

# **Violence Free Elections: Perspectives on the Peace Initiatives on the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Elections are essential in a democracy and are fundamental features of representative democracy.. When free, fair and transparent, they confer credibility and legitimacy on the outcome. However, Nigeria's electoral history has always been marred by various levels of violence with grave implications for the polity.

Since return of democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria, has conducted elections in 2003, 2007, 2011 but with an ever increasing rise in electoral violence. The April 2011 elections, which benefitted from the electoral reform efforts of President Yar 'Adua, and was considered the most credible since the return to democracy also turned out to be the most violent as the country witnessed an orgy of bloodshed after the elections.

The 2015 elections were to be held against the background of a prediction about the disintegration of Nigeria against the background of several socio-economic, political and security challenges, including insurgency in the nation's North East. The emergence of the All Progressives Congress (APC) as a formidable opposition to the ruling People Democratic Party (PDP) fifteen year rule also added more tension to the charged atmosphere of the elections.

The Peace Initiatives which started immediately after the 2011 elections attracted the attention of stakeholders including development partners, non-governmental organisations and eventually the government with the establishment of a National Peace Committee and the signing of the Abuja Peace Accord.

This paper will attempt to evaluate the various peace efforts and campaigns for violence free elections by stakeholders and the impact of the initiatives on the conduct of the elections and its outcome.

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## **Introduction**

Elections are fundamental features of representative democracy. It is regarded as the only acceptable means of either enthroning new leadership or removing an existing one (Alao, and Nwogwugwu, 2013:120). Since 1999, elections have become more regular in Nigeria with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conducting general elections in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 with varying degrees of credibility. Even though elections across Africa are generally accompanied by violence, elections serve more purposes than simply being the means by which leaders are elected to govern the state: they are also gradually emerging as instruments of structural conflict prevention. This is why across Africa increasing attention is being paid to the establishment of conditions conducive to the holding of credible and peaceful elections (International IDEA, 2015: 49).

General elections in Nigeria have always been accompanied by violence even after the return to civilian rule in 1999 that ended fifteen years of military dictatorship (International Crisis Group, 2014). Electoral violence refers to the use or threat of force against an opponent within the context of electoral competition for state power. It is inhibitive of democratic transition and consolidation. Acts of electoral violence include murder, arson, abduction, assault, rioting, violent seizure and destruction of electoral materials, and psychological intimidation (Alemika, 2011).

The fault lines of ethnicity, region and religion run deep in Nigeria. Virtually every part of the country has memory of injury or feelings of injustice, which they often feel will be best addressed if one of their own wields power at the centre, preferably as the president. Similarly, there is a pervasive fear that the president of the country will abuse the powers of his office to privilege his region, ethnicity or religion—if not to punish or deliberately disadvantage others. All these sentiments are always whipped up thus making the electoral process in Nigeria acrimonious and violent (Adibe, 2015: 3).

Due to political realities on the ground, elections are often held under volatile and high-risk political and social contexts. Consequently, enabling a peaceful environment where the right to vote or to stand for election are exercised without violence is a major challenge faced regularly by Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and other actors involved in elections such as political parties and candidates, security forces, media, civil society organizations, religious and community leaders and judicial officials. These entities often employ a number of tools at their disposal to work toward peaceful elections (Mohan and Yigit, 2015).

Former Secretary General of the United Nations and Chairman, Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security, Kofi Annan (2015) had argued that even as elections have become the norm – just about every country now organizes regular elections – democracy itself is called into question (because) elections are not enough if they are not conducted with integrity and able to reflect the real will of the people:

Elections with integrity is a shorthand for elections that respect a range of global standards and norms enshrined in international treaties and good practices. Above all they are elections that grant each citizen the equal right to participate in the selection of his or her leaders and hold them accountable. Elections with integrity also have to guarantee fundamental freedoms like the freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association.

Thus, the Peace initiative was a new dimension in the efforts being made towards credible elections and democratic consolidation in the country. Our aim in this paper is to carry out an overview of these efforts which in no small measure contributed to the peaceful conduct and credible outcome of the elections.

### **Background to the 2015 General Elections and the Fear of Violence**

Elections are essential in a democracy. When free, fair and transparent, they confer legitimacy and acceptance on resulting administrations (Musa Yar' Adua Foundation, 2014: 5). However, Nigeria's electoral history has always been marred by various levels of violence at the pre, during and post election phases, with high consequences including deaths, displacement and destruction of livelihood (WANEP 2014). Violence has been defined as the use of physical force intended to cause injury or destruction of life and property. Increasingly, it is now understood that apart from physical force violence could also be perpetrated by

word of mouth through emotional abuse and psychological incitement, hence the term verbal violence. This may also include hate speech.

In the intensity of political campaigns during elections, politicians are sometimes carried away to do and say things, which intended or not cause injury, anger, incite the public, particularly their opponents who may also wish to reply in kind thus fuelling a circle of verbal and physical violence.

Electoral violence is a type of violence intended to cause injury, harm and destruction to political opponents particularly during an election. This kind of violence could be intra-party or inter-party. The main purpose is to weaken or destroy an opponent.

According to Adetula (2007), the Electoral Violence Education Resolution (EVER) of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) has provided a very useful definition of electoral violence. According to EVER, electoral violence is “any violence (harm) or threat of violence (harm) that is aimed at disrupting any part of the electoral or political process during the election process.”

According to EVER, the perpetrators of electoral violence are political parties, politicians, their supporters, journalists, agents of governments, election administrators and the general population. This electoral violence includes threats, assaults, murder, destruction of property, physical and psychological harm.

In Africa, because of the enormous reward for electoral victory through primitive accumulation, it is almost inevitable that the contest for political power through the democratic process would be vicious. According to Claude Ake (1989: 43):

the political struggle even within the African ruling class is intense and normless, and the premium on power exceptionally high, the class constantly endangers itself by engaging in a ceaseless struggle in which all seek power without limitation as to means and exercise whatever power they have without restraint except that arising from self interest.

Several other African countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, DRC, Cote d’Ivoire and Guinea), have experienced bloody post election violence and conflict. Ethiopia’s May 2005 election was

the third multi-party parliamentary elections since the establishment of the country's federal democracy in 1994. Although the pre-election and election-day activities were relatively peaceful, the post-election phase of the election was marred by electoral violence that led to the death of more than 193 people and the detention of over 40,000 others (Orji and Uzodi, 2012: 48).

The 2008 post-election violence in Kenya caught many by surprise. The country had long been known for its professional electoral institutions and political stability, and elections there had generally proceeded peacefully in the past. But during the December 2007 presidential elections, the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK), and the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) failed dramatically to live up to their reputation. Distrust of these key state institutions foreclosed the possibility of a procedural response by the opposition over suspected electoral malpractices, producing instead widespread violence and a political crisis in what was previously seen as a stable, democratic country. In the end, over 1,150 people were killed and some 350,000 displaced from their homes (International IDEA and Kofi Annan Foundation, 2012: 5). The post-election violence of 2007/2008 left deep wounds in the Kenyan populace, sparking national soul-searching and demands for answers about the causes and perpetrators of the violence (Ali, 2015)

Côte d'Ivoire entered a renewed period of extreme political instability, accompanied by significant political violence, following a contested presidential election designed to cap an often forestalled peace process. The election was held under the terms of the 2007 Ouagadougou Political Agreement, the most recent in a series of partially implemented peace accords aimed at reunifying Côte d'Ivoire, which has remained largely divided between a government-controlled southern region and a rebel-controlled zone in the north since the

outbreak of a civil war in 2002 (Cook, 2011: ii). On November 28, 2010, Ivorians went to the polls to elect a president, hoping to end a decade-long crisis during which the country was divided politically and militarily between the north and the south. In the week that followed this run-off election, despite clear international consensus that Alassane Ouattara had won, incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo (2000 – 2011) refused to step down (Human Right Watch, 2011: 4)

His refusal to concede defeat precipitated political and inter - communal violence on both sides. The post-election crisis then evolved from a targeted campaign of violence by Gbagbo forces to an armed conflict in which armed forces from both sides committed grave crimes. Six months later, at least 3,000 civilians were killed and more than 150 women were raped in a conflict that was often waged along political, ethnic, and religious lines (Human Right Watch, 2011: 4). ). Laurent Gbagbo was finally detained and remained in the custody of the Ouattara Government before his transfer to the Hague to face charges of crimes against humanity. His wife, Simone Gbagbo was arrested, prosecuted and eventually sentenced in March to 20 years in prison for the role she played in the electoral conflict.

This background to the 2015 elections in Nigeria put all stakeholders on the alert of the need to be proactive in forestalling any outbreak of election related violence. Electoral violence in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. Nigeria has experienced chronic electoral violence since its transition to democracy and civilian rule in 1999, including more than 15,700 election-related deaths. High stakes combine with readily available guns for hire in the form of organized crime gangs and a historic lack of prosecution of perpetrators to make electoral violence a relatively attractive tool of electoral competition— even within political parties (International IDEA and Kofi Annan Foundation, 2012: 5).

The 2007 elections, conducted under Professor Maurice Iwu, were regarded as the most flawed. According to the Nigeria Electoral Violence Report (Dundas and Ojo, 2014: 169). The polls were widely condemned as the most violent, poorly organised and massively rigged in Nigeria's troubled electoral history. It was so bad that the winner of that presidential elections, Umar Yar'Adua himself confessed that the election lacks credibility and immediately on assumption of office set up the Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee to look into ways of enhancing the credibility of the electoral process in the country. The April 2011 elections, which benefitted from the electoral reform efforts of President Yar 'Adua, and was considered the most credible since the return to democracy (International Crisis Group, 2014), also carried the tag of being the most violent as the country witnessed an orgy of bloodshed after the elections.

In 2011, during the run-up to the election, 165 people were killed in violence related to political campaigns and voter registration. Another 800 to 1,000 died after widespread protests broke out in the north on the announcement of incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan's victory. More than 65,000 were displaced (International IDEA and Kofi Annan Foundation, 2012: 5, Blanchard, 2015: 2). However, as observed by Amnesty International (2011: 5) there were no general countrywide anti-electoral violence campaigns, no public awareness programmes, and no adequate investigation, prosecution and conviction of culprits from the pre-election violence incidents. It should be added also that no effort was made to investigate and prosecute those who unleashed violence in several parts of the North after the election results were announced.

Meanwhile, the level and magnitude of electoral and political violence has risen and the political elites have often converted poverty ridden, unemployed Nigerian youths into ready-made machinery for the perpetration of electoral violence (Dundas and Ojo, 2014: 169). This violence represents a political failure in the face of what was largely a technical and administrative success. Losing candidates and party leaders failed to meet their responsibilities to restrain their supporters and accept the election results (International IDEA and Kofi Annan Foundation, 2012: 5).

Accordingly, the frequency, ramifications and intensity of electoral violence, are the elements that must be carefully studied, understood and addressed in order to improve election security in Nigeria (Ibeanu, 2012: 4).

The 2015 elections were to be held against the background of a prediction about the collapse and disintegration of Nigeria in 2015 which by itself has made many people uncomfortable. Thus the potential for violence around the Elections is high given a close presidential race (Blanchard, 2015: i), as the first nationwide contest essentially between two parties – the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) – since the return to democratic rule. The emergence last year of the APC, a merger of the four largest opposition parties, altered the political landscape, potentially posing a serious challenge to the PDP, which has held the presidency and majority of state governorships for fifteen years. Preparations for the elections are going on amid unprecedented acrimony between the two parties and deepening regional and religious polarisation (International Crisis Group 2014: i).

The political parties have not responded well to this development. The ruling party, the PDP, has been in panic as shown by the language of its campaigns. The leading opposition party, the APC, was also getting overconfident. In this situation, supporters of both parties are being led to a situation that may make acceptance of the results very difficult. The parties should tone down their campaign rhetoric because a free and fair election cannot be predicted and candidates and political parties should therefore not be overconfident as they campaign as this may lead to violence after the results are announced.

These political tensions, was in addition to the insurgency being waged by Boko Haram efforts in the nation’s North East to foment further instability, have raised concerns about the country’s trajectory as it moves towards the elections. Nigeria also faces mounting economic pressures, and the government is struggling to balance competing budget demands amid a sharp drop in the global price of oil, a primary source of foreign exchange and government revenue (Blanchard, 2015: i).

There are already causes for concern over whether the vote will be free, fair and peaceful. For one, the language used at political rallies and events by members of all political parties remains violent and divisive. In the run-up to the election, ethnic and religious chauvinists

have reportedly been stoking the fire of violence during electioneering. While the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) seems to have suffered setbacks as a result of unprecedented factionalization and defections, a number of leading opposition parties have capitalised on this to merge and form a 'mega party' through which to challenge the ruling party (Omotola and Charles Nyuykonge, 2015: 2). Observers have cautioned that violent protests could follow if the polls are not viewed as credible—allegations of fraud and rigging have plagued past elections, and opinion polls indicated that public confidence in the electoral process is low (Blanchard, 2015: 1).

Adding to the problems in Nigeria is that national security has continued to deteriorate, to such an extent that the situation provided an excuse for the military and other security agencies to 'force' the INEC to postpone the election – originally scheduled for 14 February – to 28 March. Together, these developments appear to have reduced the level of public trust in Nigeria's electoral process. Thus, the odds are against the election being well-administered, which may generate a crisis of legitimacy and cause the results to be called into question (Omotola and Charles Nyuykonge, 2015: 2).

According to Chairman of INEC, Professor Jega, in a paper he delivered at a Sensitization Workshop, on non-violence in Abuja:

Attitude and the disposition of parties and candidates will determine to a large extent whether we will have peaceful and non-violent elections. So, parties and contestants, although have responsibility to ensure peaceful conduct of elections. Of course, there are other agencies; the election management body has an important responsibility. It has to do its job with competence, with professionalism and with non partisanship. Security agencies also have to do their jobs. "I have identified what I called 10 tenets of non-violent elections specifically on what we will expect. The first one obviously is internal party democracy, effective intra-party conflict resolution, accountability, Supremacy of rules, uncertain electoral outcome, willingness to accept outcomes, moderation of electioneering, trust in institutional redress, promotion of inclusiveness, well trained staff.

Factional feuds within both parties could degenerate into violence during their national and state primaries. Competing claims to the presidency, between northern leaders and their Niger Delta counterparts, could also result in violence in either or both regions, particularly after the

polls. As in 2011, clashes could erupt in some northern states if the APC, whose frontrunners are all northerners, loses the polls; there is similarly a high risk of violence if the PDP loses the presidency, particularly in the Niger Delta, home region of the party's candidate, President Goodluck Jonathan (ICG, 2014: i). The Boko Haram insurgency and the state of emergency in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe could prevent voting in parts of those north-eastern states. If this occurs, the opposition APC, which has large followers in those (and other northern) states, could lose a significant number of votes, reject the presidential polls' outcome and question the elected government's legitimacy. An election not held in all states may also fall short of the constitutional requirements for electing a president, namely that the winner score 25 per cent of the votes in two-thirds of the 36 states, thereby raising serious legal disputes. Equally worrying are the increasing availability of firearms, the rise in communal violence across several northern states since 2013 and deepening criminality in the Niger Delta (ICG, 2014: i).

Actions by the police and other security services, all controlled by the federal government, could also aggravate tensions around the polls and undermine the credibility of their outcomes. The conduct of some senior police officers, notably in Rivers state, has raised fears that the agency could be manipulated to serve the PDP's interests. Similarly, some actions and pronouncements by the Department of State Security (DSS) – Nigeria's main domestic intelligence agency – have raised concerns about institutional bias. If these agencies act or are perceived to act in a partisan manner, they could undermine free and fair polls and heighten the risks of violence, particularly after the vote (ICG, 2014: ii). These elections will take place amidst an atmosphere of even greater crisis and uncertainty than usual (Lunn and Harari, 2015)

The potential for violence around the elections is high. In the period running up to the elections – tracked from December 2014 to the end of January 2015 - political violence has killed 58 people in Nigeria according to a report released by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). “If urgent steps are not taken to arrest further escalation, Nigeria's 2015 general elections would confront a high risk of significant violence,” the Commission said. Such violence “could pose a clear and present danger to the stability of the country and its neighbours.” The NHRC report added that “the pattern and intensity of pre-election violence is atypical of Nigeria's recent electoral history” and amounted to a worrying new development. Nigeria's upcoming elections are a critical

test for its political leaders, its security forces, and its people (Blanchard, 2015: 5). There were concerns not only domestically, but also among development partners and other members of the international community that the election may degenerate into conflict. Given the development in several African countries, great fear pervaded the political climate of the country. It became clear that a great peace initiative was needed to at least try to mitigate the expected violence and conflict.

### **The Imperative for Peace Initiative**

Nigeria has had several sad experiences with electoral violence. The 1964 and 1965 elections in the country led to widespread violence particularly in the Western region. During the Second Republic, there was widespread inter-party violence. The Third Republic witnessed less violence because the nation was still under military. In the Fourth Republic, the violence has been increasing with each elections, with the 2011 general elections considered to have witnessed the most bloodshed particularly after the results were announced. Paden (2012:109) pondered over the question as to whether elections trigger violence and he offered that it is important to answer the question if democratic norms are to be preserved and strengthened. He observed that the history of national elections and violence in Nigeria is mixed and troubling in many ways, and this review of the full range of civilian elections since the civil war helps to put the 2011 crises in perspective. The Report of the Lemu panel clearly indicated that lack of adherence to PDP zoning arrangements as enshrined in its constitution, the attitude of northern political leaders and large number of unemployed youth constituted some of the reasons for the widespread post election violence in the North.

Several factors cause people to resort to electoral violence. These include:

- Human rights abuses
- Unstable political environment
- Impunity of government officials and security agents, electoral officials
- Lack of faith in the electoral process
- Fear of rigging
- Electoral irregularities
- Provocation

- Intimidation
- Unfair management of the electoral process
- Hatred/hate speech
- Weakness of the security forces
- Lack of respect for the rule of law

It is clear from the above that there was urgent need to move fast to stop the eruption of violence during the 2015 elections. As argued by Paden (2012: 140), “one of the major challenges in conflict mitigation is the inevitable range of unintended consequences of policies hence the introduction of confidence building measure can often be the first step in getting at the roots of conflict.”

There is a new global morality which no longer overlooks violence of any kind. The international community invest enormous resources in combating violence of all kinds and electoral violence in particular. In recent years, highly placed political leaders, in Cote D’Ivoire and Kenya, who were alleged to have perpetrated or incited electoral violence were prosecuted by the International Criminal Court (ICC),

### **Peace Initiatives and Conflict Control Measures in the 2015 General Elections**

Concerns about Nigeria’s ability to hold a peaceful general election in 2015 have characterised rose as the elections drew nearer. The international community, development partners have been particularly worried about the political tension in the country. It was feared that if not properly managed, the polls had the potential to make or mar the country’s democracy and threaten its peace and security and, by extension, the stability of the West African region and of the continent.

As part of the building blocks for the peace initiative for 2015 general election, ICG (2014) signalled the need by suggesting that:

With only few months before elections, the government cannot engage in long term structural efforts to improve the quality of the vote, but it can and must be encouraged to urgently take several steps to limit the risk of widespread

violence. These include increasing efforts to contain the Boko Haram insurgency, paying special attention to the police to improve the security environment, reinforcing the capacities of the INEC to restore confidence in the electoral process, and along with all politicians, avoid playing the religious card and reducing tensions within and between the parties. The government – President Goodluck Jonathan, the federal legislature, INEC, party candidates, leaders of political parties and security agencies – should avoid inflammatory rhetoric, publicly denounce violence; pledge to respect rules, in particular the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, and pursue grievances through lawful channels, Organise national, regional, ethnic and inter-faith public forums to jointly and publicly commit to non-violence, and establish channels of communication and contingency plans to respond to large-scale communal violence; Approve urgently supplementary funds for INEC to meet its logistical requirements, Intensify efforts to build relations with all parties, particularly opposition parties, including holding constant consultations to discuss and explain major decisions, sparing no effort in trying to increase confidence and ensuring transparent relations with all parties, individuals and civil society. must bear the greatest responsibility for implementing these measures, but other national and political figures, including civil society, as well as international partners must also rally to stop the slide.

As part of the peace initiative, in January, 2015, a sensitisation workshop on non-violence in was organized in Abuja. The highlight of the workshop was the signing of the Abuja Accord by President Goodluck Jonathan, APC presidential candidate, Major-General Muhammadu Buhari (rtd) and 14 other presidential candidates. The chairmen of the two dominant parties, Alhaji Adamu Mu'azu, PDP, and Odigie Oyegun, APC, also hugged themselves in a bid to send a signal to their supporters that they were in support of violence free elections. The Peace Accord, signed by 11 out of the 14 presidential candidates, re-emphasized the Code of Conduct for Political Parties signed in 2013.

The preamble of the Accord states that “We the undersigned presidential candidates of the under-listed political parties contesting in the general elections of 2015; desirous of taking proactive measures to prevent electoral violence before, during and after the elections; anxious about the maintenance of a peaceful environment for the 2015 general elections; reaffirming our commitment to the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; desirous of sustaining and promoting the unity and corporate existence of Nigeria as an indivisible entity; determined to avoid any conduct or behaviour that will endanger the political stability

and national security of Nigeria; determined to place national interest above personal and partisan concerns; and reaffirm our commitment to fully abide by all rules and regulations as laid down in the legal framework for elections in Nigeria, hereby commit ourselves and our party to the following:

- To run issue-based campaigns at national, state and local government levels; in this, we pledge to refrain from campaigns that will involve religious incitement, ethnic or tribal profiling; both ourselves and agents acting in our names.
- To refrain from making, or causing to make our names or that of our party, any public statements, pronouncements, declarations or speeches that have the capacity to incite any form of violence, before, during and after the elections.
- To commit ourselves and political parties to the monitoring of the adherence to this accord by a national peace committee made up of respected statesmen and women, traditional and religious leaders.
- All institutions of government including INEC and security agencies must act and be seen to act with impartiality and to forcefully and publicly speak out against provocative utterances and oppose all acts of electoral violence whether perpetrated by our supporters and/or opponents.”

In his contribution at the sensitisation workshop Professor Ibrahim Gambari pointed out that:

The success of the election rested mainly on the technical competence of INEC, the prevailing security atmosphere and the need for the political actors to play the game by the rules. “The credibility and peacefulness of the election will depend on three critical elements. First, the technical competence of INEC, The second concern is security. The security agencies and INEC should provide security and sense of fairness to all the stakeholders. The security agencies which are supporting the elections: the police and the military must accept that their roles are to facilitate. “The third and most importantly, the contestants themselves will have to accept the rules of the game and to educate their supporters to encourage against violence. These three elements will be what will, in my view, lead to free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria”.

According to Cardinal John Onaiyekan, “the Abuja Peace Accord was brokered by President Jonathan himself because it was the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Inter-Parliamentary Affairs, Senator Ben Obi who anchored that meeting at which were present eminent personalities including former United Nations’ Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, the chairman of the event and former Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, Professor Attahiru Jega, former Nigeria’s representative to the United Nations, Professor Ibrahim Gambari among others. The Accord called for a Committee of credible and respected Nigerians who would help the group to maintain the letter and spirit of the accord. It was Ben Obi who went round inviting people to come and serve in the Peace Committee.

Members of the National Peace Committee are: Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar Rtd, Chairman, Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe Rtd, Vice Chairman, Cardinal John Onaiyekan, the Sultan of Sokoto His Eminence Sa’ad Abubakar, Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, Bishop Hassan Kukah – the Coordinator. Other Members include the foremost businessman, Alhaji Aliko Dangote, Alhaji Muhammed Musdafa, Primate of Anglican Church, Most Rev. Nicholas Okoh, President of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor and Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC). Others are Justice Rose Ukeje, Prof. Ibrahim Gambari, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Chairman of the 2014 National Conference, Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi, Prof. Ameze Guobadia, Prof. Zainab Alkali, Publisher of Vanguard Newspapers, Mr Sam Pemu- Amuka and former President of the Nigerian Bar Association, Dame Priscilla Kuye, Professor Oshita O. Oshita, Director General, Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution and Senator Ben Obi, Special Adviser to President on Inter party Affairs.

According to Cardinal Onaiyekan, (2015), the Committee drew up its own Terms of Reference which include among others to ensure that:

- Contesting parties should behave well
- Institutions of state should also behave well
- INEC ensures free and fair elections
- Security agencies, police, SSS, Armed Forces, Judiciary ensure impartiality in the discharge of their responsibilities.

In his appeal to Nigerians the Chairman National Peace Committee, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar Rtd remarked that “Any Nigerian, who loves this country must preach and practice peace. There is an apprehension and there is no need for that. Nigerians, Please I beg you. Learn from the former mistakes. We must ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. We must ensure that the elections are peaceful. If you go to many African Countries, you will see the kind of carnage going on as a result of post – election violence. We must live in peace. Whenever there is election violence, people blame politicians. But the people are the ones inflicting violence on themselves. If we destroy property and other things, we will still have to come back and rebuild what we have destroyed”.

The National Peace Committee held series of meeting with stakeholders Like the election Management Body (EMB), the INEC, the service chiefs, including the Chief of Defence Staff, Air Vice Marshal Alex Badeh; the Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Suleiman Abba, and leadership of the major political parties. In his remark the chairman and the former Head of State, said” his frequent meeting with Jonathan and Buhari among others was meant to ensure peaceful and smooth transition”.

As the election got closer so also did tension in the country. People started moving back to their home states for fear of violence. The campaign rhetoric became more alarming. There were rumours about impending removal of the INEC chairman, there was widespread campaign against the use of the card reader, there was rumour of an Interim National Government (ING) being in the offing and to make matters worse, there was rumour of an impending military intervention. Generally, people were largely on edge across the country. The postponement of the election for six weeks further heightened apprehension in the country.

The Committee felt there was need for some intervention and three days before the presidential election, it called the two main contestants together and asked them to face Nigerians and make a state of recommitment to peace and also tell their followers to be committed to free, fair and credible elections. This pre-election declaration had a great impact. The Committee drafted a statement which they signed on March 25. As explained by Cardinal Onaiyekan (2015), the insistence on the agencies of government in the statement is very significant by reason of hindsight:

The perception was very widely spread to the effect that whether it is INEC, army, police and others, they are all agencies of government and therefore there is a tendency for them to operate in such a way as not to put the government of the day at a disadvantage, which means being neutral and impartial became very difficult in the PDP government and the whole problem was how do you make sure that institutions under the control of the PDP government will operate in such a way that they do not work against the interests of the opposition? In previous elections, there was no guarantee of that even posting of police commissioners very often was done just a day before the elections and it seemed obvious that the postings were done to put right people in the right places in order to get a particular job done. Even INEC structure itself was such that if they didn't themselves do into rigging, they very often stood by and allowed rigging

There were several other peace initiatives. The international interest in Nigerian's election was unprecedented and there was great apprehension by the international community that if the elections were not properly managed violence could erupt on an unprecedented scale. Accordingly key members of the international community showed more than casual interest in the preparation for the elections. The development partners (USAID, DFID, EU, UNDP and others) have been involved for years in political education and have supported and funded several advocacy programmes and sponsored several jingles and drama programmes on radio in support violence free elections. The American National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) also ran programmes in support of peaceful elections. American Secretary of State John Kerry visited Nigeria in January and met President Jonathan and General Buhari and threatened that any Nigerian involved in electoral violence would no longer be eligible to American visa (Vanguard; 26 January, 2015). Another intervention was the joint US/UK statement on the collation of the election results in which it was observed that "there are disturbing indications that the collation process – where the votes are finally counted may be subject to deliberate political interference. Warning that any plan to change the results will contravene the letter and spirit of the Abuja Accord to which both major parties committed themselves" (Punch, March 30, 2015). US ambassador to Nigeria James Entwisle had in April, 2014 embarked on a nationwide tour that took him to different parts of the country to, interact with the people, learn more about the security issues and to share the United States' wishes for a peaceful election, good governance, development opportunities and a better future for Nigeria.

There were so many other local initiatives to promote peaceful elections. Highly respected leaders, such as the Sultan of Sokoto and Cardinal Onaiyekan of Abuja, have launched the Nigeria Inter-Faith Initiative for Peace, which aims to mitigate the negative impact of polarization along religious lines.

There was also the Women Situation Room, which was on ground for ten days to observe the pre- elections, elections and post – election processes. They received calls toll free from Nigerians and the citizens were not just able to report incidents around them, they were able to get prompt intervention so that such incidents would not escalate unnecessarily (The Guardian, April 15, 2015: 31). The CLEEN Foundation also established the Violence Monitoring Campaign, while the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) introduced the Partners for Peace (P4P) project.

The CDD launched its Harmonization Election Day Broadcast (HEDB) for peaceful elections in Kaduna state with a studio based marathon radio programme on the conduct of the presidential elections. This was a kind of retrospective look at the post election violence that rocked the state in 2011 and the country at large.

The Institute of Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) also contributed to the efforts towards peaceful elections. With the support of the UNDP, it organised an interfaith dialogue for peace and security in Northern Nigeria in Kaduna in September, 2014 to bridge the gap between Christians and Muslims on security and violence in the society. It also organised a Strategic Stakeholders Dialogue on Peaceful Elections: Ending Electoral Violence with the support of the UNDP in March, 2015 and carried out a Review of the National Peace Policy at a Peace and Security Forum in April, 2015. It also hosted the screening of the award winning film Selma to sensitize the people on the value of elections and the benefits of peaceful elections. Staff of the institute also served as resource persons at the many workshops, including those organised by NEMA to promote violence free elections.

Another initiative is a civil society conference on Elections with Integrity chaired by Cardinal John Onaiyekan and organised by a coalition of Nigerian NGOs under the umbrella of the Election Situation Room with the support of the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA). At the conference the participants expressed their concerns about the elections,

security, delays in registration and the heated rhetoric that is heightening tensions. In his remarks at the conference, Kofi Annan underlined the role that political actors, civil society, the security services and the general public have to play in ensuring that the elections are non-violent and acceptable to the people of Nigeria. He urged all stakeholders to make these elections about the issues rather than the personalities, or the identities of the candidates.

Many prominent individuals and organizations are contributing substantively to the promotion of peaceful conduct of the elections. For example, Nigerian music superstar, Innocent Idibia the launched the “Vote Not Fight: Election no be war,” under his 2Face. Foundation as a nationwide youth Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) campaign among others. The Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Human Rights Monitor Nigeria, Nigeria Women Trust Fund and the West African NGO Network (WANGONET) launched its 9ja Voter project.

The signing of two peace accords within three months underlines imperative for peace before, during and after the elections. President Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, and Maj-Gen Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress, APC, signed the first accord in Abuja on 14 January. Just before the presidential and National Assembly elections, on March 28, the National Peace Committee on the 2015 Elections invited Jonathan and Buhari for the second accord. The timing was important. Many Nigerians saw the contestants hugging themselves, days to the elections. In view of the over-heated campaigns, and pockets of violence in some places, a second accord was apposite. Preventing electoral violence requires the same kind of political maturity, the same kind of visibility and focused effort from a range of players, from government officials to security forces to civil society. It also requires coordination among all those interests for a collaborative sense of purpose within Nigeria's complex political context (Wilson and Liang-Fenton, 2014). .

### **The Impact of Peace Initiatives and Conflict Control Measures on the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria**

Giving us insight into the desired impact in his speech, during a sensitisation workshop themed: “2015 General Elections: Sensitization workshop on Non-Violence” Kofi Annan asked the contestants to avoid the use of inflammatory languages to underscore the need for the country to prove its big brotherly position in Africa and beyond with the election. “Aside

being the eighth largest exporter of oil, Nigeria has become a strong player in telecoms, agriculture and in banking. She is a major contributor to UN peace-keeping and is now at the UN Security Council. You can't abstain from voting and then complain." He urged, them to "focus on party policies and not on individuals, avoid inflammatory languages and the use of ethnicity and religion to gain political sympathies. "Nigeria doesn't want to repeat the experience of Kenya where violence took them back several years. 2015 will confirm Nigeria's progress in the eyes of the world. The stakes are high but I know Nigeria can rise to the challenge. Nigeria's success is Africa's success. Nigeria has the future of Africa in her hands. Make Africa proud."

Opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari won the presidential election with about 15 million votes while incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan who got about 12 million votes, conceded defeat on 31 March, even before the finally votes were counted. The decision of President Jonathan to concede defeat was probably the highlight of the efforts made by several stakeholders, domestic and international to ensure a peaceful election. Though it was the right thing to do, we must appreciate that should he have decided to contest the results or refused to accept the results, definitely there would have been violence across the land. The election marks the first time an incumbent president has lost re-election in Nigeria. And equally the first time a presidential election has gone without being challenged in the court of law. President Buhari observed to visiting Ghanaian President, who came to congratulate him on his electoral victory, that "Jonathan's action turned around Nigeria's nervous political process. His action actually doused tension and averted crisis in Nigeria."

It must be put on record that the conduct of the 2015 general elections, withstanding the pockets of violence experienced in some parts of the country went on peaceful thanks to the collective efforts of stakeholders who invested enormously in ensuring that the the elections were largely free, fair and credible and peaceful. The credit must go to the National Peace Committee led by the former head of state, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, for its role in keeping the major candidates, their political parties and supporters and the election umpire INEC , security agencies, the press and other stakeholders in check. It was indeed a unique and historic experience.

Cardinal Onaiyekan (2015) notes that:

For the first time in the history of election in Nigeria, we had a group that sat there ready, a group that was not just that of monitors and observers, but one that was there and somehow acquired an amount of authority, moral authority and was making it available to intervene. It became obvious that without that kind of a group there was such distrust between the two parties

## **Conclusion**

The 2015 general election witnessed the thickening ominous cloud pervading the Nigerian polity. The post election violence that greeted the announcement of the results of the 2011 elections was still fresh in the minds of Nigerians. Electoral violence should be recognized for what it is, a criminal and evil act, which pollutes the political process, damages social harmony, undermines socio-economic development and destroys life and property and inflicts pain in the psyche of the people. To forestall the reoccurrence of such ugly scenario, a lot of measures were put in place to ensure peace before, during and after the election. This was the first time such a proactive measure was put in place to forestall electoral violence and conflict. And it paid off handsomely.

The series of workshops, civil society sensitization and political education activities all work together to deliver a free, fair and peaceful election with a credible outcome acceptable to the people. An important dimension was the creation of a forum the political parties, candidates, civil society and all the stakeholders to meet and brainstorm on the effective means to conduct a credible election devoid of violence. Another major contribution was the signing of a an “ Peace Accord” by leading candidates in the election. The setting up of the National Peace Committee also gave merit to all the efforts being made by all groups and no doubt provided a conducive atmosphere for the elections and a kind of anchor for the political leadership in following through on commitments made in support of peaceful polls. It is the first time in Nigeria that the incumbent has lost election, yet conceded defeat. This singular act of statesmanship on the part of President Jonathan has raised his profile domestically and internationally and improved the standing of Nigeria globally as a reference point in democratic consolidation.

One major lesson from the peace initiatives during the 2015 general elections is that peace can only be gotten when its fought for! Members of the Peace Committee and the Civil

Society groups and development partners worked hard to achieve the peace that we had during and after the elections. Another lesson is that we can deploy this same initiative to other aspects of our national life to improve integrity in public service, create greater harmony and integration among the diverse people of the country and launch the country on a path of sustainable economic growth.

### **Recommendations**

In addition to our observations above and against the background of our national experience in dealing with electoral violence and the success of the efforts to promote violence free elections in the country, the following points are being suggested to ensure peaceful environment for future elections:

- First of all, there should be respect for the rule of law,
- Government should invest seriously in violence prevention measures and not leave it to NGOs and the development partners
- Electoral violence should be criminalized, because presently it is considered a sport, a kind of entertainment and perpetrators are treated with kid gloves and are protected by politicians and other influential people in society.
- There should be certainly of apprehension, prosecution and punishment for perpetrators of electoral violence.
- We should ensure that we don't allow politicians and people generally to give the impression that violence is part of the electoral and political process.
- We should ensure impartiality of electoral officials.
- Security officials should treat everybody and every group equally.
- We should improve and expand political and civic education to shape consciousness and improve awareness.
- The message of violence free elections should be carried to the places of worship and schools.
- NGOs, CBOs and all civic and religious organisations and traditional institutions should be involved in this campaign.

- We must preach acceptance of the election results. With a free and fair elections, it is possible to discourage the notion that any party that wins must have rigged.

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