

POVERTY, POLITICAL THUGGERY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA 2019-2023

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ABSTRACT

This study on poverty, political thuggery and development in Nigeria was carried out to ascertain the relationships between poverty and political thuggery on one hand and poverty, political thuggery and development on the other hand. Poverty is endemic in Africa and the plunge into extreme poverty in many part of Nigeria has become a very critical challenge that needs to be addressed, especially in view of its adverse effect on development which is the very important to Africa. The study relied on the relative deprecation theory as a tool of analysis, while the historical descriptive research design was adopted and data collected from secondary sources. Findings indicated that poverty and political thuggery are intentional and closely related, with both poverty and political thuggery having profound negative effects on the economic, social and political developments of Nigeria. The study also found that the indulgence in the act of political thuggery is as a result of the deprivation of a section of the population from accessing the resource and the desperation of the political elite to win elections and occupy political office. Therefore, the study concluded that poverty and political thuggery impacts development in more ways than one, and recommended for aggressive poverty alleviation programme and stricter punishment for electoral offences to cub and eradicate the menace of poverty and reduced the incentives that lures youth into political thuggery.

Keywords: Poverty, Politics, Thuggery, Political Development.

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty is a state of being poor, it connotes the lack of money or a deficiency of elements or resources that are needed or desired, or that constitute richness. In other words, poverty is the

direct opposite of riches. Many vices and anti-social behaviors like stealing, pilfering, pick pocketing, cultism, drug abuses and official corruption are often attributed to poverty or the fear of returning to being poor. The phenomenon of poverty manifest in various ways including the lack of income, and productive resources that is sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihood, hunger, malnutrition, ill-health, limited or lack of access to health care, basic education, increases morbidity and mortality arising illnesses, inadequate housing and homelessness, and unsafe environment. Poverty also expresses in the form of social discrimination and exclusion including the lack of participation in community decision making, civil, social and cultural life (Anger, 2010). The legendary Nelson Mandela (2005) in a campaign against poverty in London, United Kingdom, while pocketing on the topic: making poverty history, asserted that “like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural, the phenomenon is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the combined action of human beings” (p. 1). In a renewed global effort and commitment towards the eradication of poverty, Nelson Mandela could only imagine a world without poverty.

Poverty as it were, means different things to different people, therefore difficulties does arose whenever the need to draw a line between the poor and non-poor as often than not, what may be termed poor by one may not measure up to the considerations of another as poor (Obayilu & Ufford 2007). While in the field of economics, poverty is thought of in global terms, disciplines like sociology and psychology treats poverty from a relative or comparative terms or point of view. It therefore means that poverty is not only an expression of life’s situation but also a state of mind and a perception of oneself in the complex web of social relations (Soyombo, 1987).

Different states and government around the world have the habits of measuring poverty in such a way that it reflects their own circumstances and focus. Despite all these, some consensus does exist among social scientist in the measurement of poverty as either the lack of money or the inadequacy of it in terms of income and expenditure needs. The focus on money as a measure of poverty is predicated on the fact that inadequate income or lack of money is statistically and economically measurable (Diri, 2020). Poverty in this case therefore becomes both an economic and social mile that manifests in many more ways than one.

Rowntree (1901) classified poverty into two typologies (primary and secondary) poverty. Primary poverty Rowntree noted will occur when the income of an individual or family is insufficient to provide for the basic needs required for physical efficiency. On the other hand, poverty is considered secondary when and where there is a manifest mismanagement of available resources/ income which otherwise would have been sufficient for the satisfaction of basic needs.

The political history of Nigeria, especially as it relates to democratic elections has been tented and severally punctuated with the issues of political crisis as a result of the activities of political thugs. Political thuggery has become an unspoken code of conduct in every election in Nigeria. The contracting of thugs by political parties and election candidates has become a ‘normal’ practice as politician and other political actors go about campaigning and jostling for election into government offices.

While the fear of falling into secondary poverty as a result of loss of election on the part of the politicians after committing enormous resources into the ‘election business’ either as political godfather(s), election financier, or political party candidate tend to aggravate and sustain the demand for political thugs, these vendors of political and election crisis who masquerades as political thugs does so in a frantic bid to put food daily on the table for themselves and their

dependents and also by so doing escape the clutches of primary poverty. These merchants of political crisis otherwise known and called political thugs are mostly vulnerable, unemployed and poor youths who are either uneducated, school drop outs and sometimes graduates who willingly make themselves available for any kind of job that promises to put food on their table even at the risk of their own lives and that of others.

Given that political thuggery has become a recurrent decimal in the annals of Nigerian politics since the 1962 western regional election crisis, it became pertinent to ask if there is any relationship between poverty and political/election thuggery in Nigeria. How has poverty shaped normal participation in politics and what are the likely remedies to the menace of poverty and political thuggery in Rivers State. To achieve the goals of this study therefore, the social deprivation theory developed by Robert K. Merton (1938) and Samuel Stouffer (1946), which explains all the ranges of ways in which a person can be disadvantaged in the society, which mostly concerns their inability to properly participate fully in the society was adopted as the theoretical frame work and tool of analysis.

The relative deprivation theory is use to understand some significant actions and behaviors perpetuated by individuals in the society. The theory gives room for comparing the situation between groups or individuals to the rest of the society by demonstrating the level of denial of benefits that are related economically, politically and socially. Relative deprivation is seen as the factor driving incidences of social disorder like thuggery, while the historical qualitative method is adopted as the research design, therefore data for the study were gathered from secondary source only.

Though poverty is a global issue, it severity differs from continent to continent and from country to country even within the same continents. In some continents, the severity of poverty varies also from region to region. The causative factors of poverty are many. Sometimes it is as a complex factors. Adeyemi (2013) identified some factors including harsh economic policies, poor governance or poor leadership, low productivity and lag in human resource development as some of the contributing factors of global poverty crisis.

Other factors that contribute to poverty according to Anger (2010) are the lack or absence of a comprehensive national poverty reduction programme, lack of sound agricultural policy, partial or total neglect of the agricultural sector and the lack of basic infrastructure, to equate rapid population growth. These factors Ajakaiye and Adeyeye (2002) noted are responsible for the decline in the living standards of the people, while Thinkers Forum International (2006) added to the list such items like resource mismanagement, corruption, trade injustice and greed as the most recent causes of global poverty. To escape from poverty many had resorted to elicit activities including political thuggery and the merchandising of election crisis. Political thuggery according to Alhaji et al. (2016) is an aspect of social violence which is detrimental to democratic sustainability in Nigerian politics. Thugs are social misfits who are peddlers and merchants of violence during elections. They ply their trade by visit mayhem on individuals, terrorizing and intimidating people before, during and after elections. They are effectively the hires of the political class, who recruit, train and sustain them to serve their selfish interest of maintaining grip and control over political power.

The term thuggery Howell and Asiegbu (2004) noted is principally making reference to the activation of thugs which are expressed in the form of social vices. Thuggery affects the normal peaceful and harmonious coexistence among groups in the society and in the case amongst the different political parties, electorates and party candidates.

Basically, this issue of election or political thuggery is that of a mini proxy war fought by thugs on behalf of their hirer or paymaster, whose ultimate aim is participate in the allocation of value through the occupation political offices after winning election with the help of political thugs. Political thuggery therefore becomes the criminalization of politics by taking away peoples right to peaceful choose their leaders and representatives, including also the sanctity of the observation of good morals by unleashing of violence on the political process.

Political elites in Nigeria larches on the poor economic situation and low social standard of these individual with a promise of mouthwatering remuneration as a means of escaping poverty, thuggery therefore became a sort of seasonal or part time employment for the perpetrators of political thuggery and the army of new recruits who are eager to showcase their criminal prowess on the masses (Hassan, 2011). Iorhen and Kwarah (2024) noted that poverty is the main obstacle to rural development in Nigeria; therefore to tackle the hydra headed monster of multi-dimensional poverty and development, the federal government adopted severe policies.

Development is a complex and highly contested concept that does not lend itself to general acceptable definition as a result of its multidimensional nature and multidisciplinary approach. Some scholars often misconstrue development for growth, modernization, progress or westernization. This is especially south modernization scholar. Development however, is the qualitative and quantitative improvement in the living standard of the people. It is according to Roston (1975) the progressive movements from traditional society to a modern society characterized by the stage of high mass consumption of goods and services.

As per Rodney (1972), Development is the over-all social progress which is dependent on the increase capacity of members of society to master the laws of nature and aptly such laws in the production of tools with which they can deploy control their immediate environment to meet their daily needs. The depositions of Rodney on development is to the effects that, development can only be achieved through the mastery of scientific laws, crafting of technologically tools and the application of the same in achieving their material needs.

Abuiyada (2018) defined on the other hand development as a process that creates growth, progress, positive changes or the addition to physical, economic, social and environmental components, this does not only align with that of Walter Rodney, it also amplify the fact that development is different from growth, progress, modernization or westernization etc., though these components are the necessary outcome of development.

FINDINGS

Relationships between Poverty and Political Thuggery

Deprivation as the actual or perceived lack of resources that is required to maintain one's quality of life, diet, activity and material possession has been cited as one of the factors driving the incidences of social disorder in the political melee such as, rioting, looting, thuggery and so on. People who felt they are being deprived of resources to which they are entitled often fall into this group when indulging in disorderly act either to vent their anger or to obtain a share of the resources needed for their sustenance.

Iorhen and Kwarah (2024) noted that being poor is generally associated with deprivation of some life's basic need such as food, shelter, clothing, basic education, health care and security. The political classes in Rivers State over the years have mastered the act of

weaponizing poverty in such a way that the masses are perpetually disadvantaged and at their mercy.

The perpetual governance and leadership failure in Nigeria has created such harsh economic situations that multiply poverty across all regions of the country. The unfailing or logical outcome of poor leadership which manifest mostly as poor policy articulation, implementation and monitoring have inadequately led to low productivity, and lag in human capital development which are some of the harbingers of poverty especially in rivers State were there exist a contrast of poverty in the midst of abundance (Adeyemi, 2013).

To guarantee the steady supply of political thugs during every election, election business merchants and political elites being aware that only uneducated, hungry and poor populace will be willing to put their lives on the line to obtain food, made poverty the unofficial labor supplier of election/political thugs. This they achieve through the inadequate funding of the education sector, divestment in industrialization and lack of employment opportunity. The constant display of wealth and affluence by the political elites in a poverty stricken society serves as an alluring effect on the poor, especially youths who are sometimes promised a better life without the claws of poverty to draw them into political and election thuggery.

Political Thuggery and Development

The impacts of political thuggery on development especially in Nigeria are easily traceable to the relationships between democracy, election, politics and poverty. Though some scholars have repudiated any connections between democracy and developments and rightly so because some countries of the world that have attained some level of development is largely undemocratic (Onyishi & Oji, 2022).

In a study carried out by Jain (2004) on democracy and development in Japan and some newly industrialized Asian countries, to ascertain if developing countries need to adopt democracy to achieve economic success. The study contend that though economic and social freedom which are the necessary fall out of democracy are good for economic success and development, it does not necessarily follow that western styled institutions and culture must be adopted. The study held that liberal democracy is not a prerequisite to the development of any country. However, what is important for development is social and economic rights, freedom from poverty as against western ideologies.

Nigeria, having adopted the practice of democracy, though practiced in its crudest form especially in Rivers State, the drivers of the political system have placed their trust on the ability of democracy to reduce the incidences of poverty and drive development.

Politics and elections being necessary ingredients of democracy keep attracting thuggery as a necessary and unconventional luggage. Political thuggery has a profound impact on the development of Nigeria, as the practice often time has ended up with the enthronement of irresponsible leaders, leading to poor governance and retarded development.

In spite of the pivotal position of election in every democratic setup the incidences of political thuggery in the Nigerian body polity has cut by half the participation of the electorates in the democratic process. Election apathy is widely attributed to violence at the polling station, these have been one of the strategies employed by political thugs to rig elections and enthrone unpopular candidates as winners. For example, out of the seventy million (70m) registered voters for the 2015 election, only about thirty five percent (35%) actually came out to vote citing electoral violence and thuggery (Laden-Baki, 2016).

Election being the only avenue of opportunity given to the populace to have a say in the policies, programme are direction of the government through their elected representative, is been effectively taken away by the activities of political thugs. The fear of the voting pattern of the electorates in future elections often condition the elected representatives to embark on developmental projects and policies to appeal to the electorate, however, all these has been defeated by the activation of political thuggerist (Cookey-Gam, 2022; Diri et al., 2021).

Elections, especially when it is competitive is a key determinant of the legitimacy of those who occupies public offices and exercise public authority. The activities of political thuggery has watered down election competitiveness, thereby casting a laggy doubt on the legitimacy of those who occupies offices. Leadership without legitimacy may have less time to propose and implements policies and programmes that are developments driven than it will have for seeking to legitimize itself on the psych of the electorate.

Election thuggery in Nigeria in recent years have further assumed a worrisome dimension with the active involvement of security agencies. Egobueze and Ojerika (2007) held that the Nigerian police is the most culpable in the numerous violence that have come to characterize elections in Nigeria. The duo noted that the police where used as political thugs to chase opposition party members in the 2015 general elections in Rivers, Edo, and Ekiti States with the backing of the security agencies, many youth leaders who had been hired as political thugs took over the control of what happened at the polling stations.

The untoward activities of these political thugs and security agents though rooted in poverty have continued to deal negative blows to the developmental needs of the Nigerian state. An armed poor security agent on election day is not different from the political thugs as both are out for hire and can offer their services to the highest bidder, even if that means to temporarily escape poverty, without minding the consequences of such action on development and the general need of the people.

CONCLUSION

Poverty in Africa is endemic and the end seems not to be in sight. The political elites in most African countries have made a pact with poverty as a veritable partner in the perpetual subjugation of the citizens. The reason for this unholy alliance is not far-fetched. The poorer the people, the more vulnerable they are to political manipulations. Poverty creates an army of hungry docile follows who are neither able to resist the onslaught of the political elites nor the crumbs that falls from their table.

Political thuggery is the necessary outcome poverty as hunger and desperation pervade the entire landscape. Poor youth are easily hired into merchandising of electoral violence as a means of survival. The entrenchment of election violence in the name and style of political thuggery have further infracted the rate of developments achievable within the society. Noticeably, despite the consistency of general election rituals every four (4) years and the sustenance of ‘democracy’ in many African countries vis-à-vis Nigeria, political developments in these countries have been largely retarded as a result of the activities of political thugs which gave rise to seat tights leaders as with the case of Cameroun, Uganda, South Sudan, and most recently Tanzania. Therefore on the pertinent question of the nexus between poverty and political thuggery, it is been concluded here that the consequential effect of the two variable on development negative.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Giving the susceptibility of the poor within the society to indulge in such vices like political thuggery, the Federal, State and Local government should embark on aggressive poverty reduction and alleviation programme to reduce the number of recruitable political thugs.
- Poverty mostly stem from lack of employment opportunity as a result of poor educational background. The government at all levels therefore is to aggressively pursue mass literacy programme.
- Political violence which is the core activity of political thugs on election day is a crime punishable by law. The Government therefore must enforce the relevant extant law and make example of culprits and their sponsors to serve as deterrent to others.
- Finally, security agents like the police and armed forces must be well remunerated to the extent that can stay neutral on election day and those caught getting involved in election malpractices or aiding one political party or candidate over the others should be made to face the full weight of the law.

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