

# Human tragedy as electoral strategy: Nigerian politicians and the unique selling proposition (USP) towards the 2019 general elections

## Abstract

Tragedies resulting from security failings of government have almost become the only Unique Selling Proposition (USP) among Nigeria's ruling and opposition parties particularly in every election year. Reminiscence of the heated 2015 electioneering process, the race towards the 2019 general elections is ominously generating tension with political gladiators and opposition parties capitalising on the sporadic killings and kidnappings across the country to continually raise alarm pertaining to the incompetence and malfeasance of the ruling party. Almost two decades into democratic rule, rather than serving as a shadow government with alternative policies against any perceived obnoxious policy, opposition parties still substantially draw political capital from misfortunes in the country to the consternation of political observers, thus turning human tragedy into electoral strategy. This essay seeks to examine the place of the Nigerian politicians' Unique Selling Proposition (USP) and its impact on electoral behaviour in previous elections and preparatory to the 2019 general elections.

**Keywords:** general, elections, unique, selling, proposition, gladiators, opposition, parties

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## Introduction

Nigerian elections have always been characterised by violence in form of intimidation and harassment of political candidates and supporters, assassinations of political candidates, clashes between supporters of different politicians both within political parties and between rival parties. Indeed, elections in the country have continued with progressive degeneration ever since Nigeria began its experimentation with the presidential system of government. As a matter of fact, Nigeria has continued to experience recurring ethno-religious conflicts since the return of civilian rule in 1999, following a protracted period of military rule. Some of these struggles have degenerated into bloody sectarian fights and thousands of Nigerians have been left dead, maimed and homeless over the years.<sup>1</sup> In some states, tensions between ethnic groups rooted in electoral competition, allocation of resources, fears of religious domination among others, have intermingled to create lingering insecurity. As would be discussed in this study, election years are more volatile in the country where contest for political offices is seen as zero-sum game and all resources, no matter how deadly, are deployed to achieve selfish interests in a game where the end justifies the means.

Given the fact that the essence of any electioneering campaign "is to inform voters about the choices before them and to mobilize citizen participation",<sup>2</sup> then the central focus of campaigns in democratic society should be "to what extent and in what ways do they fulfill this primary goal and thereby enhance the democratic process".<sup>3</sup> Come February/March 2019, the Nigerian citizens will once again elect new set of leaders at all levels of government, being a periodic exercise, and the political gladiators are already gearing up to animate the electioneering process.<sup>4</sup> The elements of traditional prejudice of ethnicity continue to ignite enmity, distrust, and hatred among Nigerians just as the country is more divided along ethno-religious fault lines now than any other time in its history, excepting the years of war. Expectedly, Nigeria's social media space is now highly susceptible to manipulation by different political actors with vested interests and little sense of electoral ethics.<sup>5</sup> The aim of this study

therefore, is to reflect on the complex nature of politics in Nigeria and explore the linkage between human tragedies and politicians' electoral marketing strategy/ Unique Selling Proposition.

## Electoral/political marketing and unique selling proposition: a conceptual exploration

The major pillar on which participatory democracy is predicated is the act of voting by the electorate to choose those to occupy positions of authority in a political entity. The point here is that election is the only process through which the people, the strongest point in the democratic chain, actively participate in order to amplify the very essence of modern governance<sup>6</sup> and this affirms the supremacy of the choice of the majority. Considering the fact that government's power directly affects the lives of most people in the world,<sup>7</sup> it becomes a fundamental task for political parties to aspire to have a large numbers of voters in an election. Most politicians enter politics for ideological reasons. They want to contribute and make the country a better place, by whatever measures they see as important. However, the primary game of politics in a democracy is one of vote winning.<sup>8</sup> In many parts of the world, the structure and the course of election campaigns have been changed by party realignment, the emergence of the new media and the rise of political marketing.<sup>3</sup> Accentuated, by social media, Facebook and Twitter especially, it has become increasingly difficult to separate politics from governance, as politicians employ new political technologies to run campaigns in between elections.<sup>9</sup>

In representative democracy, marketing is used by political parties with a view to providing citizens and voters with information on existing and potential programmes for running the country. The main objective of any electoral campaign is to gather as many votes as possible for a certain candidate, stipulating how parties aim to improve social cohesion, democratic participation and citizen belongingness. The defining aspects of a campaign are the same but the angle of approach is different.<sup>10</sup> Suffice to note that the overall strategy, established with a clear structure of messages, is vital for a successful campaign. Put differently, the suitable strategy for a

political campaign can be determined by an accurate knowledge of the players, political context, problems, trends and the available resources. As noted by O'Shaughnessy:<sup>11</sup> "Identifying the needs and wants of customers and fashioning products and communications shaped by that understanding is the core of the marketing task". Increasingly, political parties or candidates in different countries around the world seem to think that becoming market-oriented is the main road to electoral success. That view also gains support from people within the academy.<sup>12</sup>

A political marketing orientation is commonly defined as "how a party uses strategy to adopt and/or change aspects of its environment for a more favourable alignment". It is variously referred to as predisposition, ideological thrust, political marketing pattern or choice in literature.<sup>13</sup> There is a growing concern among scholars that contemporary campaigning techniques, accompanied with the media focus on "strategic election game, tabloid scandal and down-market sensationalism"<sup>22</sup> diminish democratic process. As targets in political campaign (i.e. electioneering and voter mobilization campaigns), the voters are influenced through various political marketing strategies and programmes. The array of political marketing strategies provides information which voters need to assess candidate's capability in satisfying their needs. The contents of the campaign blue-print are the expressions of candidate's objectives for seeking votes from the electorate.<sup>14</sup> Kriesi<sup>15</sup> argues that "a campaign can be characterized by its intensity and its direction. The intensity of the campaign depends on the extent of elites' interest". Thus, to be able to holistically influence voters, different forms of political advertising which anchored on different unique selling propositions (USPs) are usually employed by politicians and their strategists.

In his book titled "Reality in Advertising" Rosser Reeves (1960), a leading advertising man, developed the concept of unique selling proposition where he outlined it as the central concept which had important impact in his philosophy of advertising. Unique Selling Proposition or USP is that very reason which motivates a buyer to purchase that product even though it might be costlier than other products. Today, the concept of unique selling proposition has become a dominant element in most campaigns and this could be observed in radio, television and print advertisements. According to Azu,<sup>16</sup> there are three types of political campaigns that have nearly no chance to achieve victory on Election Day due to their own internal failures: The first is the campaign that does not have a persuasive message to deliver to voters and does not have a clear idea of which voters it wants to persuade. This type of campaign lacks direction from the beginning and the situation will only get worse, without adequate research work put in place. Secondly, is the campaign that has a concise, persuasive message and a clear idea of which voters it can persuade, but lacks a reasonable plan of what to do between campaign period and Election Day to persuade these set of voters. Finally, the third kind of campaign is one that has a clear message, a clear idea of its voters and a plan to reach Election Day, but it fails to follow through on the strategic plan, not doing the hard work day after day to get elected.

### **Elections and political stakeholders in Nigeria: desperation, despondency and dilemma**

Unlike the advanced democracies of the world where electioneering presents opportunities to further entrench the sovereignty of the people and strengthen the resolve of the country to forge ahead in the task of providing acceptable socio-economic direction for the population in a secured environment, elections in Nigeria have oftentimes exposed

the weaknesses in the polity and the selfish determination of the political class to swim against the tide of popular wish to the detriment of the polity. Put differently, elections are seen as a violent means of acquiring the spoils of democracy rather than being embraced as one of the important processes that strengthen democratic institutions and facilitate peaceful transition of power.<sup>17</sup> There are always cases of high incidence of political thuggery and uncontrollable violence characterized by wanton destruction of lives and properties; elections in Nigeria can best be described as warfare.<sup>18</sup> Political elites mobilize the pool of unemployed youths, often along ethnic, religious and party affiliations, as vital violent arsenals<sup>17</sup> more so that those "who hold positions in the power struggle determine the location and distribution of scarce resources". As aptly noted by Ochonou:<sup>19</sup>

The way in which power is wielded and performed in the current political dispensation in Nigeria bears out and complicates Foucault's thesis of subtle and stealthy power at the same time; it is at once crudely physical and invisibly subtle. It is so brutally real that one can only speak of a power-knowledge regime with some intellectual trepidation. At the same time, it takes such subtle and discursive forms that it makes contemporary Nigeria some kind of ethnographic present for Foucault's thesis. A critical appraisal of Nigeria's democratic history since 1960 reveals a sadly reoccurring decimal: the fact that elections in Nigeria have only served as avenues for the recycling of governments, and not for improving on the quality of governance – the former being a mere change of guards, while the latter connotes a practical utilization of the administrative apparatuses of the state to allocate values for the common good.<sup>4</sup> It could be posited that the emergent political class and their military apologists since 1999 have always obstructed the free expression of the people's will in the choice of their representatives except in the 2015 election. Indeed, with the subtle confirmation that public office opens unrestricted access to commonwealth in the country, "a new crop of elites was created, nurtured, and weaned on the altar of violence". Kendhammer<sup>20</sup> posits that: One of the abiding paradoxes of Nigerian politics is that the very institutions and rules designed to reduce ethnic and religious tensions often produce more and more intense conflict, undermining the very democratic principles and practices they were meant to reinforce. Career politicians permanently long for power and the attendant perks of office much to the detriment of a larger populace. It is almost always either they have people's votes or people's lives! So terminally fixated on winning the mechanisms of control, the elements have little or no regard for the sanctity of human life. Just as the incumbent seeks to hold onto power at all costs, even when his failure in the expiring tenure is as glaring as the day, the aspirant him/herself schemes to attain the office just for the kill, using all manner of artifice, purporting to be on the side of the people and ever willing to 'serve' them. For the two desperate sides, the end often justifies the means!<sup>21</sup> In a research carried out by Seiyefa,<sup>22</sup> it was discovered that the political environment of Nigeria has defined elite political culture to be largely grounded on zero sum politics, politicization of violent and nonviolent conflicts, and identity politics.

Given such a picture as history has repeatedly painted with grim outlines, elections are often heralded by palpable tension and held amidst open brigandage, culminating in voter apathy which had quite invariably aided endemic mal-administration. In Nigeria therefore, elections - the only available process of political leadership choices and succession - have perennially left a sour taste in the mouths of the electorate who have haplessly had to bemoan human and material losses engineered by hoodlums sponsored by rival camps in vile

tussle for the control of people's destiny. Almost in all cases where the competition is keen, caution is thrown to the winds, as the competitors revel in orgies of mayhem, arson and killings, and such other conducts which brazenly abbreviate societal peace and progress, sacrifice patriotism and nationalism on the altar of entrenched personal interest.<sup>21</sup>

Political actors have always expected the power of the street to change seemingly deadlocked political situations. Each time they cannot navigate the political field to achieve their goals, they appeal to primordial sentiments of the ever ready agile section of the populace to protest, mostly in a violent manner. With the proliferation of small arms, the youths are usually mobilised for this purpose. Thus, the street is an easily sparked powder keg. Violence is omnipresent in the rapidly-growing cities, often exacerbated rather than restrained by a still-militarised style of policing, and the presence of armed forces accused of complicity in many of the street killings as once alleged by a former Chief of Army Staff, Theophilus Danjuma. It is in this light that Nigerian politicians have routinely succeeded not only in wrecking monumental damage on peoples' psyche, but have also made good governance in the country quite illusory. Yet, aside open confrontation or physical violence, there are collateral losses in the form of psychological and institutional violence unleashed on the whole electoral process, and by implication, democratic governance in the country. For the electorate, this ugly trend naturally puts up a dilemma either to continue their participation in the electoral process in the face of "do or die" contest/scenario while anticipating governance deliverables or take a back seat while desperate politicians pilot the affairs of the state in an undeserved manner, confirming Collier and Vicente's assertion that "electoral violence is an effective strategy that can keep those likely to vote for opponents away from the polls".

### Discrediting the ruling party with instigated violence

When the state establishes its machinery for controlling the populace, politics becomes the struggle to control the power base<sup>13</sup> just as the struggle for power creates disagreement and conflict. Indeed, democracy embraces political conflict — the conflict of ideas, competition for power, the struggle for influence. In Nigeria, Alemika<sup>23</sup> posits that elections are not just competition between political contestants but war among candidates and factions within parties and between political parties. Consequently, violence is a major resource for electoral competition in the country. In the struggle for electoral victory and political offices that give access to monumental corrupt enrichment, politicians employ violence.<sup>23</sup> Elections can be a source of human tragedies by triggering violence in a society where social cleavages like religious and ethnic differences are continuously reinforced by persons seeking to use them as means of gaining or retaining political and economic power (ibid). Seiyefa<sup>24</sup> expatiates this within the context of elite political culture: Elements of elite political culture such as zero sum politics, political elite manipulation of social cleavages and identity politics, themselves enabled by elite involvement in governance, leads to mis-governance by the elite in power and the concomitant emergence of social movements or groups to convey the grievances of sections of the country's diverse population. These movements are, in turn, co-opted by individuals within the elite who use the movements' muscle and influence to coerce the electorate, notably during election periods. This results in the social movements' transformation into organised political violent groups.

Nigeria has become an increasingly insecure territory in the last few years. In various parts of the country, Nigerians are virtually under the

siege of kidnappers and herdsmen attacks in addition to the onslaught of Boko Haram. Thus, one phrase, according to Sekoni<sup>25</sup> that has been popular in the country's political space is 'politicisation of security' i.e. subjecting community or nation to threats of its survival and its values by individuals or groups whose motive is to obtain or retain political power. Historically, violence has always featured prominently in all electoral processes in the post-colonial Nigeria but its frequency and magnitude of occurrence in the country since the return of the country to democratic rule in 1999 have assumed a catastrophic dimension.<sup>26</sup> For example, "deadly election-related and communal violence in northern Nigeria following the April 2011 presidential voting left more than 800 people dead", according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>27</sup> The victims were killed in three days of rioting in 12 northern states and the protests degenerated into violent riots or sectarian killings in many northern states.

Major political issues in the country are vigorously and violently contested along the lines of intricate ethnic, religious and regional divisions<sup>28</sup> and most often, these fault-lines or other potentially divisive identities are being explored by political gladiators to discredit their opponents and to garner support.<sup>29</sup> They mobilise and instigate people into violence with a view to causing chaos in the polity and thus creating political capital in discrediting a ruling party while projecting their parties as the best alternatives. As observed by The Economist,<sup>30</sup> "politicians have been known to hire gangs and arm them to disrupt rivals' campaign events. Some have thrown hand grenades during public speeches". This was reinforced by a former deputy Senate President, Ibrahim Mantu, on a national television<sup>31</sup> monitored by this writer while confessing to his past electoral atrocities, that politicians may be involved in sponsored violence in the country for political purposes. As a matter of fact, in some case studies compiled by Human Rights Watch,<sup>32</sup> it was emphasised that "politicians or their close political supporters have been responsible for committing violence for political ends. In most of the cases, there has been little or no progress in bringing the perpetrators to justice". Politicians have also been fingered in the cattle herders-farmers clashes. According to the National President, Miyetti Allah Kautal Hore Socio-cultural Association, Bello Abdullahi Bodejo: What is happening in Nigeria today is not a normal clash between the Fulani and the farmers. The whole thing has been politicized and politicians are getting involved in the problem... In the last two or three weeks, the police have arrested some people with AK47 rifles but those people are not Fulani. They are mentioning some politicians who are not Fulani for buying AK47 for them and I believe them because the poor cattle herders cannot buy AK 47.

Unfortunately, most of the election related violence, including political assassinations, unlawful killings, beatings, destruction of property, harassment and coercion have been either poorly, or not, investigated.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the Nigerian authorities have fostered a climate of impunity by failing to take effective measures to stem the tide of violence. Also, hate speech, as noted in Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room<sup>34</sup> report, "presents a profound challenge to the Nigerian democratic landscape. This is because in this country, like many others around the world, hate speech often precedes outbreaks of violence". Rhetorically, while employing sectarian (ethnic, religious and geopolitical) discourses as a means of appeal to popular support, most platforms for debates are also turned into platforms for verbal threats, hate speech, coercion, blackmail and intimidation, coercion. Those who control the airwaves have ceaselessly poisoned the minds of Nigerians against each other, stirring up sectional strife, stoking tension and promoting political messages that are designed mostly

for their personal pecuniary benefits. Thus, political campaigns in Nigeria are typically characterized by these uninhibited discursive behaviours. Criminal responsibility for violence that arises out of hate speech is not only restricted to politicians. Media personnel and religious leaders, in particular, who place their shows, publications, or pulpits at the disposal of politicians for the spreading of hate speech can be held responsible for any violence stemming from that speech.

### **The march towards 2019 general elections: counting on continued human tragedies**

During electioneering, parties and campaign organisations do employ different strategies to woo voters and discredit their opponents, including attack advertisements, use of inflammatory rhetoric, as witnessed in the 2015 general elections. As being witnessed now, forthcoming general elections have already created a fierce power struggle characterized by instances of mudslinging and violence. Indeed, Nigeria's myriad security challenges have continued to serve as a potent campaign instrument in the hands of the politicians because, according to Hassan<sup>5</sup> "one of the biggest issues that will determine the 2019 general elections is insecurity, which is affecting communities across the country. On-going instability could affect the vote itself and will certainly be a big issue on the campaign trail". Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari has been facing an upsurge in violence between crop farmers and herders that may threaten his party's election chances next year. The conflict has arguably become Nigeria's most pressing internal security threat. Hundreds of people have been hacked to death with machetes and other dangerous weapons with images shared on social media. The Buhari administration has been criticised for its poor handling of the issue. For instance, more than 120 people were killed in Benue and the nearby states of Taraba and Adamawa in the first 10 days of 2018, according to the National Emergency Management Agency.<sup>35</sup>

On Boko Haram in the North East, for which former President Goodluck Jonathan was accused of "failing to effectively address both the security element of the crisis as well as the underlying socio-economic problems",<sup>36</sup> the APC government has been unable to permanently subdue the sect. This has been the major focus of attack by the PDP and other opposition parties. Though the conflict predates the APC's rule, but its severity and death toll have escalated in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in the midst of economic turmoil, bloodletting and crises, so many politicians are jostling for office, using the tragic situation to market their parties and candidates. It has been a regular phenomenon since the advent of the present republic in 1999. The abduction of school girls by the Boko Haram sect has, since 2014, remained a potent security failure to campaign against a sitting government and electoral fortune to gain political capital by the opposition parties. As a matter of fact, the school girls' abduction, according to Ojeifo<sup>37</sup> has become "an attention-getting strategy to blackmail successive administrations. Global and national sensibilities are quite easily evoked because of the existential threat that the insurgents pose to the femininity of the schoolgirls who are prone to sexual abuses". The abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls on April 14, 2014, which was initially denied by some allies of former President Goodluck Jonathan, became a national embarrassment when every concerned stakeholder, including the international community condemned and protested the incident.

The abduction shattered President Goodluck Jonathan's administration and created a yawning security hole in his re-election effort. Indeed, "the saga fitted perfectly into the opposition's grand

design to sink the Jonathan administration".<sup>38</sup> The abduction and failure of government to rescue the girls became a sing-song for the main opposition party, APC. Though no alternative strategies were provided, the APC's campaigns were not complete without the party telling the people that it had better and practical approaches to stopping the activities of the Boko Haram sect and ensured that the abducted girls were brought back to their parents. The Buhari administration has had its share of security embarrassment with the abduction of the 110 girls of Government Science and Technical School, Dapchi, in February 2018. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) described as iniquitous, the attempt by the President to use the heart-breaking abduction of innocent schoolgirls in Dapchi, Yobe state, to score cheap political points. The opposition party also maintained that the President's "morbid comparison of the Dapchi incident to similar heartrending abduction of schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno state, in 2014, appeared pregnant with meaning, especially in the face of pervading speculations and conspiracy theorems that trailed the Dapchi abduction and its associated conflicting reports". Even when the girls were rescued a month later, the PDP on its Twitter page, alleged that the abduction and release of the Dapchi girls was staged by the APC Government: We condemn the @APCNigeria and certain officials in the @NPresidency for staging the abduction of the schoolgirls in Dapchi, Yobe State, for political purposes. It is wicked, callous and tormenting to use innocent schoolgirls as pawns. Nigerians know that the main aim of this devilish act was to delude the public, set the stage for an orchestrated rescue, create a heroic myth and false sense of achievement around the @APCNigeria administration and serve as a spur for @MBuhari's declaration to contest in 2019.<sup>39</sup>

From the killing fields of Benue, Taraba, Zamfara, to the raiding of farms and kidnapping in the South, opposition parties readily cash in on these tragedies to defame the Buhari government as his party went to while in opposition. On the Benue killings in January 2018 for example, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) condemned what it termed "a conspiracy of silence by the same APC governors who in 2013, unleashed insults on the PDP and its federal government for allegedly delaying in visiting the fronts of Borno"<sup>40</sup> during the attacks. The PDP consoled Nigerians that come 2019, the ruling party would be chased out of power while pledging to continue to defend the interest of Nigerians at all times. Interestingly, when the President decided to visit the troubled states, the PDP expressed disbelief at the president's dismissal of public criticism over his delay in visiting the conflict areas:

When well-meaning Nigerians said the visits were cosmetic and a political gambit, some apologists of the APC dismissed it as a mere political statement. Now, the action and comments by the President during his whistle stop visit to Taraba state have bared it all...Nigerians were shocked by the President's claims of having performed in providing security in the country, even in the face of the daily bloodletting in the land. Perhaps, he was not aware, as usual, that while he was in Taraba, marauders were having a field day slaughtering women and children in neighboring Benue state.<sup>41</sup>

Other pathetic national issues have also become a focal point of attack for opposition to discredit the ruling party. For example, while linking the rising rate of job losses and unemployment to insecurity in the country, the National Chairman of the PDP, Uche Secondus submitted that: "Our teeming youth are hopeless with no jobs. Their parents and guardians keep losing their jobs by the minute. Since 2015, more than sixteen (16) million Nigerians have lost their jobs.

According to him, “this demonstrates how badly the APC Federal Government has mishandled Nigeria, an economy they took over from the PDP in 2015, as the largest (economy) in Africa”.<sup>42</sup>

The political intrigues and manoeuvres that characterise many states of Nigeria also attest to the politics of human tragedy as political gladiators continually engage in blame-game over various dastardly acts. Rivers State for instance, according to Onah<sup>43</sup> “is no longer the place to live in, as rivers of blood flow ceaselessly, following an unending siege by militants, kidnappers, cultists, and criminals of other hue”. As affirmed by a Rivers Commission of Inquiry, a monthly average of 19 killings occurred in Rivers State between November 2014 and April 2015.<sup>44</sup> The APC had always accused Governor Wike and the PDP of having the backing of the various ex-militia and ex-militant groups in the state.<sup>45</sup>

### Changing the ugly narrative: the needed interventions

The fault lines of ethnic nationalism, regional marginalization, bureaucratic and administrative nepotism, religious bigotry, inequitable distribution of financial resources and genocidal tendency by Fulani herdsmen and Boko Haram insurgents continue to weaken the basis of our federal structure and the chord of the nation’s fragile unity.<sup>37</sup> In a country like Nigeria, where politics is played with all sorts of bitterness, an alarming trend of hate-speech by political gladiators, particularly in an election year, may be a filip to a tension-soaked country. Of recent, some of the discussions taking place in the social media are laden with hate speech. In the 2015 elections, hate and dangerous speech became a very serious problem because it reached unprecedented heights. The campaigns disseminated hate speech and used foul language on leading broadcast stations and some national newspapers in the country. Accepted that the country’s electoral processes have not been open, free and fair, due to the mischievous inclinations of its overambitious power-seeking politicians, Nigerians themselves are as culpable as the political class they keep blaming for the inconsistencies and malpractices that have turned elections into the comic shows they have become in these parts.<sup>4</sup> According to Alexis de Tocqueville, “in a democracy, the people get the government they deserve”. Thus, it is incumbent on Nigerians to ensure that the right crop of leaders is elected to navigate their ship of state out of the tempestuous waters it currently wallows in<sup>4</sup> as 2019 beckons. Votes must be treated as precious as human lives, and human lives as precious as the existence of the state; and respect of fundamental human rights must extend to all humans irrespective of ethnicity, religion, political stance, gender or orientation.<sup>46</sup> It is however, obvious that the average Nigerian politician has not imbibed the spirit of democracy of which respect for the wish of the majority is most paramount and he is yet to exhibit commitment to national growth.<sup>6</sup> Citizens all over the world want political parties and governments to represent their views and be responsive to their needs. But where politicians-custodians of power either in or outside government- deliberately engage in untoward activities, hinging on peoples’ lives, then the society is deemed for perpetual backwardness.

As earlier noted, the winner-takes-all mentality makes every contest for power a zero-sum-game, which in essence reduces elections to a do-or-die affair. In Nigeria, citizens are perceived, and in fact treated by their leaders, as superfluous, expendable commodities unlike other climes where people seek public office to promote public good.<sup>47</sup> A situation where politicians who have been indicted for electoral violence in the past are still working freely till this day tend to

promote impunity among the political class. In changing the narrative therefore, the culture of impunity that permeates every stratum of the polity and perpetuated by political gladiators, must be fundamentally addressed within the confine of the law and state power. In other words, government, through its security agencies, must demonstrate the requisite political will to try,<sup>48</sup> and punish perpetrators of political, religious and ethnic violence in the country. Similarly, “a proper legal framework that holds political actors responsible for hate speech and its consequences is necessary.<sup>49</sup> There also needs to be a greater level of enforcement of the already existing laws”.<sup>34</sup> The proposed hate speech law should be made to reflect the socio-political realities in the country to prevent witch-hunt by the ruling political class. Also,<sup>50-53</sup> government should ensure that security agencies maintain neutrality between all candidates and parties; and in the troubled communities/states.<sup>54,55</sup>

### Conclusion

It is affirmed in this essay that politically motivated violence has been an albatross to electoral democracy in Nigeria and political gladiators, in and out of government, have feasted on such human tragedies as electoral Unique Selling Proposition, to advance their selfish course to the detriment of the electorate and at the expense of good governance. The existing atmosphere of political competition of zero sum game in the country is largely fuelled by the over-zealousness and desperation among political elites to acquire political power by all means. As the country approaches another election year, this trend is further exacerbated by proliferation and dissemination of hate and dangerous speech- itself, a product of ethno-regional and religious cleavages. It concludes that unless stakeholders make urgent efforts to stem this political behaviour and enthrone the integrity of the process, Nigeria’s already serious internal instability could be fatally aggravated.

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### Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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