

## ELECTIONS VIOLENCE IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*Election is one of the fundamental features of democracy in both developed and developing countries. Though, the challenges of conducting elections are enormous, but still remained the most widely acceptable procedure of electing representatives into political offices in most African states. Thus, designing elections stand to be the furthestmost tough task in democracy processes mostly in conflict prone societies that are divided along the line of ethnicity, religion and cultural diversities. In Nigeria, for instance, weak institutions, insecurity, political uncertainty, high rate of poverty and more or less bad governance have remained contentious issues affecting elections in the country. The rising tensions and happenings related to political violence, thuggery, banditry, and poor economy have constitute part of the confounding contests facing the groundwork of the pre 2019 general elections in Nigeria. Thus, the paper seeks to examine the rising issues and challenges in Nigeria's build up to general elections. The methodology adopted was purely based on secondary (documentary) sources of data and anchored on the principle of theoretical model of electoral competition. The paper, therefore, argued that insecurity, political rivalry, weak institutions and poor economy among others are the appalling challenges of democracy and democratic processes in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Election, Violence, Insecurity, Democracy, Divided Societies, Nigeria

## **Introduction**

A number of conflict studies scholars have pointed out the risks that competitive elections bring about in conflict societies. Elections may become the focal point of tensions and thus bear the risk of violence. Thus, since the end of Cold War, the international community has dedicated much attention and effort to building peace in societies torn by ethno-political violence, as well as to preventing the outbreak of violence in conflict-prone divided societies in the first place. In attempts to promote the peace in conflict-prone societies, democracy has been considered as the most preferred form of government in the world today. This is because of the fact that one of the basic principles of democracy is the participation of the people by making a choice on who governs them through either direct or indirect elections (Elaigwu, 2014). Elections, therefore, involve a set of activities leading to the selection of one or more persons out of many to serve in positions of authority in any given society.

Elections serve multipurpose. Most importantly, free and fair elections are an indispensable element in any modern democracy. Elections, however, do not only bring about risks but also make important contributions to the mitigation of conflict in divided societies. At a general level, elections can be seen as an alternative to violent conflict. The Conflict mitigating effects of democracy go back to its ability to give a voice to all groups in society and to have their concerns heard, it not included in decision-making. Nigeria as a complex society, for instance, the first attempt to practice parliamentary democracy was at independence in 1960 which was interrupted by a military coup in 1966 till 1979 (Dudley, 1982). In 1979, thereafter, the country made a transition from military rule to presidential democracy. For a second time, the democratic government was removed via a military coup in 1983 and the third democratic

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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experiment began in 1989 but was aborted in 1993 following the annulment of the June 12 Presidential election, which would have marked the highpoint of the transition (Joseph, 1991).

Following intense internal (domestic) and external (international) pressures on the military government, as well as the sudden demise of the then military Head of State- General Sani Abacha, the military government finally relinquished power to an elected civilian government in May 1999 (Osaghae, 1998). Between 1999 and 2015, elections have become more regular in Nigeria but the quality of these elections is a matter of momentous concern to both the actors and observers because the history of elections in Nigeria shows that violence is an integral part of Nigerian politics whereby the results of elections come in two separate columns- the votes cast at polling stations and the number of people killed around the time of the election (The Economist, 2011).

Thus, the electoral process in Nigeria, characterized by vote buying, vote rigging and outright violence, remains incapable of producing a leadership imbued with the spirit of public interest and accountability (Ugandan, 2010:90). All these could be attributable to the unbecoming experimentations and/or designs of the electoral system and the country's diverse nature of ethnicity and religion. It is, however, based on this backdrop that the paper seeks to examine issues and challenges of the pre 2019 general elections in Nigeria's diverse society that is more tailored towards ethnicity and religion.

**Conceptual Clarifications****Violence**

Violence is inherent in every social formation regardless of the nature of its political forces and levels of development. It has generated a lot of intellectual confusion than clarity, particularly over the meaning, causes, nature, possibilities and social utility of violence among

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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scholars across fields of academic (Obadare, 1999). Nonetheless, there is a fair consensus that violence emanates from a conflict of interests in social life, itself an inescapable aspect of the human condition (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1981). Violence, in this paper is therefore seen as the use of physical force or might which usually create disharmony, insecurity, unsafely and chaos amongst individuals and groups or between two or more societies.

**Electoral Violence**

Some researchers, such as Hoglund (2009), Fischer, (2002), Sisk (2008) have begun to join around the notion that electoral violence is a subset of political violence distinguished by its timing, perpetrators and victims, objectives and methods. These are important criteria because they help to separate electoral violence from other types of violence that may happen to occur around election time. But the term electoral violence has been used generically in two strands (Yusuf, 2016) of research. In a first approach, electoral violence is seen as a subset of activities in a larger political conflict-ethnic or communal violence where it has been noted that violence tends to cluster around election times (Hoglund, 2006). In a second approach, electoral violence is seen as the ultimate kind of electoral fraud; and electoral fraud has been defined as clandestine efforts to shape election results (Lehoucq, 2003).

Thus, for the purpose of this paper, electoral violence shall be used here to refer to all acts of physical assault, threats or intimidation purposefully to cause injury, damage of properties or even death which is directly tied to an impending electoral contest or an announced electoral result.

**Democracy**

This concept has no universally accepted definition. The concept that democracy is the government of the people, by the people and, for the people has evolved into gradual

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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irrelevance as the realities of the modern states no longer suggest the idealist mode of participation. In fact, this definition has been described by Entwistle (1971) as a pedestrian definition of democracy which require the direct, above and continuous participation of citizens in government. A kind of participation only applicable in relatively small city states without the complex intricacies of modern statehood.

In an attempt to avoid the problems associated with the lexical use of the concept (democracy), political and social scientists have offered a number of definitions and explanations on the concepts, for instance, Agbaje (1999) opined that democracy is a term that is used to describe an idea, process (series of event leading to change or a course of action) or system of government. It entrenches and expands the right, ability and capacity of people in any community to take control of their lives through participation, in discussion and decision on issues and events that affect them and their community. Similarly, Nwoye (2001) cited in Mohammed and Fadeyi (2017) maintains that democracy signifies political system dominated by representatives either directly or indirectly chosen by the people.

This paper conceived democracy as a set of ideas, institutions and processes of governance that allows the broad mass of people to choose their leaders and that guarantees them a broad range of civil rights with the inclusion of socio-economic concerns of the society. Also, it embodies fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression, right to life, right to dignity of human person, right to personal liberty, right to fair hearing, right to freedom of thoughts, consciences, etc.

**Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts Collier and Vicente (2008) theoretical model of electoral competition. The model introduced three illicit strategies for winning elections: vote buying, vote-miscounting

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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and voter intimidation. Collier and Vicente propose that the incumbent has more opportunity to make use of the first two strategies: vote-buying and vote-miscounting. In the case of vote-buying, incumbents are argued to have more access to state resources; hence, they could more easily buy the votes of the electorate with state money. In the case of vote-miscounting, incumbents are also clearly more likely to do so given that they have more influence on the electoral body that counts the votes. In this instance, the most feasible option for the opposition to challenge the strategies of the incumbent is to resort to violence.

It is against this backdrop that this model suggests that violence is mainly a device of the opposition and weakest parties; though no convincing argument is provided as to why violence is also not a feasible option for the incumbent. The model, according to Onapajo (2014) does not take enough into account the character of the state, that is, the coercive nature of the state apparatus and the kind of incumbents such a state produces contributes to explaining the use of violence to influence electoral outcomes by parties during elections.

Collier and Vicente used the 2007 presidential election in Nigeria to test the model. The researchers allied themselves with a Non-Governmental Organization- NGO, called *Action Aid*, which was committed to promoting a violence free election in the state. The NGO adopted the strategy of campaigning against violence with the slogan “#Vote Against Violent Politicians#”, aiming to demobilize votes for violent politicians. To test the model and observe which party or parties were really involved with violence, they asked Nigerian voters who they intended to vote for before the anti-violence campaign and then, after the elections, studied how they actually voted.

They observed in their survey that the incumbent and the strongest opposition parties- People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and All Nigeria’s People’s Party (ANPP) respectively

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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greatly benefitted from the anti-violence campaign, while the supposedly weakest party, Action Congress (AC) dramatically lost support because of the campaign. Based on these findings, it was assumed that “respondents initially intending to vote for a politician perceived as violent may have decided [to] either [...] abstain or even switch to other candidates” (Collier and Vicente 2008: 18-19). Therefore, they reported that AC supporters (as the weakest party) were more likely to switch their votes to the PDP in the areas surveyed (Collier and Vicente, 2008:18-19).

According to Onapajo (2014), Collier and Vicente’s study suffers from conceptual problems because the authors were silent on exactly what was taken into consideration to determine the strengths of parties for their classification as either the “strongest” or “weakest”. It is unclear whether this was measured on the basis of the number of members, financial base, popularity of candidates or popularity of the political parties. If those were the factors taken into consideration, it is certain that the party considered as the weakest in the 2007 presidential elections in Nigeria could not have qualified as such given the other parties involved: It should be recalled that 24 parties staged candidates for the presidential elections, and 18 of them gathered less than 100,000 votes from the 54 million registered voters; however, the AC received more than 2.6 million votes (see appendix) (NDI, 2007:45).

In addition, most of the other parties operated only in a small part of one state, or in just a few states, in the country. They also lacked the financial resources required to politically mobilize and actively participate in the elections. Furthermore, Atiku Abubakar- the candidate for the party considered as the weakest was the country’s incumbent vice-president during the electoral period. He had a tremendous political following and a wide support base across the country, including, of course, enough financial strength to preclude him being labeled the “weakest” among the presidential candidates (Onapajo, 2014).

**Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

It could be argued out that election/electoral violence in Nigeria cannot be fully understood without situating it within the political history of the country since colonial period to date. The colonial Nigerian state offers a useful point of entry. For, it was under it that some form of electoral politics was introduced especially with the introduction of the elective principle in 1922. Although electoral politics during this period was to a very large extent non-violent, the democratic substance of the elective principle was too limited with income and residential qualification and could therefore be a potential basis for violence.

But as Nigerian state began assuming a more central position over power and other resources; forces of identity, like ethnicity and religion, became appealing. These forces became the main drivers of politics in Nigeria as they were employed by the political elites to manipulate their ascension to power and secure economic base for themselves. For instance, beginning from the 1964/65 general elections (federal and regional posts), violence has been a major feature of electoral politics in the country (Omotola, 2008) ending in the military coup of January 1966.

Election based violence in Nigeria's democratic experience was first documented alongside with the violence in Tiv and Yoruba land (Anifowose, 1982). The violence in Tiv land was a reaction to perceived political intimidation and harassments of the opposition politicians by the ruling Northern People Congress (NPC). While the violence in Yoruba land was in reaction to massive irregularities that characterized both the 1964 federal elections and 1965 western region elections. The consequences of these crises largely contributed to the rude termination of Nigeria's First Republic through a bloody military coup in January 1966 (see Anifowose, 1982; Omotola, 2008; Animashaun, 2010).



**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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Nigeria's Second Republic was also greeted by violence in the South-West states of Oyo and Ondo in particular and other parts of the country. The violence in these two states was organized in protest against perceived manipulation of the governorship polls, acclaimed as electoral strongholds of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) in favour of the candidate of the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN). In addition to the heavy human and material losses suffered by political opponents, the headquarters of the election management body, FEDECO in Oyo and Ondo States were torched (Egwu, 2007).

With the collapse of the Second Republic in December 1983, four years after inauguration, Nigeria was sentenced to prolonged years of military rule. Democratic rule was restored in May 1999 following the conclusion of the 1998/99 transition elections. Though the transition enjoyed a smooth ride with few hitches, the same cannot be said of the 2003 general elections. In fact, the period preceding the 2003 polls was marked by organized violence, as well as by attempted and actual assassinations of political opponents and rivals. Several reports by international and domestic observers confirmed that the run-up to the country's 2003 general elections was bloody with about 100 people killed during the two months of April and May (Ugho, 2004). Electoral violence further manifested itself before, during and after the 2007 elections in Nigeria in the form of pre-election assassinations, intimidation of political opponents and voters, hijack of election materials as well as organized attack on security personnel and on officials of election management body (Nwolise, 2007; Yusuf, 2016).

Thus, in spite of the ills that followed the 1999, 2003, and 2007 elections, Nigerians still showed willingness to elect their leaders in the 2011 elections (Plotch, 2011). But the phenomenon of electoral violence still dotted the landscape of the 2011 elections. There has been an atmosphere of intimidation and threats, assassination, arsons, bombings, random shootings and pitched battles between opposing bands of thugs using sundry weapons.

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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Amnesty International (2010) argued that hundreds of people had already been killed in what it calls politically motivated, communal and sectarian violence across Nigeria ahead of presidential and parliamentary polls.

The orderliness, statesmanship and the interest generated by the 2015 presidential elections were a departure from what obtained at the state level during the gubernatorial elections. Prior to the elections, the campaign train of President Jonathan of the PDP was stoned with sachet water in Bauchi state. This was in addition to the burning of campaign buses, and a case of bomb blast near a campaign ground in Potiskum, Gombe state. Irregular gunshots at APC members were also reported in Rivers state allegedly by PDP thugs. Indeed, some states recorded significant number of violent incidents in the 2015 elections, the most affected being Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Ebonyi and Ondo States (Muheeb, 2015).

**Challenges of 2019 Elections**

In Nigeria's political and/or electoral history, the 2015 general elections marked a turning point where an opposition party had won both the presidential election and a majority in the legislative and gubernatorial polls since the return to civilian rule in May 1999 after a long period of military rule. Nevertheless, in February, 2019, Nigerians will decide who will lead Africa's largest oil producer and most populous country (giant of Africa) into the next decade through election (vote) to the post of president, state governors, and all federal and state legislators. In this respect, a few key factors will determine whether the incumbent government, All Progressive Congress (APC) will repeat its 2015 victory or risk defeat. The first is the degree to which the party either remains united behind Buhari's candidacy or sees additional high-level defections and a widening of existing factional divisions. The second is the president's performance in the last six months of his term, and his party's performance in off cycle governorship elections in the country (Page & Tayo, 2018).

The opposition, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) currently controls 12 state governorship and the office of Senate President, as well as- following large-scale defections from the APC in July 2018- an apparent majority in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Looking ahead, the PDP's competitiveness will depend on two main factors: the political pedigree and popular appeal of the party's presidential nominee, and its ability to unify against a well-financed incumbent who retains a strong support base across much of the north (Page & Tayo, 2018).

However, a number of political groupings are now emerging that are keen to exploit popular disillusionment with the APC and PDP. They are raising awareness of the power that citizens hold, and calling for an end to political impunity by encouraging the electorate to hold political leaders to account. Thus, the challenges are as follows:

The APC, led by former General Muhammadu Buhari, who had previously headed a military government in 1983-85, entered office with an ambitious list of pledges to the electorate. These centred on fighting corruption, combating insecurity, improving public services and creating social welfare programme. With the exception of large swathes of the South-South and South-East, the APC could boast widespread support across the country. But it was not long before public frustration with Buhari's new government began to mount. The new president took several months to name his cabinet, and he left many other key government positions unfilled.

The economy entered recession, largely as a result of low world oil prices, reduced oil production, and the government's slow policy response and illiberal economic policies. The naira plummeted as the Central Bank of Nigeria imposed foreign exchange controls to avoid

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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devaluation, and food prices shot up as the effects of protectionist trade policies hit consumers. Security also deteriorated, with the Centre for Democracy and Development's 'Buharimeter' monitoring project reporting that more than 800 people died as a result of insurgency-fueled violence in the northeast during Buhari's first 100 days in office.

Although the president would later claim some victories over the weakening Boko Haram insurgency, a potentially deadlier expansion in land- and resource-based clashes between farmers and pastoralists was devastating parts of the Middle Belt region of central Nigeria. In the southern half of the country, Niger Delta militants threatened a fresh wave of violent attacks against oil infrastructure, and there was a revival of Biafra separatist movements. In addition to the challenge of multiple conflicts, a series of overseas visits by the president to address an undisclosed health issue helped create a fertile environment in which an internal party conflict then festered.

Despite the speculation over his health and criticism of his presidential style, Buhari remains very popular in some parts of the country and within factions of his party, and he has declared his interest in running for a second consecutive term in 2019. If he wins and then serves another full term, he will be in his early 80s by the end of his tenure, and it is likely that his time in office will again be disrupted by further medical treatment overseas and internal party disputes.

The PDP is not faring much better as regards party unity. Instead of focusing on repairing its image, which has been tarnished by decades of corruption, the party prefers to criticize the APC's failings without offering alternative policy approaches. Despite this, the PDP gained significant mass in July 2018 after numerous senators and federal representatives defected to it from the APC. The PDP is certainly not short of prominent figures hoping to win the party's

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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presidential nomination: several sitting and former governors and a former vice-president have joined the crowded primary field.

By and large, the 2015 elections, conducted under the leadership of Attahiru Jega, are considered the most efficiently run and the most transparent of Nigeria's recent elections. But obstacles are already apparent as regards preparation for 2019. The presidency and the Senate are currently jockeying over the sequence of elections, which is proving to be very disruptive to the process. Traditionally, the presidential election and national assembly elections are first to be conducted, followed a fortnight later by the state governorship and state assembly polls. The Senate has supported a legislative proposal to alter the order and hold elections over three days, with national assembly elections first, followed by state governorship and state house of assembly elections, and with presidential elections coming last in the sequence.

INEC released its election timetable (providing for a two-stage election process) in January 2018, but the bill to enable the reordering of the electoral sequence was, controversially, passed by the National Assembly a month later. President Buhari refused to sign the bill into law, warning that it might undermine INEC's ability to organize, undertake and supervise elections. Critics of the bill condemn the actions of its supporters as unconstitutional, and are concerned that, with a sufficient majority in the House of Representatives, the president's veto can be overturned.

The argument for reordering is that the outcome of the presidential poll influences the way in which people vote in the elections that follow. By holding the presidential elections last, the intention is that electorate will exercise greater consideration in electing their federal and state legislators, rather than voting for the party of an already declared winner. This dispute has drawn attention to the discord between the executive and legislative branches of government.

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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If the National Assembly overturns the veto, this will embolden the legislature and set a trend for more confrontations with the presidency.

INEC has been carrying out continuous voter registration since 2016, but this has not been without difficulties, and some parts of the country have experienced the problem of citizens being unable to register because of inadequate staffing levels and a shortage of registration machines. INEC personnel, for their part, have complained about voters registering but then failing to collect their permanent voter cards. The increasing number of parties being registered also poses complications. There are currently 68, and the number is likely to rise even higher. Another issue dogging Nigerian elections— and one that resurfaces with every election— is that of underage voters. An INEC official has claimed that underage voters have been registered in certain parts of the country after some members of those communities' intimidated INEC staff. But despite such challenges, INEC claims that it will be ready for 2019 and its incumbent chairman, Mahmood Yakubu, insists he will not be intimidated by partisan pressure.

Security remains a serious problem in the northeast of the country, with Boko Haram and other militant groups still very active in the region. The 2015 polls were delayed to allow for a military offensive to secure the area. If the military is called into action again for 2019, this will further weaken the government's often-repeated claim that the insurgency has been eliminated. Security conditions during the pre- and post-election period will greatly impact INEC's ability to conduct credible and well-executed polls. Since Buhari's victory the government has claimed success in reducing the impact of insurgents in the northeast, but other security crises have intensified across the country: these could be exploited by unscrupulous politicians and their supporters to disrupt pre-election logistics or the voting process itself. In some states, the threat of inter-communal clashes (such as the farmer–herder

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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conflicts that roil the country's Middle Belt states) could suppress voter turnout, or even put poll workers at risk.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conflict societies, designing elections have remained the toughest task. The division among the ethnic and religious line are triggered because of the competitiveness and polarization of elections. Election has been the hallmark of democracy processes, thus, avoiding election is not the right alternative in divided societies. However, measures to curtail the violence are most essential. Nigeria been regarded as one of the most divided society in African continent, is currently facing utmost challenges in addressing rising tensions ranging from assorted violence, economic uncertainty, political brouhaha and religious/ethnic tensions in the maintenance of the democracy in the country. With Boko Haram pandemonium in the North-East, Fulani/herdsmen conflicts mostly in the Middle-Belt regions and North-West part of the country and rising Shiite Movements among others were identified to be the main challenges in pre general elections.

Equally, the lopsided fight against corruption crusade of the present regime has continued to create further tension in the polity. Recent bye and primaries elections conducted in Nigeria are characterized with violence, votes buying and ballots snatching. The vote buying and possibility of misusing the state machinery by the incumbent may hinder the sources of the election. The incumbent government may indulge in vote buying and abuse of security apparatus. This has made experts to make further assertion on the need for political leaders to promote equity, justice and fairness among the followers. As a matter of urgency, the Federal government needs to provide adequate security measures to ensure peaceful conduct of all elections. This would also adequately help in curtailing post elections violence experienced in

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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the past. There is also need to sensitize general public on the importance of peaceful coexistence and harmony among individuals.

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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**Elections Violence in Divided Societies: Issues and Challenges in Nigeria**

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