and institutional frameworks indirectly work to exclude those groups of people from benefiting political offices.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study locality is the Volta region of Ghana. It is one of the sixteen regions of Ghana which is made up six (6) municipalities and twelve (12) districts. Citizens of the region have been very active in the electoral processes in Ghana since the inception of the fourth republic. The registered voter population size of Volta Region is 328,834 (Population and Housing Census, 2010). The Volta Region has eighteen (18) constituencies and the three constituencies namely Ketu North, Hohoe and Agotime-Ziope were selected for the for study because they represented the political flash points in the 2016 general elections as determined by the electoral commission and the security agencies. The study adopted the qualitative methodology and an interview guide was used to conduct in-depth interviews in the process of gathering data in the three study areas. The target population for this study includes political party executives, candidates of previous elections, youth leaders, chiefs/opinion leaders and staff of EC in the three constituencies namely Ketu North, Hohoe, and Agotime-Ziope in the Volta Region of Ghana. The study focused on the above target population because of the critical roles they play in the electoral processes by shaping the opinion of the electorate during elections. The total sample size of the study is 120. Both primary and secondary data sources were used in the study with the view to enrich the data. The primary sources of data collections used in the research are in-depth interviews.

The paper is grouped into four sections. The first section of the paper focused on the problem statement of the study, objectives of the study and the research questions. The second section of the paper provides a brief review of relevant literature on electoral systems and electoral violence. The third section contains the materials and methodology used for the paper. It includes the sampling size, target population and the data sources and collection of the study. The fourth section focuses on the discussion of the findings of the study. The final section of the paper provides the conclusion and recommendations to manage the incidence of electoral violence in Ghana.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study identified both internal and external factors to be responsible for electoral violence in the study areas. The internal factors are also called the immediate factors. Some of these factors include: confrontations during and after the counting of the ballots, involvement of electoral officials and the electorate in electoral malpractices, concept of winner takes all, unnecessary or over jubilation, lack of transparency in the electoral process, the use of provocative statements or languages, and ignorance of electoral laws and regulations. Other internal factors are the use of resources to Influence the choice of voters, coverts or existing societal conflicts such as land disputes, tribal disputes, religious disputes and chieftaincy disputes which serve as fertile grounds for the eruption of electoral violence.

The findings of the study revealed that confrontations that ensue during and after the counting of the ballots. Candidates' agents hold the view that, once their candidates are winning in particular areas in the electoral constituency, the likelihood is that ultimately they would be the winners. Such supporters forget that, each candidate has a strong-hold where he or she could maximize votes. The situation becomes more complex where politicians put in all their trust and resources but it turned out to be otherwise. This normally happens especially when supporters of a candidate or party begin to engage themselves in debate about their candidates' chances of winning the election at all cost and when he/she turned out to be otherwise. In the process of debates about why their candidate did not win such debates could degenerate into violence by attacking the officials engaged by the electoral commission. For example, Deme polling station, in the Ketu North Constituency, supporters of the various political parties used abusive and provocative languages that affected one another and in the processes led to violence.

The second is the ignorance of the electoral laws and regulations identified by the study as one of the factors responsible for occurrence of electoral violence. The study noted that, the electorates and the supporters of various political parties or candidates do not understand how electoral laws operate at all the stages leading to the declaration of results. For example, the laws on citizens' qualifications to register as voters with regards to their ages and nationality status.

The political party supporters believe that, everybody in their community must be registered to vote and when officials insist that they do not qualify, it creates confusion which ultimately leads to violence. The study also identified the involvement of electoral officials and electorate in electoral malpractices (cheating). For example, multiple registrations, the involvement of foreigners or people who are non-resident of Afegame in the Agotime-Ziope constituency and people below 18 years were encouraged by contesting candidates or parties to register to vote. Also, the issuance of fake ballot papers to party supporters to vote in other to get more votes so that the party would be declared the winner. If perpetrators involved in the malpractices are found and care is not taken by the security officials and they are ruthlessly beaten, that could lead to violent situations. Multiple ballot papers are issued to voters by polling staff recruited by the electoral commission to supporters of political parties or candidates the polling staff also support. Again, the finding also revealed snatching of ballot boxes from the polling stations and replacing them with different ballot boxes stuffed with already thumb printed ballot papers in favour of a candidate or political party by macho men recruited by such parties or candidates. Also, disregard for electoral laws, rules and regulations to win the election create avenues for the eruption of electoral violence. The findings revealed that, the officials in charge of the poll do not treat the candidates or political parties who are the key stakeholders equally. This study gathered that officials recruited by the electoral commission to man the polls on the Election Day give undue advantages to parties they support in other to win the elections.

Another factor responsible for the causes of electoral violence is the wanton distribution of money and other resources to influence the voters' choice during election. The study noted that, "the politicians do not only influence the voters in their strongholds, but the strongholds of their opponents. When such a phenomenon happens, it frustrates the defeated candidates who then tend to use violence against their political opponent".

Lack of transparent electoral process has been identified as another factor responsible for the occurrence of electoral violence. The study revealed that, all stakeholders to the elections must be treated fairly and openly in all the electoral activities. In other words, whenever the stakeholders realized lack of transparency on the part of the EC to elections, it gives room for mistrust, doubt and ultimately the affected parties tend to react violently.

The manifestations of electoral violence as the study gathered ranges from physical violence, causing of destructions to public and private property, and death. According to Aning [3], most acts of electoral violence in the country are perpetrated through open confrontations, death threats, mob action, intimidation, molestations, abductions, lynching and murder. Properties worth millions of Ghanaian cedis owned by political parties and their supporters as well as government property got vandalised by disgruntled party supporters and elements of unscrupulous political opponents.

Political parties are other stakeholders the study also identified. They play very important key roles in the electoral processes and among them which the study observed are to educate, organize workshops to train, and capacity building for their supporters, sympathizers to understand how the laws governing elections operate. As a result of the roles they play, they create much enthusiasm for the electorate to take part in the electoral activities very effectively. The study observed that, in every election, the political parties usually come out with their guidelines. However, the guidelines are not binding and not enforceable if any member of the political parties goes contrarily to them. Again political parties should not only adhere to, but also make their code of conduct legally enforceable with punitive measures that could serve as deterrents to others.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has established that there are both immediate and remote factors that account for the eruption of electoral violence in the study areas. The immediate factors are also termed as the process or endogenous factors. The process or endogenous factors are the activities that take place concerning the actual electoral work. They include demarcation of electoral boundaries, registration of voters, exhibition of voters' register, filing of nomination to contest election, campaign process by the contesting candidates, casting of votes, counting and announcing of votes at the polling stations, collations, and final declaration of election results. The above activities are the main steps taken to arrive at the final winner of an election and these must be systematically followed. The study emphasized that, if the EC does not carry out such activities

professionally to the satisfaction of stakeholders, any infraction in the above steps alone could lead to the eruption of electoral violence considering the resources, time, hope, and energy the key stakeholders put into it. The study noted that, there are remote or exogenous factors that already exist in the communities which could serve as fertile grounds for eruption of electoral violence in case any of the process factors above are not followed or there are electoral malpractices that affect the outcome of the elections. The study concludes that if there are external or existing societal problems and the EC can act professionally, electoral violence might not occur. This is because it might be difficult for the defeated candidate or party to find grounds to base their grievances on. However, if there are rampant external factors and with little malpractices involved in the processes to the elections, electoral violence is bound to occur.

The study recommends that the supporters of various political parties should not only be effectively and properly educated with the support from Civil Society Organizations to intensify voter education on the counting and collation of votes, but how to cast votes well to reduce the number of rejected ballots. With this, the supporters would be in a position to know especially when the counting does not favour their candidate or party who were hitherto leading in the first instance. Most of the times the supporters tend to accuse the electoral officials for manipulating or changing the election results in favour of their opponent.

There is the need for politicians to desist from politicizing existing societal conflicts that they are not capable of solving. In this regard, the institutions judicial and other law enforcement agencies that are in-charge of settling conflicts in the society should be strengthened to handle them. The government should empower the legitimate legal institutions to settle all pending societal conflicts like chieftaincy, land ownership, tribal and religious conflicts so that politicians would not capitalize on them and they would not serve as fertile ground for eruption of electoral violence.

The government should not only adequately resource the Electoral Commission and National Commission on Civic Education who are the major institutions involved in educating the public on the electoral processes effectively, but the resources should be timely so that they could take up their legal responsibilities seriously. Again, these institutions should adhere to their legal roles assigned to them by law and perform their roles effectively and efficiently.

The political parties in collaboration with their candidates in the electoral processes should endeavor to recruit agents who are well educated and understand how the electoral processes operate as well as how the rules governing the elections are applied.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, participant's written consent has been collected and preserved by the author.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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