

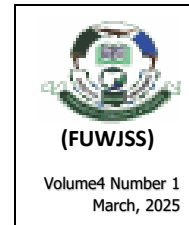
# **ELECTORAL HATE CRIMES AND VIOLENCE DURING THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN LAFIA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, NASARAWA STATE, NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

Although the Electoral Act 2022 forbids electoral crimes, electoral hate crimes are widespread in Nigeria. However, perpetrators of electoral hate crimes in most instances are a mystery; victims are sometimes known, but consequences remain ignored. This study investigates electoral hate crime and violence in Lafia Local Government Area, Nasarawa State during the 2023 general elections. Data for this study emerged through a cross sectional survey, which also involved focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and observation of personnel of the Nigeria Police Force, and the Independent National Electoral Commission, political party leaders, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and female and male community members within Lafia Local Government Area. Purposive sampling was used to select participants in the study. Sixteen FGDs and twenty KIIs were conducted for the study. Data collected were analyzed using NVivo software. The study found that politicians – especially candidates, and male youth were vanguards of electoral hate crimes and violence. Victims of electoral hate crimes and violence were individual members of either the People Democratic Party or the All Progressive Congress, relations of politicians contesting for elective positions from these political parties, members of Eggon or Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups, Christians or Muslims, and Independent National Electoral Commission. The study concluded that electoral hate crimes and violence were widespread during the 2023 general elections. The study recommends that there is need to amend the Electoral Act and assign stiffer penalties to electoral hate crimes offenders. Also, there is need for more voters' education in order to promote tolerance and understanding among diverse political groups and interests.

**Keywords:** Electoral crimes, violence, 2023 elections, victims, voters

## **Introduction**

Election remains the preferred path to power and authority across the globe. Elections are the hallmarks of democracy, and they serve the purpose of

peaceful change of government, thereby conferring legitimacy on the institutions that manage the electoral process in ways that respects the will of the people. The electoral systems determine how votes are translated into political representation (Farrell, 2011; Lijphart, 1994). Prior to elections, campaigns are carried out via media, canvassing and targeting swing voters (Gelman & King, 1993; Shaw, 2006). An effective election administration involves among other things ensuring accessibility, transparency and security which is crucial to maintaining democratic legitimacy (Kimball & Kropf, 2005; Stewart, 2013).

Dahl (1956), defines elections as a formal decision-making process through which individuals choose an individual or group to hold public office who are accountable to the people. This definition emphasizes elections as a mechanism of popular sovereignty, highlighting its role in establishing a democratic link between citizens and those who govern. Similarly, Lipset (1960) defines elections as social processes that reflect societal values, norms, and power dynamics through which voters express their preferences and choices through voting; while Issacharoff (2016), defines elections as legally sanctioned procedures for selecting representatives or determining public policy outcomes. This definition focuses on elections as legally approved procedures that must adhere to principles of fairness, transparency, and inclusivity; and election laws and regulations ensure that these procedures are just. Proceeding from the definitions, we define election as legally mandated processes through which citizens aged 18 years and above elect individuals to represent them at various levels of government including, state and local government councils. This process is crucial for democracy and the continuation of government. In Nigeria, the Electoral Act 2022 recognizes the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as the only national agency responsible for conducting elections into national elective and state political offices such as the Presidency, the National Assembly, governorship, and State Assemblies (Electoral Act 2022).

In Nigeria, election is a power game that is akin to war, this may not be far from the high premium attached to political power and attendant benefits. With that mindset among the political elite, it is no surprise that violence has tended to characterize all segments of the electoral cycle since 1999 (Nwozor & Oshewolo, 2017; Ezeibe & Ikeanyibe, 2017). One of such violence, witnessed over the years is known as electoral hate crimes. Hate crimes are acts of violence, discrimination or intimidation motivated by prejudice against individuals or groups based on their religion, ethnicity, gender, beliefs, age, socio-economic status, and political party affiliation. As a result, the groups' members to whom the bias is directed feel themselves rejected, under threat, may be seized with fear, and experience serious

psychological trauma. Hate crimes disrupt the harmony of mistreated individuals and groups within the society as well as their social sense of justice; it can shake people's faith in the state institutions, organizations and the supremacy of law (Erkan, Cömert, Yükseloğlu, & Kostek, 2014). Electoral hate crimes are incitement to hatred and violence, and or criminal acts motivated by bias or prejudice towards a specific group or individuals based on their political affiliation. Such acts could have significant implications for electoral integrity and election security.

In the United States, the election of the first Black president led to a spike in hate crimes in 2008, and it has consistently been on the rise since Trump's presidential campaign in 2015 (The Leadership Conference Education Fund, 2022). And, many have argued that the Presidential election held in 2020 contained one of the most negative, even hateful, campaigns held in America. Many countries in Africa, for example Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Nigeria have not been spared hate crimes and its consequences (Somerville, 2011; Olowojolu, Rasak, Bamidele, Ojo, & Afolayan, 2019). The political violence in several African countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia and Nigeria had links to electoral hate crimes (Somerville, 2011; Mohan & Barnes, 2018; Ezeibe, 2021). According to Binniyat (2012), and Ezeibe (2021), electioneering periods provide the most fertile ground for hate crimes and widespread incitement to hatred and violence.

In Nigeria, the struggle for scarce resources, including state power, since the country's political independence in 1960, has intensified electoral hate crimes and political violence (Ezeibe, 2021). Nigeria is noted for election violence which has become a regular feature of the democratic process. One of the states that has experienced persistent election violence is Nasarawa State. However, very little attention has been devoted to finding out the role of electoral hate crimes in the violence; the vanguards, victims, and consequences of the hate crime in the State have not been clearly understood. The trend seems to get worse with succeeding elections in the State; the electoral hate crimes and violence in Nasarawa State during the 2023 general elections appeared to be more monumental and fiercer than previously. Therefore, this study sought to find out the vanguards, victims and consequences of electoral hate crime and violence in Lafia Local Government Area during the 2023 general elections.

### **History of Electoral Hate Crimes and Violence in Nigeria**

Perry (2001), and Iganski (2008), defined hate crimes as criminal acts motivated by bias or prejudice towards a specific group or individual based on their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. These acts may include physical assault, damage to property,

harassment, or other forms of victimization. In elections, these acts undermine the democratic process, create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation or sway the electoral outcomes by targeting specific communities or individuals.

Nigeria transitioned from colonial to self-rule in 1960; but the country has organized thirteen general elections and numerous regional/state/local elections between 1954 and 2023. A review of these elections reveal that Nigeria has witnessed both pre and post- election hate crimes violence. Nwolise (2007); Campbell (2010) and Orji and Uzodi (2012) have traced electoral violence in Nigeria to animosity, religious dichotomy, pervasive poverty and weak institutionalization of democratic architectures such as political parties, election management bodies, law enforcement agencies and the judiciary. On the other hand, mobilization of ethnic groups to electoral hate crimes by the political leaders during elections has continued to intensify (Ezeibe, 2013). Political leaders in Nigeria use hate speech to mobilize the people already divided along ethnic and religious lines. Put simply, political leaders in Nigeria employ hate speeches in politicking and this incites coexisting ethnic and religious groups, thereby generating all forms of violence especially election related ones.

According to Ezeibe (2015), electoral hate crimes in Nigeria dates back to the pre-independence era, but the colonial administration used the big whip to manage its negative manifestation. After Nigeria's independence, the First Republic politicians employed hate crimes fiercely. This tendency helped in heating-up the polity for electoral violence, sectarian killings, military coups and civil war. Electoral hate crimes in Nigeria laid the foundation for the 1964/1965 electoral violence especially in the Western Nigeria, which culminated into the first military coup and counter coup, the pogroms and civil war in Nigeria.

Although successive military governments in Nigeria suppressed electoral hate crimes and its negative manifestations during 1979, 1993 and 1999 elections, electoral hate crimes reawakened after the death of President Musa Yar'adua and the abandonment of People Democratic Party's arrangement of zoning political offices between the northern and southern Nigeria. Despite that Nigeria has adequate legal frameworks – Constitution of Nigeria, 1999; Electoral Act, 2022; Political Party Code of Conduct, 2013 – to check electoral hate crimes, political leaders and their ethnic/religious and party supporters continue to use hate as a campaign strategy. For instance, there was notable growth in electoral hate crime before, during and after the 2011 and 2015 elections in Nigeria (Ezeibe, 2015). These hate crimes were behind the electoral violence in Rivers State in 2015, and made it impossible to hold the All Progressives Congress campaign in Okrika. Hate crimes were allegedly responsible for the bombing of the All

Progressives Congress Secretariat in Okrika in 2015; the attack by gunmen on the campaign ground of the All Progressives Congress in 2015, and the disruption of All Progressives Congress rally in Okrika with explosives and sporadic gunfire in the same year.

In Nigeria, youths are usually recruited and deployed as political thugs to unleash violent attacks on those with political dissenting voices so as to prevent them from participating in the electoral process (Ugwu & Omotola, 2022). These thugs also disrupt the electoral processes in the strongholds of opposition political parties and their candidates. For instance, in Rivers State, between 2011 and 2019, electoral hate crimes and violence was a significant social and political problem; it undermined democratic consolidation by eroding public trust in the electoral process, discouraged political participation, and promoted social divisions (Wilson & Umar, 2020). In some States, opposition parties were denied of venues (Alubo, n.d.), thus obstructing the conduct of free campaign. Alubo (n.d.) also noted that in some states, female candidates were not able to compete with male opponents because they encountered various forms of violence from party supporters or agents, who were usually men. Such violence included: hate campaign rhetoric, resorting to ethnic and religious themes, insults at political rallies, defacement of campaign posters (Campbell, 2010).

Ezeibe (2015) has observed that hate crimes are mostly rampant in consolidation elections than transition elections in Nigeria. Transition elections are relatively more peaceful than consolidation elections because they are manned by a coercive institution – either a colonial government or a military regime. According to him, the 1954, 1959, 1979, 1993 and 1999 elections took place without significant incidents of violence despite marked cases of irregularities because they were manned by a coercive institution. On reverse, electoral hate crimes and violence characterized consolidation elections in 1964/1965, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011 and the 2015. Consolidation elections in Nigeria are more prone to hate crimes and violence because contending forces in the political process are less able to compromise their common interest (Orji & Uzodi, 2012). This manifested greatly during the 2011 and 2015 elections as the People Democratic Party's rotational presidency arrangement collapsed. During the electoral campaigns for the 2011 and 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria, hate campaign and hate crimes were rife. The situation does not seem to better with subsequent general elections, including the 2023 general elections.

Electoral hate crimes and violence were more likely to occur in States with intense political competition (Varshney & Jha, 2021); and political parties often exploit communal divisions – a very similar situation to what obtains in Nasarawa State (Alubo & Hunduh, 2013; Alubo, Okwuwa, &

Hunduh, 2015; Hunduh, 2020), to mobilize voters, who contribute to an increase in hate crimes and violence during elections.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Merton's (1968) strain/anomie theory guided the study in explaining electoral hate crimes during the 2023 general elections in Lafia Local Government Area. According to Merton, every society has valued goals and prescribed means of achieving the goals. However, access to legitimate means to valued goals is not equally or evenly spread; there are those who have access and those who do not. Merton argues that those who have access to the legitimate means follow the norms or rules while pursuing the goals; they conform. Those who desire the valued goals, but do not have access to the legitimate means experience a strain, and innovate illegitimate means to achieve the valued goal.

This study believed that the 2023 general election in Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa State created strains for some politicians and their supporters, especially that the contest was highly competitive and polarized. These strains were socio-economic factors such as ethnic and religious backgrounds, political party affiliations of candidates as well as their economic status. The chances at the polls were not evenly or equally matched among candidates who contested for elective positions; while some contestants had access to legitimate means to win the elections, others did not. Those who did not have the legitimate means to clinch the much-desired victory innovated illegitimate means of electoral hate crime to win the 2023 general election in Lafia Local Government Area. Thus, hate crime was a strategy used by those groups who did not have access to legitimate means against those they considered had higher chances of winning the elections.

### **Research Methodology**

The study was a cross sectional survey conducted in Lafia Local Government Area of Nasarawa state. The local government area consists of adherents of both Christian, Islamic religions, African traditional religionists, and many ethnic groups. Focus group discussion, and key informant interview guides and observation were used to collect qualitative data for the study. A pilot study was conducted in Akwanga Local Government Area, and the research tools fine-tuned before the researchers proceeded for fieldwork. The population for the study were personnel of the Nigeria Police Force, Nasarawa State Command; personnel of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Nasarawa State office; political party leaders, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and female and male community members. The choice of this category of respondents was

deliberate considering their strategic placement, knowledge and understanding of issues that were being explored.

Sixteen focus group discussions (FGD) were held in four wards with male and female community members. In each ward, four FGDs were conducted with adult males, adult females, male youth, and female youth. Twenty key informant interviews were conducted with either personnel of the Nigeria Police Force, Nasarawa State Command; personnel of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Nasarawa State office; religious leaders, political party leaders, or traditional rulers. Participants were purposefully selected. Data collected were analyzed using NVivo.

### **Results and Discussions**

Hate crimes and violence are still part of the electoral process in Nigeria. Most participants in this study believed the youth are vanguards of electoral hate crimes and violence. Political thugs, who were mainly youth, destroyed or caused damage to individual and public properties, they harassed and intimidated other political party members or supporters. A female participant in focus group discussion in Assakio told her experience within her neighbourhood during the 2023 general elections: "...we heard a loud noise outside our house and when we looked out the window, we saw a group of young men smashing the windows of a nearby shop. They were shouting political slogans and calling out the name of an opposing political party".

This was not an isolated event, there were several others. For instance, a male participant in Ashige revealed that:

During the last election [in 2023], our neighborhood was targeted by a group of young men who went around destroying property and setting fires. They broke windows, defaced walls with graffiti, and set fire to some of the shops and homes in the area. They were shouting political slogans as they did this. Everyone was terrified and many people had to leave their homes for fear of being targeted.

A community member who participated in a focus group discussion at Assakio observed that some young men there destroyed the campaign posters of an opposing candidate and set fire to the ballot papers in the polling unit. According to him, there were many such hate crimes and violence. A female participant in Bukan Sidi recalled:

During the last election [in 2023], a group of men approached me on my way to the polling unit. They were wearing political party shirts and carrying weapons. They asked me if I had a voter's card and when I said yes, they threatened to hurt me if I didn't vote their party. I was so scared that I went home without voting. The worst part is that I know these thugs were connected to the police.

Some respondents believed the police are vanguards of electoral violence; they harass and intimidate people at checkpoints on election days, especially people from the villages. They demand to see voters' card of people in transit; in the process, prospective voters are delayed. These accusations were likely misconstrued; the Police have a duty to restrict movement on voting day.

A male participant in the study in Gayam ward revealed his experience with political party thugs during the 2023 general election:

I was working as a party agent for one of the political parties during the last election. We had been told that our candidate was in the lead and that we were going to win. As the results started coming in, it became clear that we were winning. The other party's agents started shouting and getting angry. Then, out of nowhere, a group of thugs arrived with machetes and started smashing the ballot boxes and threatening people. They were trying to intimidate and silence anyone who wasn't supporting their candidate. It was a terrifying experience. I had to run for my life as the thugs chased after me and my fellow party agents. They were shouting and smashing things as they went. It was chaos. I could hear the screams of people being beaten and injured. It was clear that they were trying to disrupt the election and prevent the votes from being counted. I think it's shameful that people are willing to resort to violence and intimidation to win an election.

Olowojolu, Rasak, Bamidele, Ojo and Afolayan's (2019) had earlier found that election violence in Nigeria is common.

An Electoral Officer in Lafia metropolis stated: "... as a poll worker, I witnessed firsthand the tensions and hostility in the air on Election Day. Voters from opposing sides yelled and shoved each other in queue. There were even a few scuffles that required police intervention. It was a shame to the democratic process." This may not be unconnected to the competitive nature of the 2023 elections. Birch and Muchlinski (2018) observed that violence is more likely to occur during highly competitive elections. These findings corroborate those of Ugwu and Omotola (2022) who in their study of Multidimensional election security threats in Nigeria: Challenges, options and opportunity for the 2023 general elections, concluded that youths were usually recruited and deployed as political thugs. Youth carted away election's materials, disrupted the electoral processes especially in the strongholds of opposition political parties and their candidates. They unleashed violent attacks on those with political dissenting voices so as to prevent them from participating in the electoral process.

Hate crimes were pervasive among various political, religious, and ethnic groups such as Alago, Eggon, and Hausa. These groups were both perpetrators and victims of electoral hate crimes, particularly their youth. Their participation may not be unconnected to existing deep-seated ethnic



and religious tensions and conflicts within Nasarawa State (Alubo & Hunduh, 2013), which very likely, exacerbated during the election period.

Few other respondents blamed politicians, opposition party supporters, religious and ethnic thugs, and government officials for electoral violence in Lafia Local Government Area. A community leader in Bukan Sidi accused politicians for often using divisive language to whip up sentiments against the opposition, this on many occasions led to violence and unrest. He noted that politicians talk about how one group of people is better than the other, and how some people are making a mess of the State. The community leader further disclosed that citizens in the Local Government Area were incited on how they need to fight back against their oppressors, imagined or real. In the same vein, a Catholic Priest in Assakio observed that politicians scapegoated certain minority groups and portrayed them as threats, this incited their supporters to lash out violently. Waya, Ugwuanyi, and Alozie's (2019), Inobemhe, Mohammed, Santas, and Asemah (2021), had earlier found that candidates and their supporters used divisive rhetoric based on ethnicity, religion, and political affiliation to demonize opponents, harass them, and in some instances use physical violence. On the other hand, Chuku and Onapajo (2019) and Han, Min and Zaw (2020) found that electoral hate crime during campaigns manifested in aggressive ethnic violence targeted at those who supported different candidates.

A male community leader in Kwandere area of Lafia said incidences of hate crimes increased in the months leading to elections; neighbours turned against each other, friends became estranged, and community sense of unity shattered. Most participants in all the locations for the research shared the same views with the community leader in Kwandere. For instance, a female participant in focus group discussion in Gayam within Lafia metropolis observed:

It's not just the direct attacks, but the overall environment of suspicion and mistrust that these political debates create. My daughter came home looking scared because some kids at school were saying she doesn't belong here since her family is Muslim. That kind of thing trickles down and makes people feel unsafe in their own neighborhoods.

Electoral hate crimes and violence continued after election results were announced. A female participant in this study in Lafia Central recalled an event that took place in the street where she lived the night election results were announced:

On the night election result was announced, I heard a loud explosion and looked outside to see a car on fire in the street. The car had been parked outside a polling station and had been targeted by a group of young men who were angry at the results of the election. The car exploded, causing

chaos and panic in the street. Luckily, no one was hurt, but it could have been much worse.

These findings validate Ezeibe's (2021) study which found that election violence is pervasive in Nigeria. It is evident that most vanguards of electoral hate crimes were politicians and youth, especially male youth who were political thugs.

There were many victims of different kinds of hate crimes and violence during the 2023 general elections in Lafia Local Government Area; the victims were individuals, political parties, and Independent National Electoral Commission. Participants in this study noted that some people lost properties, others experienced arson, verbal abuse, vandalism, intimidation, and physical violence. Political parties lost properties, experienced arson, and vandalism. People were threatened or attacked because of their political affiliations. According to a male participant in focus group discussion in Gayam in Lafia metropolis, properties like cars, campaign offices and homes were vandalized and/or destroyed in some cases. A senior police officer in Lafia town noted during an interview: '...electoral hate crimes caused arson and vandalism during election periods. I saw firsthand the destruction that arson and vandalism caused during election periods. We saw polling stations destroyed, homes burned down and businesses torched and or looted'. Several geographical areas, including Shabu, Assakio, Ashige, and Gayam were affected by incidents of electoral hate crime and violence from rival political, religious or ethnic groups or their supporters who saw the other as posing threat to victory.

A male participant in this study in Gayam, recalled that party supporters, usually youth from opposing political parties, engaged each other in open street fights. On many occasions during the 2023 electioneering in Lafia Local Government Area, the streets in the city were full of people from opposing parties shouting insults and throwing stones at each other. It was scary and dangerous to go outside. People were afraid to wear anything that showed their political affiliation. A female participant in focus group discussion in Bukan Sidi, narrated how her friend whose brother was contesting for election into the Nasarawa State House of Assembly had her car vandalized and graffitied because of a political party sticker displayed in the car. She concluded that '... the violence and intolerance during elections [in Lafia L.G.A.] was terrible'. These findings corroborate Ezeibe's (2021), and Olowojolu, Rasak, Bamidele, Ojo and Afolayan's (2019) conclusions that election violence in Nigeria is common. Election violence is common because most politicians in Nigeria would like to win at all costs.

Merton (1968) noted that when individuals do not have the legitimate means to achieve valued goals, they may innovate illegitimate means. The stiff competition for political offices was a strain for many politicians and their supporters in Lafia Local Government Area; politicians who saw themselves as not having the approved and legitimate means to win at the polls resorted to electoral hate crimes as an illegitimate means to victory. This argument is similar to Agnew's (2006).

Many participants in the study, including a community leader from Ashige, noted that electoral hate crimes and violence affected all geographical locations; it also affected all ethnic, religious, gender, and political groups in Lafia L.G.A. It flared up in the most unexpected places such as quiet suburbs, bustling urban centers, small villages, rich neighborhoods, college campuses, and even places of worship. A Police Officer in Lafia was emphatic that: 'Electoral hate crimes and violence have no geographic boundaries, they occur everywhere, regardless of geographic location'. However, the patterns differed depending on areas. There were anti-Christian, anti-Muslim, and anti-ethnic incidents in some areas, depending on which religion or ethnic group was most populous in a particular area. To illustrate, a female community member in Shabu stated that a week to the 2023 gubernatorial election, a Muslim family which lived in a Christian dominated area had their vehicle's tyres slashed and hate messages scribbled on the car door. This was not an isolated event; and it shook the community's sense of safety.

Businesses of Christians or Muslims, males or females, and from any of the ethnic groups were not spared. A male Muslim participant in focus group discussion in Lafia shared his experience with electoral hate crime:

As a small business owner, I used to think my shop was immune to hate crimes since it's located in the safer part of the city. But then in the last election [in 2023], someone broke our windows and sprayed paint slurs directed at me because I am a card-carrying member of the opposition party. It was a real wake-up call that no area is truly safe.... We have to stand united against this kind of intolerance, regardless of where it is coming from.

Another Muslim man in Shabu within Lafia was attacked, thoroughly beaten and his shop vandalized during the 2023 elections. He was accused of being a threat to the community. In Kwandere, a shop owned by a female business person was looted and vandalized during the electioneering campaigns in 2023; the perpetrators painted slurs on the front. She was certain the act was by members of the opposition party because of her public support for a particular candidate. Many participants in this study, including a Catholic Priest in Assakio, argued that there was a spike in inflammatory campaign rhetoric, destruction of properties and other electoral hate crimes during the

2023 elections. People became so hateful towards others just because of their political party affiliation. The hate crimes and violence targeted specific ethnic groups, the Hausa, Eggon, and Alago, echoing the ethnic and religious tensions and conflicts that often flare up within the State, most especially during elections. This lends credence to the notion that electoral hate crimes can exacerbate pre-existing societal divisions (Chuku & Onapajo, 2019). The nature of electoral hate crimes revealed in this study reflect the dynamics of ethnic and political polarization described in the work of Höglund (2009), and Ugbagbe (2010).

A youth leader in Assakio observed that religious minorities were the most common targets of electoral hate crimes. Similarly, a Pastor with Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ in Ashige noted that: "... during elections, the religious tension in our community boiled over. Members of the minority religions were seen as outsiders who don't belong here. There were instances where mosques and churches were burned down, and people were assaulted just for going to their places of worship. It's sad and scary". However, a Priest in Assakio observed that the targets for electoral hate crimes were mostly Christians and other marginalized communities. As Campbell (2010) noted in his study of electoral violence in Nigeria, this study found electoral hate crimes and violence in Lafia Local Government Area targeted opposition political parties, ethnic and religious groups.

Electoral hate crimes and violence in Lafia did not end in the pre-voting period, it continued during the vote. On election day in the 2023 elections in Lafia, a female Christian voter who registered in a predominantly Muslim community went to vote. She was chased from the polling unit. She said:

I still remember how terrified I was when those men surrounded me and told me I didn't belong to their community. They threatened me with violence if I didn't leave. I ran home without casting my vote, feeling like a stranger in my own State of origin. It was a really painful and dehumanizing experience that I will never forget (a female participant in FGD, in Lafia)

Many participants narrated similar instances of electoral violence predicated on belief. One of them was a female Muslim in Ciroma area of Lafia who went to a polling unit on election day to cast her vote. The electoral officials told her that she could not vote because she was not wearing a hijab. She recalled:

They said that I was violating the rules of their community. I argued with them, telling them that there was no law that said I had to wear a hijab to vote; but they would not listen. They threatened to call security if I didn't leave, so I had to go home without casting my vote. I felt so angry and humiliated. I couldn't believe that I was being discriminated against just because of my religion. It made me feel like I wasn't even an indigene of

my State. It's such a shame that in this age and time, people can still be denied their basic rights because of their beliefs (a female participant in FGD in Ciroma).

A female participant in FGD in Shabu revealed that many women in the area were denied voting rights on ground that they dressed provocatively, with tight clothes and exposed skin. In Assakio, a predominantly Christian area, a woman in hijab was accused of trying to vote twice on election day. Some men chased and beat her, they accused her of being a member of a certain political party. As Campbell (2010), and Stephen (2017) noted in their study of electoral violence in Nigeria, this study also found electoral hate crimes and violence in Lafia Local Government Area targeted members of opposition political parties, ethnic and religious groups. The findings also agree with Varshney and Jha's (2021) who noted that electoral hate crimes and violence are likely to occur in states with a history of communal tensions and intense political competition. Nasarawa State has experienced several ethnic and religious conflicts arising from political competition (Alubo & Hunduh, 2013; Hunduh, 2020). It's important to pay attention to these patterns of violence in order to develop effective prevention and response strategies to hate crimes and violence within the State.

Electoral hate crimes and violence had consequences on electoral participation, economic and social life in Lafia Local Government Area. A community leader in Ciroma area in Lafia metropolis argued that political debates demonized particular ethnic, religious and cultural groups, which inevitably led to a climate of fear and hostility. A male participant in the research from Bukan Sidi recounted how false rumours about Christians trying to take over the government affected the relationships between Christians and Muslim friends in the election period. Others argued that such talks made some people within the Local Government Area angry, and they did hateful and hurtful things to people considered different. One of the participants who spoke on the consequences of electoral hate crime was a senior Police officer in Lafia, he recalled: "We have seen polling stations destroyed, homes burned down and businesses looted. This not only disrupts the democratic process, but also creates fear and mistrust among different groups". The Police officer further stated that electoral hate crimes and violence made people feel unsafe and discouraged from further participating in the democratic process. However, he noted that enlightenment by some leaders and adherents of the two religions dispelled some of the rumours.

The electoral hate crimes varied from physical violence, intimidation, destruction of property, and verbal abuse between political parties, ethnic and religious groups. Those who were losing out the electoral contest, resorted to rebellion and violence; and those who were targeted resisted. This

created an atmosphere of insecurity for political actors and their supporters in particular, and the general public. People lived in fear of their safety and lives. Pervasive fear undermined the democratic process by deterring voter participation and voting. Cheeseman, Chege, and Wafula (2021), had earlier noted that hate crimes do not occur in isolation but rather in combinations that amplify their detrimental impacts on the electoral process and social cohesion. Electoral hate crimes impacted significantly on the 2023 elections in Lafia Local Government Area; it created a general sense of fear and insecurity among the electorates.

The impact of electoral hate crimes on social life within Lafia Local Government Area was devastating and far-reaching; it created mistrust and division among people of different political, religious and ethnic affiliations. Hate crime and violence divided many people in the Local Government Area; it made them lose sight of the values that bind them together as a people. Lafia Local Government Area lived in fear of insecurity long before the 2023 elections. Nevertheless, the tensions and divisions that arose during election periods worsened the problem, but they did not create it. If anything, the elections simply magnified the underlying issues of insecurity and mistrust that already existed in the community.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This research examined electoral hate crimes and violence in Lafia Local Government Area during the 2023 general elections with the objectives of identifying vanguards, victims, and consequences of such acts. The study concluded that electoral hate crimes and violence were not isolated incidents but widespread during the elections. It affected diverse ethnic, political, and religious groups; and the vanguards were also individuals from diverse religious, ethnic, and political backgrounds, but mostly the youth. However, individuals who were political, ethnic or religious minorities in places they resided experienced more hate crimes and violence.

Furthermore, the study concludes that pervasive hate crimes and violence caused a lot of damage to businesses and other properties, it created insecurity and fear among the electorates which negatively affected political participation. This finding strongly suggests a serious need for a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to create a peaceful political atmosphere in order to stimulate political participation, and ensure the integrity of future elections. Höglund, Jarstad and Kovacs' (2021) study on the impact of electoral violence on democratic consolidation also found that electoral violence has a negative impact on democratic consolidation in several ways. It undermines the legitimacy of elections, reduces political participation and trust in the democratic process, and fuels polarization and

political instability. This study strongly believes the current legal framework and sanctions is insufficient in deterring those who commit electoral hate crimes. There is urgent need for the Independent National Electoral Commission, and the National Assembly to amend electoral laws and impose severe sanctions on offenders to serve as deterrent to others.

In addition, this study concludes that there is need for the Independent National Electoral Commission to invest in robust voter education and awareness campaigns to sensitize citizens on the dangers of electoral hate crimes and violence. This initiative will not only raise public consciousness but also foster a sense of collective responsibility in safeguarding the sanctity of elections. This can go a long way in promoting a culture of peaceful and inclusive participation and preventing future occurrence of electoral hate crimes and violence. This study believes that community peace building and empowerment are vital means of addressing the underlying tensions and divisions that often fuel electoral hate crimes.

Arising from the findings and the conclusions, the study recommends that the Independent National Electoral Commission and the National Assembly should amend the Electoral Act and assign stiffer penalties to electoral hate crimes offenders. the current penalties are not severe enough to deter people from engaging in violence and hateful conducts during elections. When people see and feel the drastic consequences for their actions, they will be less likely to engage in electoral hate crime or violence. We need to promote tolerance and understanding between different groups and to work together to build a more harmonious and just society. There should be more voters' education and awareness campaigns by Independent National Electoral Commission, political parties, civil society organizations, and non-governmental organizations on the harms of electoral hate crimes to prevent the reoccurrence. The social media and traditional media can be used to spread the message about the dangers of electoral hate crimes and the importance of tolerance and understanding. Ackermann (2021) found media literacy education to be an effective tool for combating disinformation and promoting peaceful elections. Civil society organizations can work with community and religious leaders to promote dialogue and understanding between different groups and to provide support for victims of hate crimes. Wall and Zvobgo (2020), Gutbrod (2018), Birch and Alvarez (2017), Ajumah and Asumadu (2020), and Davenport (2020) have noted that civil society organizations play a crucial role in preventing election violence by promoting civic education, monitoring elections, facilitating dialogue between political actors and advocating for electoral reforms. Too often, we wait until violence has already occurred before we act. We need to be more proactive and prevent these crimes. Social media companies have a critical role to play in mitigating the spread of electoral hate speech and crime on

their platforms. They should ensure that their platforms are not used to incite violence or harm. As observed by Stremlau (2020), promoting responsible and ethical reporting, and strengthening media literacy among citizens can counter hate speech and electoral hate crime. Thus, collaboration between media outlets, civil society and state institutions to monitor and address hate speech and hate crime in a coordinated manner should be encouraged. The social media should work together with the police to achieve success. Strategies for effective electoral security management should also include establishing effective coordination mechanisms among security agencies and other stakeholders (Kumar, 2017; Belloni & Keil, 2018).

Government and civil society organizations should encourage funding and support to understand the dynamics of electoral hate crimes, informed prevention and mitigation strategies, and how to promote accountability. Both parties should work together to fund research into the root causes of electoral hate crimes, as well as to develop and implement effective prevention and mitigation strategies. For instance, the government and donor agencies could allocate funds for research into the social and political factors that contribute to electoral hate crimes. They could also provide support for educational programmes that teach young people about the dangers of electoral hate crimes and violence. At the same time, civil society groups should also be encouraged to engage in similar activities.

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