

Too many election-related deaths

Nigeria has become a country of impunity, lawlessness and bloodshed, where the principle of crime and punishment appears to have been abandoned. Election-related violence and deaths continue because perpetrators are rarely held to account. This is not only barbaric and totally unacceptable; it is also a betrayal of everything democracy is supposed to represent. In this context, at least 870 people have been killed in election-related violence in Nigeria since 2015. According to the National Peace Committee, led by former Head of State, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, the deaths included 106 in 2015, 626 in 2019 and 109 in 2023. In the August 15 governorship election in Osun State, the ugly pattern continued. At least 30 people were reportedly killed in election-related violence before the election. The worst electoral bloodletting occurred after the 2011 presidential election, when more than 800 citizens were killed. That is an unconscionable price to pay for democracy. The fundamental problem is Nigeria's do-or-die politics. Too many politicians regard elections not as contests of ideas, but as battles for power at all costs. Some are criminally minded and, to achieve their sinister objectives, recruit thugs, arm them, and unleash them on opponents and voters. Even more disturbing is the increasingly reckless and incendiary language coming from some politicians. In the run-up to the August 15 governorship election in Osun State, an All-Progressives Congress chief and senator representing Osun East Senatorial District, Francis Fadahunsi, 74, reportedly directed his supporters to kill Accord Party members in the state. He later claimed he was quoted out of context. But by then, the damage had been done. Post-election violence in Ikire subsequently claimed two lives. In the Federal Capital Territory, the Chairman of Kuje Area Council, Samuel Shekwolo, reportedly warned residents opposed to the APC to leave the area council.

In Ebonyi State, Governor Francis Nwifuru reportedly ordered newly sworn-in local government chairmen to strengthen the APC in their respective LGAs and mercilessly deal with opposition parties. He also threatened to sack chairmen and councilors in LGs where the APC loses the next elections. In Borno State, the Commissioner for Youth and Sports Development, Sainna Buba, threatened to flog and cut off the fingers of people who refused to support the APC in the 2027 elections. The latest addition to this orgy of violent rhetoric is the statement attributed to the Yobe APC Chairman, Muhammad Gadaka. He was reported to have urged married women whose husbands prevented them from voting for the APC to seek divorce. He even offered to pay their dowries and marry them. These statements are deeply ominous as Nigeria heads towards the 2027 elections. More troubling is that the political class often appears to speak with impunity because it expects little or nothing to happen afterward. President Bola Tinubu, who should ordinarily be cautioning politicians against inflammatory rhetoric, was himself recently reported to have said that "all is fair" in politics. That is precisely the mentality Nigeria must reject. Many countries contend

with electoral violence. But where it occurs, it is generally treated as a serious crime, not as an unfortunate but inevitable feature of politics. The difference is consequences. In Nigeria, there are few consequences. In the United States, supporters of Donald Trump attacked the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. The attack triggered the largest criminal investigation in US history. Approximately 1,583 people were charged with offences ranging from trespassing and assaulting police officers to obstruction and seditious conspiracy. Many were convicted and sentenced to multi-year prison terms. Unfortunately, Trump subsequently issued an executive order granting presidential clemency to those involved in January 2025. Even so, the message from the initial prosecutions was that political allegiance does not place anyone above the law. Nigeria needs that same principle. There must be a credible mechanism for punishing electoral violence. Political parties, particularly the APC as the ruling party, must first rein in their members. Party leaders cannot continue to look the other way while their supporters issue threats, mobilize thugs and inflame passions. A public hall of shame for politicians and other individuals who promote electoral violence should also be considered. Commendably, Amnesty International has vowed to name and shame advocates of election violence in Nigeria. The organization said it would use Fadahunsi as an example, insisting that "the impunity by Nigerian politicians cannot continue, and we cannot tolerate it again."

That is the right direction. Law enforcement is central to the survival of democracy. The police must wake up and do their duty. Politicians who incite violence should not be treated as untouchable members of the political elite. They should be investigated, prosecuted and, where found guilty, punished. To their credit, the police have commenced investigations into the controversial remarks allegedly made by Fadahunsi, Buba and Shekwolo. Anyone found to have incited or participated in election-related violence must face serious sanctions. The police said the 154 persons arrested during the last governorship election in Osun are under investigation. They must keep their promise to make the outcome of those investigations' public. Investigations must not become another bureaucratic black hole where politically sensitive cases disappear. Anyone involved in killing must be prosecuted and, upon conviction, jailed accordingly. The police must also intensify efforts to mop up the illegal arms circulating across the country. Electoral violence becomes deadlier when political thuggery is combined with easy access to weapons. Nigerians have had enough. Democracy should be about ballots, not bullets. It should be about persuasion, not coercion. And political power should never be worth a single Nigerian life. The recurring violence and deaths must stop. The era when politicians can incite violence and walk away without consequences must end.

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