



## IMPACT OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE ON ELECTION VIOLENCE – THE CASE OF 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract:

The vision of every nation going through a nascent democracy is to have a seamless electioneering process that would produce credible and effective leaders who reflect the will of the people. However, this may not always be so, as the exercise may be fraught with violence. This qualitative narrative research examines the impact of substance abuse on election violence with particular reference to the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Data collection was done through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in two homogenous groups of participants comprising ten (10) males and females in each group from Makurdi, Nigeria. Participants were briefed, and they filled out the consent form to show willingness to participate. They were aged between 26 and 63 years and had voted in the 2023 elections. A set of written question statements guided the discussions to direct the sessions by the interviewer, while two reporters recorded the responses of the participants. Responses were retrospective and experiences were based not only on what was witnessed in the participants' polling stations but also on scenes from the electronic and social media. Discussions confirmed different forms of violence and that these were largely carried out by the young people and fuelled by the political elites. Both groups attested to the increase of substance use and abuse during elections but differentiated types along rural and urban lines, with alcoholic beverages being more in use in the rural and synthetic drugs more popular in the urban, but also opined that marijuana use cuts across the divide. They agreed that consumption of psychoactive substances could have aided in physical and verbal violent actions like kidnapping, fighting, macheting, killing, stuffing and snatching of ballot boxes, abuses, threats, and the like. They suggested that families, schools, communities, and government should work hard to educate voters on the need for a violence-free election and to contain the excessive use of psychoactive

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substances, especially during elections. Finally, the need to prosecute election offenders to deter others from indulging in the same was reiterated.

**Keywords:** substance abuse, election violence, general elections

## 1. Introduction

Nigeria, a large society with a population exceeding 200 million and approximately 500 ethnic groups (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022), is often described as a deeply divided state. National issues in Nigeria are frequently interpreted and shaped along identity lines such as religion, ethnicity, class, gender, and language. These identity patterns have historically influenced the country's political system. Scholars trace the origins of these divisions to the colonial era, when the British leveraged these patterns to implement a divide-and-rule strategy (Ikelegbe, 2019).

Historically, elections in Nigeria have been plagued by controversies, grievances, violence, and fraud, leading to widespread dissatisfaction (Igbuzor, 2010; Osumah & Aghemelo, 2010). Ekweremadu (2011) notes that electoral disputes in Nigeria have been characterized by increasing bitterness and national controversies, primarily due to the persistent issues of violence and fraud (Ukpong & Udoh, 2023). Electoral irregularities in Nigeria are not new. They date back to the pre-independence era and have remained a significant challenge in the country's democratic journey (Alfa *et al.*, 2020). Even during the colonial period, elections were marred by manipulations and malpractices, with historical evidence indicating that British colonial authorities engaged in election rigging (Yusuf, 2016).

Grace *et al.* (2023) analysed democracy and Nigeria's 2023 general elections, considering a wide range of variables that influenced both the electoral process and its outcomes. Over the past few decades, Nigeria has experienced significant strides in democratic practices. Democracy, as a system of governance, allows citizens to select their leaders through free and fair elections. These elections serve as the cornerstone of democracy, offering citizens the opportunity to decide who governs them. The ability of the people to participate in free and fair elections distinguishes democracy from other forms of government. The 2023 general election marked the seventh in the series of elections held since Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999. However, democracy in Nigeria has been shaped by the complexities of its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, a history of military interventions, and limited economic development.

The pattern of electoral malpractices persisted through the 1964 General Elections and has continued across various political eras, including military and civilian administrations. Influential politicians have consistently exploited these practices to manipulate election outcomes, disregarding the people's will and exacerbating political tensions, violence, and crises in the country (Yusuf, 2016). These challenges have significantly impacted governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, leading to widespread

insecurity, corruption, weak democratic institutions, lack of internal democracy within political parties, and threats to democratic principles (Uzoanya, 2023).

The 2023 General Elections in Nigeria have particularly attracted scholarly attention due to pervasive irregularities and malpractices that hindered the democratic process. Numerous fraudulent activities, such as harassment of candidates' agents and voters, result in inflation, ballot box snatching, political assassinations, unauthorized result announcements, vote-buying, and election rigging, dominating the electoral landscape (Abdu-Raheem & Bamgbade, 2023). Alarming, these issues are no longer surprising as they have become normalised, deeply embedded in Nigeria's electoral history since independence. These persistent trends undermine democratic principles and raise critical concerns about the credibility of Nigeria's electoral system (Obiagu, 2023; Obiagu & Abada, 2023). This raises the question of whether such behaviours could be linked to the influence of hard drug use among perpetrators or victims. Drugs are substances essential for maintaining human health and should only be used under medical supervision. However, abuse occurs when drugs are taken without a doctor's prescription or consumed excessively, either persistently or sporadically.

According to Obanya (2015), drug abuse encompasses activities such as smoking cigarettes, marijuana, and Indian hemp, as well as consuming tramadol or other substances without medical advice. It also includes using drugs alleged to boost memory or energy. Currently, drug dependence among Nigerian youths is rising, transforming Nigeria from being a drug-consuming nation to a drug-producing one. Youths from affluent backgrounds increasingly associate with the so-called 'big boys' involved in heroin and cocaine use. Meanwhile, substances such as Indian hemp, methamphetamine, and codeine-laced tablets—readily available in Nigeria—are predominantly abused within schools (Okolo, 2022). Like in many other countries, Nigerian youths are developing addictions to psychoactive substances, adversely affecting the nation's economy. Drug abuse among electorates during elections has become a source of embarrassment to parents, educational institutions, INEC, the government, and society at large (Ogeze & David, 2023).

Fareo (2012) investigated drug abuse among Nigerian adolescents and proposed strategies for addressing the issue through counselling. She concluded that drug abuse is a global concern affecting both individuals and governments. Adolescents, often unaware of its dangers, are the most affected. Many turn to drug abuse due to frustration, poverty, lack of parental supervision, peer pressure, or the pursuit of pleasure. However, she suggested that implementing effective counselling programs could help mitigate the problem. In 2012, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) collected data on drug use and abuse from schools, mental health institutions' records of drug-related patient admissions, and interviews with individuals arrested for drug offenses. The findings revealed that youths are a high-risk group for drug trafficking and abuse in Nigeria. Approximately 90% of the influence leading to the use and abuse of psychoactive substances was attributed to friends and schoolmates. Although alcohol and cigarettes

are legal substances in Nigeria, they are often referred to as “gateway drugs” to more potent substances like heroin and cocaine.

Yahaya (2019) noted that the effects of drug addiction and abuse are profoundly devastating and shameful, causing concern among both Nigerian and international organisations. The consequences include mental disorders, school dropouts, cultism, social violence, internet fraud, gang formation, disruptions of academic activities, armed robbery, the “419” syndrome, social miscreants (“area boys and girls”), youth lawlessness, disrespect for elders, rape, sudden death, and the loss of innocent lives and senses. Drug and substance abuse is a serious social issue attracting attention from researchers, governments, organisations, law enforcement, and other stakeholders. The prevalence of drug use during elections and beyond has risen globally, with approximately 0.9% of the world’s population reported as drug users (Ritchie & Roser, 2018). In Nigeria, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018) estimated that about 14.3 million Nigerians or 14% of individuals aged 15 to 64, use illicit substances. Substances such as marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, tramadol, and alcohol are commonly consumed to boost confidence and facilitate daily activities. For instance, the Kaduna State Bureau for Substance Abuse, Prevention, and Treatment (KADBUSA) reported an increasing trend of drug use, with around 10% of residents using illicit drugs (Ebije, 2020).

Drug abuse exacerbates social problems during elections, such as fighting, violent assaults, ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, and threats to life. Individuals often use drugs to achieve euphoria, defy laws, enhance sexual experiences, and improve academic performance. Research indicates that alcohol, cannabis, heroin, and cocaine are among the most dangerous drugs consumed in Nigeria, with marijuana surprisingly perceived as less dangerous than tobacco (Paranjape, 2019). The consequences of drug abuse are severe, affecting individuals’ health, mental capacity, social and economic status, families, and communities (Neupane & Kapali, 2023).

Siro (2014) highlighted that individuals under the influence of drugs often engage in risky and dangerous behaviours, particularly during elections, which can lead to conflicts with authorities, loved ones, and society. These behaviours are often coping mechanisms for stress and depression. Interestingly, several countries too, including Mexico, the United States, Spain, Colombia, Argentina, Jamaica, South Africa, Peru, Thailand, Zimbabwe, Costa Rica, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, have legalized the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana cigarettes for recreational, religious, and health purposes (Pal, 2021). Scientific research has even demonstrated marijuana’s potential to safely treat diseases like arthritis and diabetes (Paranjape, 2019).

## **2. The 2023 General Elections in Nigeria**

The 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections were marred by several electoral malpractices, including rigging, underage voting, vote-buying, the destruction of ballot papers, killings, delays, disenfranchisement, result cancellations, poor logistical

arrangements, the failure of the BVAS system to upload results, and widespread violence (Udenta *et al.*, 2024). These events stood in stark contrast to the provisions set forth in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended in 2011. According to Section 133 of the Nigerian Constitution, it clearly outlines that:

*“A candidate for an election to the office of the president shall be deemed to have been duly elected to such office where being the only candidate nominated for the election- (a) he has a majority of YES over NO votes cast at the election; and (b) he has not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the States in the federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, but where the only candidate fails to be elected in accordance with this section, then there shall be fresh nominations.”*

The analysis of the constitution reveals potential compromise within INEC's operations. The candidate declared the winner by INEC appears not to have been duly nominated, lacked the majority due to alleged massive rigging (Omotoso, 2019; Oluwagbohunmi, 2020), and failed to secure victories across all states, including the Federal Capital Territory. To begin, it is important to define and clarify key concepts, as this will enhance understanding (Ogeze & David, 2023). Elections, as the only recognised and legitimate method of selecting leaders in democratic societies, hold significant importance. Electoral bodies are therefore mandated to conduct elections that are credible, accessible and fair. These processes must adhere to principles of accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. To fulfil this mandate, the National Electoral Commission must ensure these principles are upheld (Akokuwebe, 2017; Aksom, 2023).

Adhering to these principles is crucial for peaceful transitions of power and sustaining citizens' trust in the electoral process. To enhance the integrity of the 2023 general elections, sections 47 and 50 (2) of the new Electoral Act 2022 introduced digital technologies such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing (IREV) Portal. Despite these advancements and INEC's assurances of free and fair elections, the process faced challenges. These included vote buying, electoral fraud, ballot box snatching, voter suppression, technical failures of the BVAS, and widespread violence (Witesman, 2016; Ugwu, 2023). INEC's inability to deliver a credible election as promised raised doubts about its reliability and jeopardized the sustainability of representative governance. The lack of trust in the electoral process has led many Nigerians to lose faith in the government and disengage from electoral participation.

However, since independence, the elites who succeeded the colonial administrators have continued to exploit these divisions for political gain, further establishing societal divisions. These identity-based conflicts have sparked violent crises across virtually all geopolitical zones of the country. For example, the Boko Haram insurgency, which has dominated the northern region since 2009, has significantly reshaped Nigeria's security landscape and is widely interpreted as having a religious ideological underpinning, advocating the supremacy of Islam over other religions (Ebonine, 2022a).

Similarly, ethnic identity has fuelled secessionist movements in other regions, such as the Biafran and Oduduwa agitations for self-government in the East and West, respectively (Ebonine, 2022b). Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, the country has conducted seven cycles of general elections: in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023. Unfortunately, these elections have been plagued by significant irregularities, with candidates declared winners by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) often not reflecting the popular choice. This pattern of electoral malpractice was evident in the recently concluded 2023 general elections, the seventh since the restoration of democracy in Nigeria (Ifedi *et al.*, 2023).

The 2023 elections faced numerous challenges, beginning with the exorbitant cost of nomination forms, which deterred many competent candidates from contesting due to financial constraints. Ahead of the elections, the Nigerian government and Independence National Electoral Commission (INEC) assured citizens that the elections would be the most transparent and fair in the nation's history, leveraging new technologies like the BVAS (Bimodal Voter Accreditation System). However, the elections fell short of these promises. INEC's inability to deliver on its commitments led to widespread dissatisfaction among Nigerians. The 2023 general elections are widely regarded as the most flawed since the country's return to democracy in 1999.

However, the 2023 general elections were a significant test of the nation's democratic progress, especially with the introduction of new technologies by INEC, including the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IREV), which aimed to enhance the administration of the polls. Adding to this optimism was the Electoral Act 2022, which introduced reforms designed to streamline pre-electoral processes and ensure greater transparency in the collation and reporting of election results. Despite these efforts, the 2023 general elections were conducted in a contentious and disputed environment marked by widespread insecurity and uncertain government policies introduced before the elections. Using a qualitative approach that relied on secondary data and historical analysis, the study revealed that the elections failed to meet the legitimate and reasonable expectations of Nigerian citizens.

Accredited election observation groups highlighted significant shortcomings, including inefficiencies in the management of permanent voter cards (PVCs) distribution, operational and logistical failures, malfunctioning of election technology, incidents of vote manipulation, political violence, lack of transparency in the results collation and declaration processes, and poor crisis communication. These challenges were compounded by pressing national issues such as widespread poverty, corruption, insecurity, and inadequate electoral infrastructure, which have historically hindered voter participation (Uche & Okechukwu, 2023).

### 3. Drugs and Substance Use

A drug is any chemical substance capable of altering the body's systems when used. Commonly referred to as medicines, drugs are substances used for treating or managing diseases. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2016) defines a drug as any substance, apart from food, that, when introduced into the body of a living organism, can influence mood, thoughts, feelings, awareness, or attitudes. It may also refer to chemical compounds that, when ingested or injected, can alter mood and behaviour.

In a similar vein, Abdullahi (as cited in Siro, 2014) describes a drug as a substance that, upon entering the body, can sedate, stimulate, promote weight loss, induce sleep, or treat illnesses. According to the 1971 International Convention on Drugs, to which Nigeria is a signatory, drugs are categorised into narcotic and psychoactive types. Narcotic drugs, or opioids, include pain-relieving substances like opium and its derivatives (e.g., brown sugar, heroin, and codeine), coca leaves, cocaine, cannabis, cannabis resin, methadone, pethidine, and thebaine. Psychoactive drugs, on the other hand, include substances such as valium, diazepam, morphine, ketamine, and ephedrine, which primarily affect the mind, emotions, and attitudes of users (Paranjape, 2019).

### 4. Substance Abuse

Substance abuse, as a concept, has been defined and explained by researchers, regulatory bodies, and organisations in various ways. The term “drug abuse” originates from the pejorative term “druggie,” which denotes a drug addict or abuser (Okolo, 2022). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2016), drug abuse involves the harmful or unsafe use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs. It occurs when drugs are consumed without medical supervision or in an unreasonable manner. Laver (as cited in Siro, 2014) defines drug abuse as the illegal use of substances in ways that can harm or endanger the body.

Ajila (2001) elaborates that drug abuse includes the consumption, inhalation, chewing, or smoking of psychoactive substances that alter behaviour and mood. In essence, substance abuse refers to the illicit use of substances that can significantly influence an individual's emotional and psychological state. This includes the production, distribution, possession, and consumption of illegal drugs. It is widely acknowledged that criminality and delinquent behaviours are often linked to mental imbalances. Individuals with stable emotional and physical health generally avoid engaging in criminal or risky behaviours, including the misuse of drugs or substances. Studies exploring the connection between drugs and crime have highlighted shared characteristics between drug addicts and individuals involved in criminal activities (Paranjape, 2019). Some of the most commonly abused drugs and substances include;

#### **4.1 Marijuana**

Forster (2004) identifies marijuana as the most widely misused illicit drug in both Nigeria and across the globe. Commonly referred to as cannabis, ganja, dope, hashish, bhang, weed, herb, or grass, it is derived from the *Cannabis sativa* plant and is typically consumed by smoking. Its effects range from mild hallucinations and central nervous system stimulation to increased heart rate and elevated blood pressure. Prolonged use of marijuana can result in addiction, mental health issues, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory infections, and other severe health complications. Marijuana users are often associated with criminal activities such as pick-pocketing, rape, arson, domestic violence, murder, and vehicle theft.

#### **4.2 Cocaine**

Stacey (2006) defines cocaine as a powerful stimulant derived from coca plant leaves, primarily cultivated in Latin American countries like Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, and Bolivia. It is commonly consumed by snorting, rubbing on gums, or injecting after dissolving in liquid. Cocaine induces intense feelings of euphoria, usually lasting about 30 to 45 minutes. However, its use is linked to serious side effects, including nausea, elevated blood pressure, chronic runny nose, loss of smell, respiratory issues like asthma and pneumonia, and even fatal outcomes (Foster, 2018).

#### **4.3 Methamphetamine**

Methamphetamine, commonly known as meth, ice, or glass, is described as a highly addictive and potent stimulant that can be swallowed, smoked, snorted, or injected (Lebni *et al.*, 2020). It resembles glass shards or bluish-white crystalline rocks and is odorless. Methamphetamine increases heart rate and blood pressure while reducing the need for rest, allowing prolonged activity. Chronic use can result in severe dental problems, hallucinations, memory impairment, anxiety, insomnia, weight loss, and cancer. It is also associated with risky behaviours and sleeping disorders (Lebni *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, injecting methamphetamine heightens the risk of contracting infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B and C (NIDA, 2021).

#### **4.4 Alcoholic**

Beverages Alcoholic beverages, often called beer, spirits, or booze, are popular recreational substances. Many believe alcohol alleviates tension, enhances skills, and provides relaxation and enjoyment. While moderate consumption is generally considered safe, excessive drinking can lead to health challenges and risky behaviour. In Nigeria, traditional alcoholic drinks such as bammi, gogoro, and burkutu are prevalent in many cultural settings.

#### **4.5 Codeine and Cough Syrup**

Codeine, an opium derivative, is commonly used to treat pain, cough, and diarrhea. It is typically taken orally, and its production and distribution are tightly controlled due to its



narcotic properties. Users often report feelings of relaxation, drowsiness, euphoria, and increased energy. However, adverse effects include nausea, vomiting, dry mouth, constipation, itchiness, and coughing (NIDA, 2021).

## **5. Theoretical Framework**

### **5.1 Merton's Strain Theory**

Merton's Strain Theory, developed by Robert K. Merton, explains how societal pressure to achieve culturally accepted goals like wealth or status can lead to strain when individuals lack access to legitimate means (e.g., education or lawful opportunities) to reach them. This strain can result in frustration and may push individuals toward alternative, sometimes deviant, behaviors to achieve success.

### **5.2 Modes of Individual Adaptation**

Merton outlined five ways individuals adapt to societal strain: Conformity: accepting both societal goals and legitimate means; Innovation: accepting goals but using illegitimate means, often leading to deviance; Ritualism: abandoning goals but rigidly following societal norms; Retreatism: rejecting both goals and means, often leading to withdrawal and substance abuse; Rebellion: rejecting and replacing societal goals and means with new ones.

In the context of substance abuse and election violence, strain from political or social exclusion can lead individuals to innovate (e.g., use violence to achieve power) or retreat (e.g., disengage and turn to substance use), with drugs acting as both a coping mechanism and a trigger for aggressive behaviors.

### **5.3 Institutional Theory in the Context of Electoral Violence and Substance Abuse**

Institutional Theory explains how formal and informal structures, norms, and rules shape individual and organizational behavior. Rooted in the work of early sociologists and developed further by scholars like Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the theory emphasizes the role of institutions in creating stability and legitimacy in society. Applied to the 2023 Nigerian elections, it helps analyze how both official electoral systems and informal practices influenced electoral violence, showing how institutional norms and structures affected the actions of political actors, officials, and voters—particularly in relation to substance abuse and its role in fueling such violence.

### **5.4 Agency and Institutional Dynamics**

Patriotta (2020) highlights how individual and group agency operate within institutional structures. In the 2023 Nigerian elections, political actors exploited institutional weaknesses and societal vulnerabilities, using substances to manipulate and embolden individuals, especially youth, to commit electoral violence. Although tools like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) aimed to ensure fairness, systemic flaws and

sabotage fueled unrest. Voter agency, particularly among youth resisting manipulation, showed active engagement, but was often undermined by those influenced by substance abuse to disrupt the process.

### **5.5 The Process of Institutionalization and Electoral Violence**

Stoltz *et al.* (2019) emphasize institutionalization as a dynamic process, highlighting how substance abuse has become ingrained in Nigeria's electoral violence. Weak rule enforcement and systemic flaws have normalized the use of substances to disrupt elections. Failures in digital tools like the INEC Result Viewing Portal and BVAS technology, along with inadequate infrastructure, further exposed vulnerabilities. These issues, combined with substance-fueled actions by political thugs, show how electoral violence is reinforced through both systemic failures and the institutionalization of deviant practices.

### **5.6 Neo-Institutional Perspectives on Substance Abuse and Electoral Violence**

Neo-Institutional Theory, as described by Sandhu (2018), explores the interplay between organizations and broader systemic structures. In Nigeria, this perspective highlights how political actors exploited socio-economic inequalities and weak enforcement to use substance abuse as a tool for electoral violence. Inadequate technological infrastructure and uneven rule enforcement reinforced this cycle. As a result, voter disillusionment grew, reflecting the deeper socio-political consequences of institutional failures.

## **6. Empirical Reviews**

The reviewed studies collectively highlight the significant links between substance abuse, socio-political conditions, and electoral violence in Nigeria and similar contexts:

Maimako *et al.* (2023) found a positive relationship between psychoactive substance use and electoral violence in Keffi LGA, with male participants more involved than females. Also, Eneji & Ikeorji (2018) emphasized youth involvement in elections and the subsequent neglect they experience, suggesting more inclusive political engagement for young people. Their findings highlighted that youths exert substantial energy during elections to ensure the victory of their preferred candidates. However, once these candidates assume office, the youths are often neglected. The study recommended involving youths in decisions affecting their interests to foster a sense of belonging.

Carter *et al.* (2020) explored daily substance use and violence among high-risk urban youth in the U.S., identifying key predictors like binge drinking, opioid use, and retaliatory attitudes. The study concluded that among a high-risk urban minority sample, factors such as baseline retaliatory attitudes, anxiety, same-day binge drinking, non-medical opioid use, and illicit drug use were significantly associated with daily violence, influenced by both pharmacological and socio-contextual factors.

Further, Idowu (2022) examined the factors contributing to electoral malpractices in Nigeria, identifying poverty, lack of patriotism, the absence of nationalism, the greed

of Nigerian politicians, the “winner-takes-all” mentality, and inadequate awareness among citizens as key drivers. Some respondents in the study suggested that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political parties play a central role in perpetuating these malpractices. They opined that if INEC intensively monitored the activities of political parties, electoral malpractices could be significantly reduced.

Similarly, a study by Obiagu and Abada (2023) analysed the effect of government interference in election administration on electoral irregularities in Nigeria. The researchers argued that INEC has struggled to maintain its independence due to governmental interference, resulting in recurrent electoral irregularities and diminishing public confidence in the electoral process. Findings from interviews they conducted indicated that most respondents attributed INEC’s poor performance to the appointment of key officials by the president. This appointment process, the study revealed, influences INEC’s policy direction and has taken on ethno-religious undertones, undermining meritocracy and contributing to poor policy implementation in ensuring credible elections. The study concluded by emphasizing the importance of voter-driven electoral reforms, as government-led reforms have failed to address fundamental issues affecting the electoral system. It further acknowledged that its findings do not comprehensively address the challenges of electoral processes in developing democracies and called for additional research to explore other contributory factors and the ineffectiveness of legislative reforms in ensuring election management bodies’ independence.

Chironda (2023) focused on the irregularities surrounding the 2023 Presidential elections in Nigeria. The study highlighted the dismay of international observers over the widespread misconduct during the elections, including the declaration of a winner by the INEC chairman without fulfilling constitutional requirements. It also examined issues of drug trafficking linked to the declared winner, citing references to a verified U.S. complaint of forfeiture and a settlement directive requiring the forfeiture of substantial sums of money to the U.S. government. These findings underscored allegations that the declared winner of the election, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, was ineligible to contest and be declared president.

Lanre (2021) investigated the role of peer pressure, drug abuse, social dominance, and gang membership in predicting involvement in political violence among street urchins in Lagos metropolis, Lagos State, Nigeria. It was found that street urchins with a higher social dominance orientation were more likely to engage in political violence compared to those with lower dominance orientations. Peer pressure and social dominance were significant predictors of political violence. The study recommended prioritizing vocational guidance for street urchins, as many lack the necessary qualifications for available employment, thus making them more susceptible to engaging in anti-social behaviours like political violence. Izom *et al.* (2023) showed that substance abuse in Kontagora LGA is driven by socio-economic issues such as broken homes and unemployment, with easy access to both local and industrial substances.

Together, these studies reveal how substance abuse is both a symptom and a tool within broader socio-political dysfunctions that contribute to electoral violence.

## **7. Method**

This section on method highlights the research design, setting, participants and sampling. It also presents how data was collected, the procedure involved and data reporting.

### **7.1 Design**

This study used the qualitative research design. This method, according to Oranga (2023) is undertaken to provide insights into people's experience of a phenomenon. It involves in-depth information about the subject matter, including behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, and motivation. The qualitative design used in particular was the phenomenological approach to understand the experiences of the participants in the research.

### **7.2 Setting**

The setting of the study was Benue State University, Makurdi. The research was conducted in the Psychology Laboratory to provide comfort, reduce distractions and noise. The Laboratory was spacious enough for the flexibility of movement and oval (round) setting of seats. The Laboratory environment is serene, providing enough privacy for participants to air their views on the subject matter.

### **7.3 Participants**

Participants of the research were members of the public, comprising those who voted and witnessed first-hand the electoral process, especially during the casting of votes. They were males and females aged 18-38 years old. Participants included people from all works of life, including diverse cultural orientations, varying socio-economic classes as well as religious backgrounds. There were a total of 20 participants (10 males and 10 females) in the research.

### **7.4 Sampling**

The researchers used a purposive sampling technique involving participants who voted in the general elections and stood around the polling units to protect their mandate, observing the general atmosphere in the process. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that can be used in qualitative research as it involves working with the population that has the most desired characteristics, experiences and information that the study intends to get from the participants (Stratton 2024). For that reason, only participants who voted and witnessed some sort of electoral violence were selected to participate in the study.

### **7.5 Instruments**

The instrument used in this study was a structured interview guide administered in the Focused Group Discussion (FGD) to get information from participants. The researchers designed 12 structured, open-ended questions to interface with the participants of the study. The researchers used paper and pen to take down participants' responses.

## **7.6 Procedure**

The Lead researcher started by establishing a rapport with participants and solicited their willingness to participate. Each participant filled out a consent form for ethical consideration and was briefed on the rationale of the research. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held in two (2) sessions, with the group of ten (10) males being first interviewed, then the females. The interviewer encouraged active participation by engaging participants with prompts from the open-ended questions. Participants were appreciated for their openness and also assured of confidentiality. The entire discussion sessions for each group took less than two (2) hours.

## **7.7 Data analysis**

The research involved the use of narrative analysis whereby interviews were transcribed and coded manually for use by the researchers. A further analysis of the interviews involved highlighting relevant as well as convergent and divergent themes from the discussion.

## **8. Discussion**

This study investigates the impact of psychoactive substance abuse on electoral violence during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Through thematic analysis, several patterns emerged from the experiences and perspectives of male and female participants. Both groups noted that substance abuse, which tends to increase during elections, significantly contributes to violent behaviours such as kidnapping, fighting, killings, ballot box snatching, voter suppression, destruction of electoral materials, disruption of the election process, and other unlawful activities, including rigging, power tussles, vote-buying, and voter intimidation by thugs.

The participants' perceptions of electoral violence showed similarities and divergences between the male and female groups. For instance, both groups agreed that incidents like fights over the distribution of money or items among voters, ballot box snatching, damage to electoral materials, and voter intimidation by thugs were key elements of electoral violence. However, they diverged on other aspects. Female participants identified factors such as insecurity, killings, power tussles, and a lack of understanding of the electoral process as constituting electoral violence. In contrast, male participants emphasized rigging, disruption of the electoral process, and non-compliance with electoral guidelines and regulations, including vote-buying. This finding aligns with the work of Yusuf (2016), who categorized rigging and other forms of electoral violence as persistent electoral irregularities dating back to the colonial era under British rule.

Likewise, Abdu-Raheem and Bamgbade (2023) identified a range of electoral malpractices that continue to shape Nigeria's electoral processes, including harassment of candidates' agents and voters, result inflation, ballot box snatching, political assassinations, unauthorized result announcements, vote-buying, and election rigging.

These studies underscore the enduring nature of electoral malpractices in Nigeria's political system.

Participants discussed various perceived causes of electoral violence, with both groups agreeing that political elites' fear of losing, greed, and a failure by the government to provide basic services contributed significantly. Other common factors included poor governance, the incumbent's underperformance, and a lack of trust in the political process. Females also identified illiteracy, brainwashing, poverty, and the desperation of incumbents to retain power. At the same time, males highlighted issues like voter suppression, a lack of confidence in electoral officials, and public disillusionment with the electoral process. This finding is consistent with the research of Witesman (2016) and Ugwu (2023), both of whom emphasized the lack of credibility among election officials and government institutions, as well as the widespread erosion of trust in the electoral process. These studies highlighted how electoral fraud, vote-buying, ballot box snatching, voter suppression, technical failures of the BVAS, and other forms of violence and fraud significantly undermine the integrity of elections.

Regarding accountability for electoral violence, both male and female participants attributed responsibility to politicians, the electorate, and the general public. However, females pointed to government and law enforcement officials as being complicit, noting that some parents incited their children to engage in violence in exchange for incentives such as bags of rice and others. Males, on the other hand, identified thugs and party agents as key perpetrators. In a similar vein, Idowu (2022) argued that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political parties are primary contributors to electoral malpractices in Nigeria, a viewpoint that resonates with the observations made by male participants in this study. Additionally, Lanre (2021) highlighted the influence of gang involvement, social dominance, and peer pressure in predicting political violence. Their research further revealed that individuals with a higher social dominance orientation, particularly street urchins, were more prone to engage in political violence compared to those with a lower orientation toward social dominance.

On the specific role of substance abuse in instigating electoral violence, both groups agreed that it indeed played a role. When asked about the extent to which substance abuse instigates violence, female participants estimated that it contributed between 50 to 80 percent, depending on the level of substance availability and sponsorship, while male participants suggested a range of 40 to 95 percent. In line with this context, Neupane and Kapali (2023) corroborated the detrimental impact of psychoactive substance use on families, social and economic well-being, as well as broader community dynamics. Furthermore, the study by Ogeze and David (2023) emphasized that drug use during elections has emerged as a significant source of embarrassment for various stakeholders, including parents, educational institutions, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the government, and society as a whole.

The substances most commonly abused during the elections, according to both groups, included marijuana and tobacco. However, females also cited dry gin and snuff,

while males mentioned tramadol, “solution”, and “Colorado”, adding that in rural areas, alcohol, codeine, and “Chelsea” (dry gin in sachets) were more prevalent, while in urban areas, cocaine and marijuana were more commonly abused. Both groups concurred that the widespread availability of psychoactive substances contributed significantly to the occurrence of electoral violence. The findings of this study align with those of Carter *et al.* (2020), who observed that, within a high-risk urban minority sample, non-medical opioid use and illicit drug use were strongly linked to daily violence. This relationship was shaped by both pharmacological and socio-contextual factors, highlighting the complex interplay between substance use and violent behavior.

The study also explored whether gender disparities existed in electoral violence. Both groups affirmed the presence of such disparities and also the fact that males were more predisposed to electoral violence than women, with females highlighting that women more frequently employed emotional blackmail, while males engaged more in physical confrontations, thuggery, and intimidation. Males further noted that young people, particularly the uneducated, were disproportionately involved in electoral violence. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Maimako *et al.* (2023), who confirmed a positive correlation between substance use and electoral violence. Additionally, their research highlighted that males were significantly more likely to be involved in electoral violence compared to females.

When asked about the impact of electoral violence on different groups, both male and female participants agreed that the masses were the primary victims, with males adding that the less privileged suffered the most. Regarding participation in elections, both groups noted that men, women, and the uneducated were more visible at the polls. The females observed that younger people, particularly those who participated in the presidential election, were less likely to vote in the gubernatorial elections, citing disappointment with the results.

To address electoral violence, women suggested several measures, including electronic voting, prosecution of both perpetrators and sponsors, a ban on the distribution and use of psychoactive substances, and increased public education. Males recommended enforcing electoral laws, sensitizing the electorate, promoting good leadership, fostering unity, creating employment opportunities, and educating youth. They also emphasized the role of religious leaders in addressing electoral violence. This study aligns with the findings of Akokuwebe (2017) and Aksom (2023), who respectively recognized the pivotal role of the National Electoral Commission in promoting accountability, transparency, and adherence to the rule of law during elections. Similarly, Idowu (2022) emphasized the importance of INEC's active involvement in closely monitoring the activities of political parties to mitigate electoral malpractices.

Finally, when discussing the punishment of electoral offenders, females argued for a collective effort, advocating for policies such as the shoot-on-sight order previously proposed by President Muhammadu Buhari and the prosecution of both offenders and their sponsors. Males, on the other hand, emphasized that offenders should be punished according to the law. This finding aligns with the provisions of Nigeria's Electoral Act,

where Section 117 clearly outlines penalties for offenses such as fraudulent voter registration, unlawful possession of voter cards, and the buying or selling of voter cards. These offenses carry a penalty of one year in prison, or a fine of ₦100,000.00, or both. Furthermore, Section 123, Subsection 9, stipulates a three-year prison sentence without the option of a fine for any electoral or collation officer found announcing or publishing fraudulent election results. Additionally, the European Union (2023) highlighted several offenses committed during the 2023 elections, including violence, poor organization, lack of transparency, significant fraud, voter disenfranchisement, and bias, resulting in over 200 election-related deaths. The EU has prescribed legal penalties, such as fines or imprisonment, to protect the integrity of the electoral process, as referenced in the work of Usman and Saleh (2024).

## **9. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study provides compelling evidence that substance abuse impacts significantly on violence during elections. Therefore, it can be inferred that substance abuse played a significant role in the violence that ensued during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The exposé highlights the need for cogent interventions and enforcement of laws to address substance and violence during elections.

It is important to consider age dynamics and cultural practices that contribute to these behaviours as they relate to rural/urban dichotomies, so as to effectively strategise to mitigate losses of lives and property.

### **9.1 Recommendations**

The following recommendations will aid in ameliorating the impact of substance abuse on election violence:

- 1) Limit the availability and accessibility of psychoactive substances, especially during election periods, to reduce their potential impact on electoral violence.
- 2) Empower young people through education, job opportunities and skills development to reduce their vulnerabilities to substance abuse and involvement in electoral violence.
- 3) Establish monitoring and evaluation systems to track the impact of interventions aimed at reducing substance abuse and electoral violence.
- 4) Train law enforcement agencies to effectively handle situations involving substance abuse and electoral violence.
- 5) Implement community-based initiatives that promote peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and non-conflict resolution
- 6) Education on the electoral process should incorporate the dangers of substance abuse and its link to electoral violence
- 7) Employ both kinetic and non-kinetic measures to deal with issues of substance abuse, especially during elections with a view to sustaining such interventions even in the post-election era.



### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. This research is purely academic and does not involve personal advantage or otherwise on the part of the authors.

### About the Author(s)

The authors are psychology lecturers with an interest in social research. The Lead Researcher, Anyalewa Alan Ajonye, is an Associate Professor of Social Psychology with research interests in substance use/abuse, sexual and reproductive health issues in adolescents, gender-based violence with gender advocacy, and other interests on social perspectives on the use of Artificial Intelligence in research and service delivery. The co-authors, Benita Dooshima Aki, Oibiokpa Michael Oibiokpa, Susan Nguemo Hemba and Hillary Ode Agbo are young and promising researchers pursuing their PhDs in the fields of Clinical and Industrial/Organisational Psychology. They are pioneer members of the Psychology Research Team (an initiative of the Lead Researcher for guiding and mentoring young academic researchers in psychology). Published works of the authors may be accessed in academic networks such as ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Scopus-indexed journals, etc.

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