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Youth Participation, Electoral Peace, Social Cohesion, and Sustainable Development: Implications for the 2027 Nigerian General Elections

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Abstract

Nigeria's persistent electoral violence reveals the disproportionate involvement of young people as both perpetrators and victims. Grounded in Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970) and Political Opportunity Theory (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam, 1996), this paper explains how socio-economic exclusion, unemployment, and blocked mobility generate youth grievances, while weak institutions and elite alignments create opportunities for their mobilisation during electoral cycles. Using qualitative analysis of secondary data, election reports, policy documents, and extant empirical studies, the study examines the nexus between youth participation, electoral peace, social cohesion, and sustainable development, particularly ahead of the 2027 general elections. It argued that structural marginalisation and patronage politics produce political marginality combined with political availability, enabling elite instrumentalisation of vulnerable youths. In this context, political elites strategically mobilise economically vulnerable youths as instruments of electoral contestation, thereby undermining democratic consolidation and long-term development outcomes. The paper reframed Nigerian youths as indispensable democratic stakeholders and proposes targeted institutional reforms to strengthen electoral integrity, inclusive participation, and social cohesion.

Keywords: 2027 elections; Democratic consolidation; Electoral violence; Social cohesion; Sustainable development; Youth participation

Résumé

La violence électorale persistante au Nigéria révèle l'implication disproportionnée des jeunes, à la fois comme auteurs et victimes. S'appuyant sur la théorie de la privation relative (Gurr, 1970) et la théorie des opportunités politiques (Tarrow, 1998 ; McAdam, 1996), cet article

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explique comment l'exclusion socio-économique, le chômage et les obstacles à la mobilité sociale alimentent le ressentiment des jeunes, tandis que la faiblesse des institutions et les alliances entre les élites favorisent leur mobilisation lors des cycles électoraux. À travers une analyse qualitative de données secondaires, de rapports électoraux, de documents politiques et d'études empiriques existantes, l'étude examine le lien entre participation des jeunes, paix électorale, cohésion sociale et développement durable, notamment en vue des élections générales de 2027. Elle démontre que la marginalisation structurelle et le clientélisme politique engendrent une marginalisation politique conjuguée à une disponibilité politique, permettant ainsi aux élites d'instrumentaliser les jeunes vulnérables. Dans ce contexte, les élites politiques mobilisent stratégiquement les jeunes économiquement vulnérables comme instruments de la contestation électorale, compromettant ainsi la consolidation démocratique et le développement à long terme. Cet article replace la jeunesse nigérienne au cœur de la vie démocratique et propose des réformes institutionnelles ciblées pour renforcer l'intégrité électorale, la participation inclusive et la cohésion sociale.

Mots-clés : élections de 2027 ; consolidation démocratique ; violence électorale ; cohésion sociale ; développement durable ; participation des jeunes

Introduction

Nigeria's democratic experience since the return to civil rule in 1999 has been plagued by persistent contradictions. These include regular conduct of elections alongside recurring electoral violence, weak public trust in institutions and fragile social cohesion. Elections, which are theoretically designed to facilitate peaceful political competition and accountability, have frequently become flashpoints for conflict, intimidation, and violence.

At the centre of this paradox lies the Nigerian youth population. With over 60 per cent of its estimated 200 million population under the age of 35, and those under 14 years accounting for more than 40% of this population, Nigeria is one of the youngest countries in the world. Not only do these numbers present a huge asset base for the country's future, but they are also liabilities with implications for education, health, and security. This demographic reality positions young people as a decisive electoral constituency and a critical force in political mobilisation. Yet, rather than being integrated as democratic actors, many youths experience chronic unemployment, political marginalization, and social exclusion. These conditions heighten their vulnerability to manipulation by political elites, especially during election periods. It is therefore critical that the country develops and executes the right strategy for harnessing the youth potential that abounds for the positive development of the country.

As Nigeria approaches the 2027 general elections, these structural challenges remain largely unresolved. Economic pressures, insecurity, digital misinformation, and declining institutional legitimacy combine to increase the risk of electoral instability. This paper substantially revises an earlier 2020 keynote intervention on youth, peaceful elections, and development, transforming it into a comprehensive academic analysis that is both contemporary and policy relevant. It asks: how can Nigeria reposition youth participation from a driver of electoral instability into a foundation for electoral peace, social cohesion, and sustainable development ahead of the 2027 elections?

Conceptualising Youth in the Nigerian Political Context

The concept of 'youth' is socially and institutionally constructed. In Nigeria, the National Youth Development Policy (2009) defined youth as citizens aged between 18 and 35 years, a categorisation that reflects prolonged socio-economic dependency and delayed access

to stable livelihoods. This definition is broader than that adopted by the United Nations (15–24 years) but is more reflective of Nigeria’s socio-economic realities.

The Nigeria Youth Policy (NYP) supports its categorization on the basis that it is “in line with the conditions and realities on the ground, especially historical and contemporary socio-economic and political conditions...” In addition, the Policy argues that although “young people in this age group ... are characterized by energy, enthusiasm, ambition, creativity, and promise; they are also faced with high levels of socio-economic uncertainty and volatility thereby becoming the most ... vulnerable segment of the nation’s population” requiring “social, economic and political support to realize their full potential.” (2nd National Youth Policy, 2009).

Scholars noted that young Nigerians embody a structural paradox: despite representing demographic strength and innovative potential, they are excluded from elite political networks and formal economic opportunities, leading to what has been described as political marginality combined with political availability (Abbink, 2005; Agbibo, 2013; Bekoe, 2012; Urdal, 2006). This phenomenon reflects broader structural inequalities in African politics, where excluded youth remain politically available for elite mobilisation (Bekoe, 2012; Urdal, 2006). In the Nigerian context, youths are simultaneously innovators and victims of political exclusion, a condition exploited by political actors due to their political availability (Agbibo, 2013; Osha, 2009).

Youths possess the numbers and energy for mobilisation but lack institutionalised channels for constructive participation. The #EndSARS protests of 2020 demonstrated the duality of Nigerian youth engagement. On the one hand, they revealed high levels of civic consciousness, digital mobilisation capacity, and cross-ethnic solidarity. On the other hand, the violent repression of protests and subsequent breakdown of order exposed weak state–society relations, low institutional trust, and the ease with which legitimate mobilisation can degenerate into violence in contexts of low social cohesion.

Elections and Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Elections are an important mechanism for advancing democratic progress and development in democratic societies. Their purpose is to provide the opportunity for citizens within a geo-political space to freely choose those whom they entrust with political leadership and the power to allocate the scarce values and resources within the political system. In addition, elections enable citizens to hold their political representatives accountable for their actions while in political office, as well as provide the basis for periodic power redistribution. Thus, elections are a major plank of democracy and the democratic processes, especially when they are conducted in a peaceful and transparent manner and are devoid of irregularities and violence. In such an environment, elections play an important role in enhancing political stability and deepening democratic growth in societies.

Regrettably, Nigeria’s experience with representative democracy has not been very smooth. The country has had its fair share of successes and failures, but perhaps one of the greatest challenges it has faced has been the recurring problem of electoral violence during elections. Nigeria’s high-stakes contests in which political office is closely linked to access to state resources, patronage networks, and personal security tend to heighten tensions during elections and, in many instances, lead to the breakdown of the electoral process and a surge in violence. This zero-sum logic has fueled intense competition and recurrent violence.

Election in Nigeria is dated to 1922 when the Clifford Constitution was introduced. However, the first recorded case of electoral violence in post-colonial Nigeria occurred during the 1964 elections when the Western Region became engulfed in massive violence following the outcome of the federal and regional elections, orchestrated by the rift between Awolowo

and Akintola. This first incidence of violence, often referred to as “operation wetie,” signaled the birth of violence in Nigeria’s electoral process. Northern Nigeria was also not spared from violence as supporters of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) and supporters of the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) and Action Group clashed. A series of events that followed these cases of conflict and violence were to lead ultimately to the first Military coup on January 15, 1966, and the collapse of the First Republic. Elections during the Second Republic (1979 and 1983) were similarly characterised by irregularities and violence, culminating in another military intervention on December 31, 1983.

In June 1993, another election adjudged to be the freest and fairest in Nigerian electoral history was annulled by the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. The annulment sparked off mass protests and violence across the country, paving the way for the protracted democratic struggle by various pro-democracy groups who sought to restore the mandate of Chief M.K.O. Abiola, the presumed winner of the election. This created much political instability in the country, marked by riots, political assassinations, and sanctions on Nigeria by countries that wanted to see Nigeria run a democratically elected government.

The tension in the land continued until the death of General Sani Abacha, the then Head of State, who had edged out Chief Ernest Shonekan, Head of the Interim National Government, the contraption that General Babangida had set up following the annulment of June 12 elections. Following, the death of Chief MKO Abiola, the presumed winner of the June 1993 elections in very mysterious circumstances. General Abdulsalami Abubakar took over the mantle of leadership and hurriedly organized a transition to civil rule on May 29, 1999, which ushered in the 4th republic with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as President of Nigeria.

Since the birth of the 4th republic in 1999, Nigeria has conducted six general elections. Although incremental improvements have been recorded, most notably in 2015 with the first civilian-to-civilian transfer of power, electoral violence has remained pervasive. Nigerian politicians seem to have learnt nothing from the past. Rather, their greed and quest for power have become heightened and rabid, leading to gross electoral irregularities and the weaponization of the electoral process to capture and retain political power. Characterized by weak enforcement of electoral laws, politicisation of security agencies, and protracted election litigation, a culture of impunity has been entrenched in the electoral process, and efforts to reform it have either been rejected or met with tokenism.

Regrettably, youths have been the pawns used by politicians to perpetrate all manner of electoral violence and havoc across multiple phases of the electoral cycle, including being used as political thugs, ballot box snatchers, and enforcers. Several studies have consistently identified young people as both the principal perpetrators and primary victims of election-related violence (Tounaregha & Uyabara, 2022). Such dual role often led to social exclusion (Ismail, 2021; Moliki & Atobatele, 2021; Omotayo, 2022), economic vulnerability, political marginalization, and lack of opportunities (Bekoe, 2012; Fjelde & Höglund, 2016). Together, these works reflect a consensus in the literature that election-related violence involving young people is shaped by structural exclusion, unemployment, marginalisation from political processes, and manipulation by political elites - conditions that make youth both key actors and victims in the cycle of electoral conflict.

Youth, Electoral Violence, and Democratic Consolidation: A theoretical Lens

Scholarly engagement with electoral violence in Nigeria has consistently identified youth as central actors, both as perpetrators and as victims, within the country’s Fourth Republic (Egobueze & Ojirika, 2017; Moliki & Atobatele, 2021; Omotayo, 2022). Existing literature attributes this pattern to structural inequality, elite manipulation, and weak institutions as key explanatory variables. However, these empirical observations are best understood when

situated within the Relative Deprivation Theory (Gurr, 1970) and the Political Opportunity Theory (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam, 1996).

Relative Deprivation Theory posits that political violence emerges when there is a perceived discrepancy between expectations and actual socio-economic realities (Gurr, 1970). In Nigeria, rising youth demographic strength contrasts sharply with high unemployment, limited access to political power, and restricted economic mobility. This gap generates grievances that heighten susceptibility to mobilisation. Studies by Bekoe (2012), Fjelde and Höglund (2016), and Ismail (2021) underscore how structural inequality and exclusion create conditions under which youths become both agents and casualties of electoral conflict.

Complementing this grievance-based explanation, Political Opportunity Theory emphasises how institutional openings, elite competition, and state weakness structure mobilisation (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam, 1996). Nigeria's patronage-driven political system, fragile electoral governance, and the central role played by the state in its selective use of security agencies in sustaining electoral violence, all converge to provide political opportunities that enable elites to instrumentalise youth networks during elections (Egobueze & Ojirika, 2017; Tounaregha & Uyabara, 2022). Where enforcement is weak and impunity prevails, the cost of violent participation is lowered, reinforcing cyclical mobilisation.

Egobueze and Ojirika (2017) argued that there is a complex nexus “between the State and the Youth, as well as Security apparatus, especially men of the Nigeria Police”, who seemed to be “at the heart of Nigeria's crisis of governance, particularly as manifested in electoral violence.” Both authors (Egobueze & Ojirika, 2017, pp 1-11) further posited that:

“To achieve their inordinate interest ...politicians manipulate the youths to accept them as the cornerstone for their survival in the State. They arm these youths with dangerous weapons to prosecute the elections in their favour. Those already in government use men of the Nigerian Police to chase their opponents and protect themselves in order to use the youths to unleash mayhem against their perceived enemies. These youths are hardly arrested nor detained for the havoc they may have caused. The youths, therefore, are at the heart of most violent conflicts in the country.”

The views of Egobueze and Ojirika aligned with the results of a study on Youths' Violence and Electoral Process conducted by Ogbeide (2012), which suggested that youths are perpetrators of 90-95% of violent conflicts in Nigeria. Similarly, studies by Human Rights Watch (2007, 2019) documented how political elites recruit and arm youths to intimidate opponents and manipulate electoral outcomes. The study by the Human Rights Watch also noted that many of Nigeria's ostensibly elected leaders obtained their positions by demonstrating an ability to use corruption and political violence to prevail in sham elections. In violent and brazenly rigged polls, government officials have denied millions of Nigerians any real voice in selecting their political leaders. In place of democratic competition, struggles for political office have often been waged violently in the streets by gangs of thugs - youths - recruited by politicians to help them seize control of power. Likewise, Inokoba and Maliki (2017) observed that democratic consolidation in Nigeria is contingent on the behaviour of political elites and the roles assigned to youths.

It is this point of convergence between deprivation and opportunity, that produces what scholars describe as political marginality combined with political availability. Youths remain excluded from formal decision-making structures yet are strategically accessible to political entrepreneurs. Moliki and Atobatele (2021) and Omotayo (2022) demonstrated that this dual condition explains why youths are mobilised for electoral violence and subsequently suffer insecurity, arrest, displacement, and long-term marginalisation. Furthermore, the broader

African literature reinforces this framework. For instance, Bekoe (2012) and Fjelde and Höglund (2016) have shown that electoral violence is more likely where political exclusion intersects with conditions of socio-economic disparity, disproportionately affecting young populations. Thus, youth involvement is not merely a behavioural outcome but is structurally embedded within governance deficits and institutional fragility.

Overall, the literature suggests that Nigeria's electoral violence cannot be divorced from the interaction between grievance (relative deprivation) and structural opportunity (political process dynamics). In this vein, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) have argued that economic grievance and opportunity structures jointly shape participation in political violence. Therefore, youth participation in electoral violence in Nigeria is neither accidental nor purely criminal; it is embedded within systemic exclusion, elite competition, and weak democratic consolidation. Here, we find a situation in which unemployment and poverty interact with patron–client politics to incentivize youth mobilisation for violence. This theoretical grounding provides a coherent lens for examining the implications of youth engagement for electoral peace, social cohesion, and sustainable development, particularly in the lead-up to the 2027 general elections.

Social Cohesion and Democratic Stability

Social cohesion has long been central to social science, originating in classical sociology, particularly in Émile Durkheim's work. Durkheim examined how pre-modern societies were held together through mechanical solidarity, a social order based on minimal division of labour and a shared collective consciousness. In such societies, strong kinship ties and social similarity, both material (work, housing, food) and non-material (beliefs, morals, and attitudes), produced common values. Durkheim termed this shared moral and normative framework as the collective conscience, widely regarded as the conceptual foundation of contemporary understandings of the term "social cohesion".

As societies industrialize and grow more complex, Durkheim argued that mechanical solidarity gives way to organic solidarity, grounded in acceptance of economic and social differentiation. In modern capitalist societies, an advanced division of labour produces specialized roles, individual autonomy, and diverse identities. Social cohesion is maintained not through sameness but through interdependence, as individuals rely on one another's functions. Consequently, social order allows the coexistence of differing values rather than enforcing uniformity. Under organic solidarity, law reflects formalized moral norms and emphasizes restitution over retribution, reinforcing cohesion within a differentiated and interdependent social system

Durkheim identified a transitional phase between mechanical and organic solidarity marked by social anomie, a condition of normlessness arising from the erosion of collective consciousness. During anomie, society lacks clear norms and values to regulate behaviour. He links this condition to industrialization, rising individualism, and secularization, which weaken traditional moral regulation and symbolic order. Despite this instability, Durkheim remained optimistic that advanced organic solidarity enables societies to overcome anomie by reconstituting shared norms, marking the completion of societal development and the restoration of social cohesion.

Social cohesion is both a key enabler and indicator of development in modern societies. It is usefully defined as the willingness of societal members to cooperate in order to survive and prosper, based on voluntary partnerships, mutual trust, and the equitable sharing of outcomes (Stanley, 2003). Such cooperation enhances social outcomes, including health and economic prosperity. Similarly, the OECD characterizes a cohesive society as one that promotes the well-being of all, combats exclusion and marginalization, fosters belonging and trust, and enables upward social mobility (OECD, 2011). The OECD further identifies three

core pillars of social cohesion: social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility. Social inclusion is undermined by income inequality, social capital derives from trust and civic engagement, and social mobility reflects opportunities for individuals to improve their social position. Recent developments in Nigeria, particularly the #EndSARS protests and subsequent violence, illustrate a deficit in social cohesion, marked by social fragmentation that is driven by severe income inequalities and weak social capital.

To bring it closer home, indigenous African philosophies such as the Ibibio concept of *Mboho* and the Zulu concept of *Ubuntu* closely approximate contemporary understandings of social cohesion. Both concepts emphasize shared humanity and interdependence, commonly expressed as “I am because we are,” reflecting a belief in a universal bond connecting all people. Eze (2010) explained *Ubuntu* as an affirmation of personhood achieved through recognition of others in their uniqueness and difference, where humanity is co-constituted through relational existence rather than individual isolation. In this view, personhood is dynamic and sustained through mutual recognition, responsibility, and shared creation of meaning. The Ibibio notion of *Mboho* similarly underscores solidarity, belonging, and collective responsibility, aligning with social cohesion as a connector among individuals and groups. Collectively, *Mboho*, *Ubuntu*, and social cohesion emphasize community belonging, relational ties, and mutual obligation. These frameworks also resonate with social cohesion’s developmental role in promoting social balance, economic dynamism, and national identity, while fostering equity, moderating unchecked economic growth, and preventing social fragmentation (Stanley, 2003).

In addition, both concepts of *Mboho* and *Ubuntu* are closely linked to the concept of social trust, a core facilitator of social cohesion. Larsen (2014) defined social trust as trust among citizens that enables societies to overcome collective action problems (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Rothstein, 2005). Drawing from the works of various scholars in contemporary sociological thinking (e.g. Möllering 2013, Frederiksen 2012, Reemtsma 2012, Barbalet 2009, Cook, Hardin et al. 2005, Hardin 2004), economics (Knack, Keefer 1997), and political science (Putnam, 1993), Larsen argued that in highly differentiated societies, social cohesion depends less on shared beliefs or values and more on a shared norm of mutual honesty, specifically, the expectation that citizens will not cheat one another.

In Nigeria, social cohesion is weakened by economic inequality, ethnic and religious polarization, regional disparities, and declining state legitimacy. Low trust in public institutions, especially electoral bodies, security agencies, and the judiciary, intensifies grievances during elections. Indigenous philosophies such as *Ubuntu* and *Mboho*, which emphasize shared humanity, mutual recognition, and collective responsibility, have been eroded by prolonged economic hardship and elite predation, deepening social fragmentation and political cynicism.

Sustainable Development and the Political Dimension

Despite multiple interpretations, the most widely accepted definition of sustainable development is that of the World Commission on Environment and Development in Our Common Future (Brundtland Commission, 1987). It defines sustainable development as meeting present needs without compromising future generations’ ability to meet theirs (p. 43). Though conceptually broad, this framework seeks to balance economic progress with long-term environmental protection and integrates environmental policy with development strategies (UNGA, 1987; Cerin, 2006; Dernbach, 1998, 2003; Stoddart, 2011). Notably, earlier scholars had already contested the notion of an inevitable trade-off between environmental sustainability and economic development.

Although scholarship often frames sustainable development around environmental–economic interactions, the Brundtland Commission’s definition adopts a broader conception of development encompassing social, economic, and political dimensions. Within this framework, development is understood as the full spectrum of human living, ensuring sustainability is not narrowly constrained. Central to this approach is intergenerational equity, emphasizing the conservation of resources for future generations as a distinguishing feature of sustainable development policy. The overarching goal of sustainable development is the long-term stability of both the economy and the environment, achievable only through the integrated consideration of economic, environmental, and social concerns, and critically, political factors, within the decision-making processes (Emas, 2015).

A toxic political environment undermines long-term economic and environmental stability and threatens intergenerational equity. Political instability and electoral violence hinder sustainable development by deterring investment, disrupting economic activity, and normalizing violence. The UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, emphasize credible elections and inclusive governance as essential for development. In this context, therefore, persistent electoral violence in Nigeria continues to impede progress across multiple SDGs.

Methodological Orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical methodology. It relies exclusively on secondary data, including peer-reviewed academic literature, election observation reports, policy documents, official statistics and publications by international organisations and civil society groups. Data were analysed thematically to identify patterns linking youth participation, electoral violence, social cohesion and development outcomes in Nigeria. The approach is appropriate given the study’s conceptual and policy-oriented objectives. Rather than testing hypotheses quantitatively, the paper synthesised existing evidence, contextualised historical patterns, and generated policy-relevant insights applicable to the 2027 elections.

Youths, Elections, Social Cohesion and Sustainable Development

At the heart of Nigeria’s pervading electoral crisis lies the critical link between youth participation, social cohesion, and sustainable development. Across Africa, youths have often been central to electoral violence, frequently mobilized by political elites to intimidate voters (Samuel, 2017). Studies have shown that about 60% of African elections between 1990 and 2008 experienced serious violence. In Zimbabwe, the 2008 parliamentary victory of the opposition MDC provoked brutal reprisals from the ruling ZANU-PF, including targeted assassinations and beatings, forcing the MDC leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, to withdraw from the presidential run-off, illustrating the destabilizing impact of politically manipulated youth violence.

In Nigeria, elections have often amplified existing social and regional tensions. Following Goodluck Jonathan’s 2011 victory, northern factional clashes resulted in over 800 deaths, fueled by perceptions that the predominantly Christian south was consolidating power amid economic disparities. In Akwa Ibom State, March 22, 2011, witnessed severe political violence during a rally between the then ruling PDP and opposition AC supporters. Over a dozen people were killed; and extensive property destruction occurred, including vehicles, tricycles, gas stations, homes, a school, campaign offices, and government vehicles, illustrating the destructive impact of politically motivated electoral violence (Egobueze & Ojirika, 2017).

Elsewhere, empirical studies across Africa show that youths are frequently mobilized by politicians to perpetrate electoral violence. For instance, youths involvement in political

violence is common in Uganda, South Africa, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Liberia, and Zimbabwe. In Bayelsa State, Nigeria, a study of 400 youths revealed that democratic consolidation depends on political elites fostering democratic values among youths, who are often used as instruments of violence (Inokoba & Maliki, 2017). Without a clear plan of intervention, this elite manipulation risks entrenching a cycle of political violence across generations of youths, perpetuating societal harm and undermining Nigeria's democratic development.

At the Mandela Foundation's 'Youth in Dialogue' event in Johannesburg (August 18, 2013), facilitator Mandla Sibeko asked 200 young South Africans if they felt alienated and whether they had the tools to lead the future. In his lecture delivered at the event, Dr. Mo Ibrahim emphasized that youths are Africa's largest demographic and voting bloc, and urged them to claim their future and participate actively in shaping it (Mandela Foundation, 2013). This message parallels Nigeria's context, where a large youthful population presents both opportunity and risk. The government and political elites must channel youth energy toward constructive civic engagement rather than electoral violence. The 2020 #EndSARS protests illustrated this dual potential: Nigerian youths demonstrated leadership, advocacy, and societal impact, yet the protest was also hijacked by hoodlums, revealing the destructive power of disengaged or misdirected youth, underscoring the critical need for deliberate youth empowerment and inclusion in governance.

The question before us is, why are the youths so vulnerable to being used to perpetrate electoral violence? While scholars cite godfatherism, party desperation, money politics, and foreign interference (Samuel, 2017) as the leading causative factors, the author takes a different view pointing towards other objective or material living conditions - poverty, hunger, economic inequality, and lack of education - as the central drivers of youth involvement in electoral violence. Disparities between social classes make lower-class youths particularly susceptible, as politicians exploit their frustrations and deprivation to achieve power. Elite children are rarely involved, highlighting that electoral violence is largely fueled by socio-economic marginalization rather than inherent youth aggression.

Disparities in living conditions in Nigeria undermine social cohesion, including its key elements of social integration, trust, and social capital. Cohesive societies are politically stable, economically competitive, and capable of sustainable growth, achieved through inclusive policies that share prosperity (Manca, 2014). A lack of cohesion prevents the consolidation of citizenship, exacerbates inequality, and fractures society. It also limits individuals' personal development and sense of belonging, weakening the balance between freedom, social justice, economic efficiency, equitable resource distribution, and pluralistic conflict resolution, ultimately constraining long-term societal stability and competitiveness.

Prevalence of electoral violence and the involvement of youths, though a consequence of lack of social cohesion also aggravates existing societal fragmentations and fissures, thereby threatening sustainable development in such societies. Not only will long-term stability be absent but the environmental conditions for decision making to take place will be seriously compromised. So, all are inter-linked – youths, elections, social cohesion, and sustainable development - feeding on and living off each other. Youth involvement in electoral violence therefore becomes a threat and virus to democratic growth in just the same way that it hinders youth development itself.

On the other hand, while lack of social cohesion and material disparities drive youth involvement in electoral violence, undermining development in the process, it creates a vicious cycle that further reinforces violence as a rational strategy for political participation. Conversely, meaningful inclusion of youths through employment, political education, and

institutional participation strengthens electoral credibility and democratic resilience, breaking the cycle of violence and fostering constructive political engagement.

Periscoping the 2027 Elections: Emerging Risks and Opportunities

The 2027 general elections will occur within a volatile context marked by economic pressures, insecurity, and digital transformation. Inflation, unemployment, and insecurity are likely to heighten political frustration, particularly among youths. Social media platforms are likely to be used to amplify mobilization and also facilitate disinformation and hate speech.

Institutional risks include declining trust in INEC, inconsistent application of electoral technology, and perceived judicial partisanship. Security challenges, ranging from insurgency, banditry, communal conflicts to full-blown terrorism, pose logistical and credibility risks to elections in several regions. Opportunities, nonetheless exist. Youth-led civic organisations, election observation networks, and digital advocacy platforms have expanded since 2019. If supported and protected, these initiatives can mitigate violence and promote electoral integrity.

Nigeria-Specific Policy Implications

The consolidation of democratic principles requires a peaceful political environment grounded in adherence to conflict-resolution norms and the active engagement of youth in governance. However, the Nigerian experience illustrates a persistent deviation from these ideals. Political violence and intimidation are frequently employed as shortcuts to power, with youth often mobilized as instruments of coercion rather than as agents of democratic growth. The widely cited assertion that “youth are the leaders of tomorrow” remains largely aspirational, as governance continues to be dominated by older elites who have persisted in power since independence or transitioned from military autocracy to civilian politics.

This structural imbalance undermines prospects for democratic deepening, social cohesion, and sustainable development. The socio-economic context compounds these challenges. According to the Brookings Institute, Nigeria overtook India in 2018 as the country with the highest number of individuals living in extreme poverty, with approximately 87 million citizens surviving on less than \$1.90 per day. Since then, poverty in Nigeria has continued to be severe and, by many measurements, has increased in absolute terms, with over 100 million Nigerians living in extreme poverty and well over 130 million below broader national poverty lines as of the mid-2020s. While India has markedly reduced extreme poverty, Nigeria remains among the world’s most affected countries, especially within sub-Saharan Africa. The trend is also replicated across Africa, with two-thirds of the global population in extreme poverty residing on the continent, a trend projected to rise. Such economic precarity exacerbates youth disillusionment, heightens vulnerability to political manipulation, and threatens social stability, underscoring the urgent need for sustained economic and social policy reforms.

Addressing these intersecting challenges requires comprehensive policy interventions.

- i. First, youth economic empowerment through robust support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is critical to reducing unemployment, mitigating inequality, and curbing the allure of violence as a political tool. The current trend where only children of politicians, top government officials, and other well-connected Nigerians get employed in choice parastatals and agencies like the NNPC, CBN, FIRS, Uniformed Services, Intelligence Agencies, the Armed Forces, etc. is simply unacceptable; and a juicy recipe for a more violent uprising by unemployed youths.
- ii. Second, political socialization programmes led by the National Orientation Agency in collaboration with educational institutions, civil society, religious organizations, and community structures can help neutralize the influence of ethnicity, religion, partisanship, and violence in political engagement.

- iii. Institutional reforms are equally imperative and the following are proposed:
 - a. Granting full autonomy to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), revisiting the Justice Uwais Committee recommendations, and establishing an Election Offences Commission will strengthen electoral integrity. To ensure INEC's independence, it is proposed that the Chairman of the Commission should be appointed through an elective process where the electors would comprise of "Members of the National Assembly, State Houses of Assembly and all serving Judges of the Supreme and Appeal Courts in Nigeria.
 - b. Enhancing judiciary independence through an empowered National Judicial Council and adopting electronic voting systems can further promote transparent and accountable elections.
 - c. Security sector reform, particularly the comprehensive restructuring of the Nigeria Police Force in response to movements such as #EndSARS, is essential for cultivating a responsive, disciplined, and citizen-centered law enforcement system.
- iv. Finally, broader structural reforms, including constitutional implementation, federal restructuring, corruption eradication, and addressing systemic socio-economic inequities, are critical to fostering social cohesion and sustainable development. Prioritizing youth inclusion, institutional autonomy, electoral transparency, and social justice provides a pathway to mitigate political violence, strengthen democracy, and advance Nigeria's development agenda.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that youth involvement in Nigeria's electoral violence is best understood through the combined lenses of Relative Deprivation Theory and Political Opportunity Theory. Drawing on Gurr's (1970) framework, the study demonstrated how socio-economic exclusion, unemployment, and blocked political mobility generate grievances among young people. However, grievance alone does not automatically produce violence. As Tarrow (1998) and McAdam (1996) suggest, mobilisation occurs where political opportunity structures—elite competition, institutional weakness, patronage networks, and security sector politicisation—create openings for collective action. In Nigeria, these opportunity structures have repeatedly enabled the instrumentalisation of structurally marginalised youths during electoral cycles.

Consequently, sustainable democratic consolidation in Nigeria requires more than security responses. It demands institutional reforms that reduce structural deprivation, expand youth political incorporation, strengthen electoral governance, enforce accountability, and rebuild social trust. As the 2027 general elections approach, integrating youths as constructive democratic stakeholders rather than instruments of elite contestation will be central to electoral peace, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

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