

**High Gains High Stakes, Make It or Break It: Theorizing the
Foundations of Electoral Violence in Africa**

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Abstract

Election is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Supposedly, such end would refer to resultant political goods, development, peace, and progress democratic societies are expected to enjoy. However, the observed spate of electoral fraud, violence, money bag politics, prebendalism, vote buying, among other factors continually undermine and sometimes overshadow the progress made in democratization efforts in Africa. While copious studies have highlighted the above factors as the bane of credible elections and threat to democratic consolidation in Africa, a deeper understanding of why these factors in the first place come into play in Africa's elections is further desired. This study, therefore asks the central question, "Why do African political actors invest enormous resources in elections and employ violence?" This article theoretically thus explains that the vast "access" political office holders have to state resources is the driving force behind the desperation to winning elections. Adopting Nigeria as the centrepiece of its argument, this work argues that achieving much gains on the front of Africa's democratic consolidation requires more than the strengthening of institutional frameworks for elections, as the ideology and perception of political actors towards the essence and acquisition of political power plays a very strong role in the overall engagement of these actors in electoral violence and other electoral vices. Consequently, it is suggested that political offices be made less attractive by ensuring that the gains of winning elections, and the disadvantages of losing them are reduced to avoid the violence that a winner-takes-all situation can trigger.

Keywords: *Democratization, Election in Africa, Theory of Access, Vote Buying, Electoral Violence, Political Corruption*

Introduction

Elections are the hallmark of representative democracy, allowing the people's regular input in choices about leaders and policy. Yet they are also competitive processes, which could unleash conflict and tensions that, if not constructively managed, could potentially destabilize the fabric of states and societies. Since the new wave of democratization in Africa in the early 1990s, elections have become a core ingredient of popular participation in the governance process. At the same time, elections have spawned conflicts and violence, and invariably scrambled ethnic and regional alliances that sometimes threaten the social order, economic development, and efforts to strengthen national integration.

Violence during elections has greatly undermined peaceful coexistence in many societies, as observed in the cases of Lesotho 1998 and 2007, Kenya 2007/2008, Zimbabwe 2008, Nigeria in 2011, and Ivory Coast 2010/2011. This could also culminate into revolutions leading to regime changes, as seen in Tunisia and Egypt from 2011–2012. Furthermore, countries like Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Guinea, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Uganda have also witnessed common scenario of low-intensity violence, widespread coercive intimidation of both candidates and voters including harassment, imprisonment and assassinations; violent riots and clashes between supporters or security elements of the competing political parties; and attacks on local party headquarters and party symbols (Adolfo et. al., 2012).

It is again observed that while so many African countries have so far made significant progress in the actualization of sustainable credible election and greatly consolidated on their democratization efforts, it is sad to note that many have significantly retrogressed lately. The resurfacing of violence, disruptions, diversion of voting materials, kidnapping of electoral officials, snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes, killings, and intimidation of voters

during the 2019 Kogi and Bayelsa States' gubernatorial elections in Nigeria again indicate a decline in the democratic consolidation efforts of such a country that has hitherto made notable progress. Among the dastardly acts recorded during the Kogi State election was the murder of the PDP women leader, who was burnt alive in her residence by political thugs.

While studies have been dedicated to the discourse of the causes of electoral violence in Africa, most studies largely focus on the institutional dimension of the topic with little consideration on the attitudinal perspective, which in itself is a product of the prevailing dynamics of the African socio-cultural, economic and political setup.

This study therefore presents further arguments to extend the viewpoints of existing literature concerning the influence of the gains of politics on exhibited desperation for power. This work formulates an explanation on the interrelatedness of the high gains that accompany political positions and how these gains attract high stakes (for the attainment of such positions), thus cumulating into fierce contests, especially in a winner-takes-all circumstance. By introducing a 'theory of access', the work extends the viewpoint of the 'gains of politics' by presenting arguments that transcend the official emoluments of political officeholders.

Theoretical Arguments

The discourse on the causes of electoral violence in Africa has attracted a series of explanations and perspectives. Scholars have identified several structural and institutional factors as the bane of peaceful and credible elections in Africa. In most of these studies, the role and activities of Election Management Bodies have been observed to be key variables in the occurrence of violence. It has also been argued that election fraud, high probability of regime change, low GDP per capita, illiberalism and

majoritarian electoral rules cause a higher risk of electoral violence (Forsberg, 2018).

For instance, Norris (1997), Birch (2007), Fjelde & Hoglund (2014) considered the consequences of “electoral engineering”, or how an electoral system can mitigate or encourage the use of violence based on how groups in society end up represented. Violence is not the only dimension affected by the choice of electoral system. Just as pointed out in Norris (1997) that “electoral rules are not neutral.” In her paper, she compared the advantages and disadvantages of different types of electoral systems. She highlights some now well-known facts that majoritarian systems can manufacture majorities in legislative bodies with only small swings in the percentage of the votes grabbed by parties.

Similarly, with cross-national data on electoral violence in Sub-Saharan African elections between 1990 and 2010, Fjelde and Hoglund (2014) develop and test a theory that links the use of violent electoral tactics to the high stakes put in place by majoritarian electoral institutions. In their work, they argue that electoral violence is more likely in countries that employ majoritarian voting rules and elect fewer legislators from each district. Majoritarian institutions are, as predicted by theory, particularly likely to provoke violence where large ethno-political groups are excluded from power and significant economic inequalities exist.

However, beyond the roles electoral systems could play in triggering electoral violence, this work tries to formulate explanations that further establish correlations among the (gains) benefits that accompany holding political positions, the stakes of attaining such positions and the resultant fierce contests.

As a guide, I hereby present the following assumptions

1. In countries where there is unbridled ‘access’ to state resources (exposed to political corruption), the ‘gains’ of winning elections are high.
2. When such gains are high, the stakes of winning such elections are consequently also high.
3. Where the stakes are high - especially in a winner takes all situation -, the process of emerging as winner thereby becomes fiercely contested.

Analysing the ‘Gains’ through a Theory of ‘Access’

When discussing the gains of winning elections and holding political offices in Africa, pundits and studies have commonly focused on the monetary value officially accruable to the officeholder. For example, Onuigbo et al. (2017) and Onyishi & Eme (2013) in their studies showed how the huge emolument payable to government officials have attracted unhealthy rivalry for political power. This is mostly the case because countries where over 70 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty, politics is seen as an escape route from poverty. Evidently, over the decades, African politicians and other public office holders have promoted ostentatious lifestyles not been mindful of the sufferings of the masses. In most cases, those who win state power can have all the wealth they want even without working, while those who lose the struggle for state power cannot have security in the wealth they have made even by hard work. The capture of state power inevitably becomes a matter of life and death. That is one reason why our politics is so intense, anarchic and violent”

Again, Onuigbo et al. (2017) argued that elected representatives of the people at the local, state and federal levels of government earn higher wages and allowances more than their counterparts in the developed countries. Hence, the struggle for political power through any means becomes inevitable in Nigeria’s political space.

However, the ‘gains’ I refer to in this work transcend the official emoluments accruable to political officeholders. This is largely because while there is empirical evidence to show that politicians in countries at risk or found to experience violent elections are actually ranked top among countries with high earning politicians, yet, the correlation between high official earning and fierce contest is not strong enough for an outright assertion. Again, as I would be discussing later in the work, I also observed that the stakes (resources invested in contesting elections) in most of the countries at risk of electoral violence sometimes supersede what is officially accruable to the eventual winner during his/her lifetime in office.

At this stage, I reflect on the gains of politics further to include those untold, off-record, unofficial, non-monetary and illegal benefits gained as a product of the possession of authority, hence, unbridled ‘*access*’ to state resources. Here, I consider “access” as the ability to benefit from things - including material objects, persons, institutions, and symbols. In this work, I clarify that access defers from property in that access focuses on *ability* rather than *right*.

Although, the *theory of access* as largely developed by Ribot and Peluso (2003) has been frequently used by property and natural resources analysts, with little or no significant adoption in the social sciences. The theory generally examines a broad set of factors that are viewed heuristically as strands that constitute and configure webs of access. The theory intends to enable scholars and others to map dynamic processes and relationships of access to resources. The concept of access that is presented here aims to facilitate grounded analyses of who essentially benefits from things and through what processes they can do so (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Access retains an empirical “focus on the issues of *who* does (and who does not) get to use *what*, in *what ways*, and *when* (that is, in what circumstances)” (Neale

1998:48). “Use” according to this theory can be seen to mean the enjoyment of some kind of benefit or benefit stream (Hunt 1998).

However, people and institutions are positioned differently in relation to resources at various historical moments and geographical scales. The strands thus shift and change over time, changing the nature of power and forms of access to resources. Some people and institutions control resource access while others must maintain their access *through* those who have control (hence, decamping, cross-carpeting and other forms of migration from one party to another, and other forms of realignment with political lords). Access analysis also helps us understand *why* some people or institutions benefit from resources, *whether or not* they have rights to them. This is a primary difference between analyses of access and property. If the study of property is concerned with understanding claims, particularly the claims that MacPherson (1978) defines as rights, then “the study of access is concerned with understanding the multiplicity of ways people derive benefits from resources, including, but not limited to, property relations” (Ribot and Peluso, 2003).

Considering the analyses of ‘access’ above, it is a clear notion that while official emoluments and other legal entitlements can be categorized as ‘property’ (as in those benefits acquired based on rights), every other benefit which transcends claims or rights (based on ability) can be regarded as ‘access’. Access in this sense is about all possible means by which a person can benefit from things, while property generally evokes some kind of socially acknowledged and supported claims or rights

Nevertheless, in some cases, access (ability to benefit) can be used to further create properties, which would afterward be benefitted as claims/rights. These benefits are mostly legalized and made formal as a product of the possession of state power. This becomes evident in cases of legislation for

jumbo pay, provision for immunity, salary for life, hefty retirement packages among other cases. For instance in Nigeria, though ostensibly legal, federal legislators' excessive salaries, allowances, and other benefits - amounting to \$540,000 per lawmaker in 2017 - are also seen by many Nigerians as akin to corruption. Top officials also receive generous retirement packages (Page, 2018). Another case that easily comes to mind is the crisis between the incumbent governor of Zamfara and his predecessor, relating to the stoppage in the payment of pension and other allowances for former governors and their deputies. The former governor, Abdul'aziz Yari had assented to a bill in March 2019 (barely 2months to the end of his tenure) legitimizing the payment of bogus pension and other outrageous allowances, which according to records amount to over N700million annually (Maishanu, 2019).

Beyond Zamfara, other states in Nigeria have also previously legislated for hefty severance packages for ex-governors and their deputies. In line with the foregoing, a January 2017 report calculated that "over N37.36 billion was expended on servicing 47 former governors in 21 of the nation's states as pension payments and provision of houses, staff, and motor vehicles replaceable between three and four years" (The Guardian, 2019).

In preparation for elections, 'accesses to resources differs among political parties and candidates, and as such shapes political competition and influences the balance of power between parties. Candidates that are well funded are likely to defeat opponents who have less money. The amount of money in a candidate's war chest can determine victory or defeat (Weeks, 2008). For example, where a party in government has access to administrative resources, the opposition parties need more money to compensate for their disadvantage. This access overly includes public subsidies, which can take a variety of forms, including tax breaks, free access to public services including airtime, access to public buildings, provision of

goods and allocation of financial resources. All of these no doubt have a considerable impact on political competition.

In another case, Speck & Olabe (2013) argued that elected officeholders use their influence on civil service to arrange for donors, who in the long run earn contracts, get access to public loans or earn other benefits. This involves undue political influence on public service and unlawful behaviour of public servants involved in public procurement, licensing, permissions or other areas where companies expect illegal favours in return for campaign donations.

The foreseeable 'access' to tangible and intangible benefits consequently gives rise and encourages clientelistic exchanges. These clientelistic exchanges just as Berenschot (2018) suggested, involve the practice of exchanging a targeted, non-policy-based provision of money and state resources (jobs, public services, government contracts, etc.) for political support (such as votes, campaign funding, and campaign support).

With the foregoing, political offices thereby provide winners the opportunity to gain 'access' to political power, state resources (tangible and intangible), patronage, immunity against investigation (especially executives) to mention a few. Consequently, considering the predictable 'access' to these benefits, elective positions thereby provoke intense competition among political parties and candidates, as well as intense use of resources in ensuring victory.

Examining the notion of 'Access' in Corrupt Systems: the Nigerian Example

The political and economic opportunities available in different political systems, as well as the strength and effectiveness of state, social and economic institutions, shape the conditions and extent to which individuals and groups utilize 'access'. While many developed societies boast of strong systems capable of mitigating the challenges of misuse of this 'access',

societies with weak systems are bedevilled by events of leakages caused by the weak separation of the public and private spheres, which results in the widespread private appropriation of public resources and benefits.

In this context, one word that best captures the description of the relationship between public power and personal gain is ‘corruption’. This is because, in its simplest form, corruption can be seen as the “misuse of public power for private or political gain.” The notion of “misuse” here is sacrosanct in defining what a corrupt act is, and as such re-establishes the place of ‘access’.

Over time, public offices have served as a virile platform for the advancement of corruption in Nigeria, as corruption in the country appears to be ubiquitous and takes many forms: from massive contract fraud to petty bribery; from straight-up embezzlement to complicated money laundering schemes; from pocketing the salaries of non-existent workers to steering plum jobs to relatives and friends. The enormity of this prompted Page (2018) to identify twenty-eight corruption tactics in eight behavioural categories that cut across sectors.

In Nigeria, there are myriad of cases relating to how elected public officials illegally amass wealth, and through several means and strategies. It was therefore not surprising in 2006 when Nuhu Ribadu (a former anti-corruption warlord) famously told the Senate that the EFCC was investigating 31 of the 36 state governors for graft and declared the names of some of the governors who would be prosecuted after they left office (*THISDAY*, 2006).

Among the most pronounced cases were those of former Governor of Bayelsa State, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, who was arrested in September 2005 by British authorities in London. The London Metropolitan Police found about £1 million in cash at his home and charged him with money laundering. Later they found a total of £1.8m (\$3.2m) in cash and bank accounts. He was found to own four homes in London worth an alleged £10

million (*Fitzgibbon, 2016*). Meanwhile, his state's monthly federal allocation in six years (of his reign) has been in the order of £32 million. Released on bail, Alamieyeseigha managed to flee the UK - reports say he disguised as a woman - and reappeared in his home state, claiming he had been transported there by God (*Polgreen, 2005*). As a sitting governor, he enjoyed immunity from prosecution in Nigeria, but three months later, he was impeached by his state legislature, and the EFCC charged him with embezzling about \$55 million in public funds (*Ahemba, 2005*).

Similarly, in December 2007, the EFCC stunned Nigeria by arresting James Ibori, the powerful former governor of Delta State, in the oil-rich Niger Delta. On 27 February 2012, accused of stealing US\$250 million from the Nigerian public purse, Ibori pleaded guilty to ten counts of money laundering and conspiracy to defraud at Southwark Crown Court, London. Again, former Edo State governor, Lucky Igbinedion was charged by EFCC prosecutors in January 2008 with siphoning off more than \$25 million of public funds, which he pleaded guilty to as well.

It is a culmination of these cases among others that birthed the assertion by the Attorney General and Minister of Justice Abubakar Malami that “from 2000 to 2013, over US 7 trillion in illicit flows from corruption and embezzlement transited the country” (*Nnochiri 2016*).

Most of these monies are never directly transferred or flown into their private accounts, rather such monies are stated for some purposes which they are never utilized for such rather than for phantom projects, contracts, and interventions. Just like what happened under Gen. Sani Abacha administration when large amounts were taken out of the CBN under the guise of financing ECOMOG, the West African peace-keeping force. Lots of these funds are raised and tagged for public use, which are afterward diverted for personal use.

Another major scandal, which stands out as an apposite illustration of how public office holders access public funds and resources, which are eventually syphoned and utilized for private gains, is the case of a former National Security Adviser, Sambo Dasuki who faces prosecution over a \$2 billion arms fraud. Preliminary investigation suggested that about \$2 billion was disbursed for the procurement of arms to fight against Islamic insurgency in Nigeria, but was however diverted for the sponsoring of the re-election of Goodluck Jonathan, the former President of Nigeria. Reports showed how this money was distributed among party chieftains and loyalists of the PDP in preparation for the 2015 presidential election (Premium Time, 2015; The Nation, 2015; Vanguard News, 2015).

The Stakes

In Nigeria, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) specified in section 225 (1-6) conditions and scrutiny of the sources of funds and expenses of political parties. Section 225 (3) (a) and (b) as well as 225 (4) forbid political parties from foreign funding of any kind. Section 226 (1-3) demands annual reports of accounts from political parties. More so, the Electoral Act (2010) stipulates the upper limit of expenses by candidates and political parties for specific elective positions. The maximum limits are pegged at: N1,000,000,000 (naira) for presidential candidates, N200,000,000 for governorship candidates, and N40,000,000 and N20,000,000 respectively for Senate and House of Representatives candidates.

In Nigeria, in preparation for 2019 general elections, political parties in the country announced procedures of how party aspirants would obtain the various party forms. According to details released by the All Progressive Congress (the country's ruling party), the cost of the nomination and expression of interest forms for the office of the President is N45m. Those seeking the party's nod to contest the Governorship seat will pay N22.5m,

while aspirants to the Senate and House of Representatives seats were asked to pay N7m and N3.850m respectively and State House of Assembly N850,000.

On the other hand, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (a major opposition party) announced that presidential aspirants would be charged N12m; Governorship N6m; Senate N4m; House of Representatives N1.5m; and House of Assembly N600,000. For the All Progressive Grand Alliance, presidential aspirants will pay N25m; Governorship N10m; Senate N5m; House of Representatives N2.5m; and State House of Assembly N1m (see table 1 below).

In reality, there is no justification for the high cost of nomination forms, rather, such high cost is meant to strategically serve as hindrance to financially lightweight aspirants.

Table 1; Cost of Party Forms for the 2019 General Election

Office	APC			PDP			APGA		
	Expression of Interest Form	Nomination Form	Total	Expression of Interest Form	Nomination Form	Total	Expression of Interest Form	Nomination Form	Total
Presidential	N5 million	N40 million	N45 million	N2 million	N10 million	N12 million	N5 million	N20 million	N25 million
Governorship	N2.5 million	N20 million	N22.5 million	N1 million	N5 million	N6 million	N2 million	N8 million	N10 million

Senate	N1 millio n	N6 millio n	N7 millio n	N500, 000	N3.5 millio n	N4 millio n	N1 million	N4 millio n	N5 millio n
House of Rep	N350, 000	N3.5 millio n	N3.85 millio n	N500, 000	N1 millio n	N1.5 millio n	N500,0 00	N2 millio n	N2.5 millio n
House of Assembl y	N100, 000	N750, 000	N850, 000	N100, 000	N500, 000	N600, 000	N200,0 00	N800, 000	N1 millio n

Source; Ayitogo (2018); Ezea (2018);

It must be said that Nigeria (just like many other African democracies) faces formidable obstacles ahead if our politics continues to be driven by “cash-and-carry” politicians. A level playing field for all political aspirants is what sustains democracies around the world. Political offices are duties to be done, not prizes to be won by those who can afford the highest asking price. Among the very huge implications this would have on sustainable democracy is that the young aspiring candidates would not afford to contest without the negotiations and support godfathers who are readily available to provide the resources needed and recouped in multiple folds.

Moreover, purchasing the interest and nomination forms is not final, as aspirants would have to jostle for the party final tickets. In most of the popular parties, there are reports of how delegates are been bought over and huge monies expended to secure their votes. Again, vote buying has emerged as a big threat to credible elections in Nigeria. Oftentimes, this brazen attempt to sway voters’ choice by offering them incentives have come in several styles and nomenclatures. For instance, Olorunmola (2016) noted a former Governor of Ekiti State, when questioned on his decision to share food items and meals on an election day, he regarded the act as a kind gesture targeted at addressing the “stomach infrastructure” of the voters.

Having invested huge funds, candidates and their supporters have only one mindset: to win the election and win at all costs. Most importantly, in a winner takes all situation, there are huge threats and fears of losing. The candidates and sponsors are not prepared to lose the huge resources invested in the process. Therefore, elections become prone to violence, fraudulent practices and all forms of irregularity. They explore every available means, including violence, intimidation and vote buying, as well as rigging to ensure victory. Most electors stay away from voting to keep safe, consequently, amounting to low voter turnout. In such a scenario, the outcome of elections hardly reflects the wishes of the electorates. Election credibility becomes a difficult objective to attain no matter the professional competence of the Election Management Body

Conclusion

This work attempts to provide alternative explanations to why many elections spark violence. While the arguments and assumptions in the work might not be universally applicable, it however, appears resilient in explaining the prevailing nature of election violence in most African countries and other developing democracies. There is absolutely the need for more rigorous empirical examination especially for country-specific case studies, as this work stimulates new frontiers in the discourse, analyses, and understanding of the attitudinal dimensions of electoral violence in Africa.

Although in Africa, there seems to be an avalanche of problems impeding her development, however, violence, corruption, ethnic and religious bigotry top these issues. It is to this end that this work made frantic efforts to create links between political corruption, high stakes in elections and electoral violence.

In line with series of recommendations that have been previously made in other studies, charters, election observation reports as solutions proffered to

mitigate the menace of electoral violence in Africa, this study holds that there is the need for institutional strengthening to reduce leakages and promote transparency in governance. The work holds that the presence of leakages in the governance and the absence of transparency cumulatively engender higher gains in politics, thus making politics a very lucrative business in the society.

It is therefore suggested that political offices be made less attractive (as politics is viewed as investment upon which the investors will expect to recoup both his capital and interest) by ensuring that the gains of winning elections, and the disadvantages of losing them are drastically reduced to avoid the violence that a winner-takes-all situation can generate.

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