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EFFECTS OF POLITICAL THUGGERY ON DEMOCRATIZATION IN ADAMAWA NORTH SENATORIAL DISTRICT: A STUDY OF 2023 GENERAL ELECTION

Abstract

This study examined the effects of political thuggery on democratization in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 General Election. Political thuggery remains a major obstacle to democratic consolidation through voter intimidation, electoral violence, manipulation of election outcomes, and declining public confidence in the electoral process. The study sought to examine the causes of political thuggery and assess its influence on voter participation. The Elite Theory served as the theoretical framework. A survey research design was adopted, and data were collected from 391 respondents using structured questionnaires selected through random and purposive sampling techniques. Data were analysed using frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. The findings revealed that youth unemployment, poverty, weak enforcement of electoral laws, low political awareness, and substance abuse were the major causes of political thuggery. The study also found that political thuggery intimidated voters, reduced voter turnout, promoted voter apathy, compelled citizens to vote under duress, and weakened public confidence in the electoral process, thereby undermining democratic participation and electoral credibility. The study concluded that political thuggery poses a serious threat to democratic governance in the study area. It recommended the implementation of sustainable youth employment and empowerment programmes, alongside stronger enforcement of electoral laws and improved election security to ensure free, fair, and credible elections.

Keywords: Political thuggery, democratization, electoral violence, voter participation, Adamawa North Senatorial District.

Introduction

Democracy is founded on political equality, citizen participation, and the protection of individual rights through free, fair, and credible elections (Birch, 2020; Kwasau & Mohammed, 2022). However, electoral violence and fraud, including intimidation, coercion, and political thuggery,

continue to undermine democratic consolidation by weakening public trust in electoral institutions and the legitimacy of elected governments (Abdulkadir & Abubakar, 2024; Ogbonna, Ajayi & Eugene, 2022). Political thuggery refers to the organized use of violence and intimidation by individuals or groups, often sponsored by political elites, to influence electoral outcomes (Adekunte, Sadiku & Sadiku, 2024; Agba, 2020). It commonly involves ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, harassment of opponents, destruction of electoral materials, and physical assaults, all of which compromise electoral integrity and discourage citizen participation (Balogun & Ajayi, 2024; Benson, Iya, Abba & Baba, 2024).

In Nigeria, political thuggery has persisted from the colonial period through the post-independence era, when major political parties mobilized youth groups to manipulate elections through violence and intimidation (Abubakar, 2022; “Action Group Crisis in Western Region, 1962”). Despite the return to democratic governance in 1999, electoral violence remains widespread due to poverty, unemployment, political patronage, and weak institutional enforcement (Aliyu, 2022; Hassan, 2020). Adamawa North Senatorial District is a politically strategic area characterized by intense electoral competition. During the 2023 general election, fierce rivalry between the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All-Progressives Congress (APC) was accompanied by reports of voter intimidation, threats against political opponents, and disruptions at polling units, thereby undermining voter confidence, participation, and the credibility of the electoral process (Premium Times Nigeria, 2023; European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023).

Political elites also exploit unemployed youths by recruiting them to perpetrate electoral violence in exchange for financial rewards, only to abandon them after elections. This practice sustains political exploitation, reinforces impunity, militarizes politics, and weakens democratic accountability (Esiri, 2021; Agba, Coker & Ogabab, 2023). Against this background, this study examines the effects of political thuggery on democratization in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election. It focuses on identifying the causes, manifestations, effects, and possible mitigation strategies to provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening electoral integrity, democratic participation, and good governance (Abdulkadir & Abubakar, 2024; Ogbonna, Ajayi & Eugene, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

The sustainability of democratization depends on the conduct of free, fair, and credible elections that enable citizens to exercise their political rights without intimidation or manipulation. In Nigeria, however, political thuggery and electoral violence have continued to undermine electoral integrity, weaken democratic institutions, and erode public confidence in the electoral process (Birch, 2020; Ogbonna, Ajayi, & Eugene, 2022). Although the 2023 Presidential, National Assembly, Governorship, and State House of Assembly elections were expected to strengthen democratic governance, Adamawa North Senatorial District (Maiha, Michika, Madagali, Mubi North, and Mubi South) witnessed several incidents of political thuggery that disrupted the electoral process. Reports of intimidation, violence, and disruption occurred at GSS Mubi Collation Centre, Mayo-Nguli, Belel, Civic Centre Michika, Kwalavaya, Gella, Sabon

Layi, and parts of Madagali, creating fear among voters and electoral officials while reducing voter turnout, electoral credibility, political participation, and public trust in democratic institutions.

Political thuggery also manifested through ballot box snatching, destruction of electoral materials and property, voter intimidation, arson, illegal possession of weapons, ballot stuffing, electoral manipulation, and attacks on political opponents, thereby compromising the fairness and integrity of the electoral process. Despite existing electoral laws and security frameworks, the persistence of political thuggery in the study area reflects weak institutional enforcement, inadequate capacity, and a culture of impunity (Kwasau & Mohammed, 2022; Adekunle, Sadiku, & Sadiku, 2024). The recruitment of unemployed youths by political actors to perpetrate electoral violence has further reinforced cycles of violence and weakened democratic consolidation (Ahmed, 2022; Balogun & Ajayi, 2024). While previous studies have examined electoral violence in Nigeria, limited empirical attention has been given to the specific effects of political thuggery on democratization in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by examining how political thuggery influenced voter participation, electoral credibility, and public confidence, with the aim of providing evidence-based recommendations for strengthening electoral integrity and democratic governance.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the effects of political thuggery on democratization in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. Examine the causes of political thuggery in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election.
- ii. Assess the influence of political thuggery on voter participation in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study thus:

- i. What are the major causes of political thuggery in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election?
- ii. In what ways did political thuggery influence voter participation in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election?

Conceptual Clarification

Politics

Politics has been variously defined as the process of decision-making, governance, and the allocation of power and resources within society. Lasswell (1936) describes politics as “who gets what, when, and how,” emphasizing competition for power and resources, a reality that often fuels rivalry, manipulation, and electoral violence in Nigeria (Abdulkadir & Abubakar, 2024; Ogbonna, Ajayi & Eugene, 2022). Weber (1919) views politics as the struggle for power and influence over the state, explaining the prevalence of intimidation and thuggery in electoral

contests (Benson, Iya, Abba & Baba, 2024; Kwasau & Mohammed, 2022). Similarly, Easton (1953) defines politics as the authoritative allocation of societal values through governance and public policy, arguing that weak institutions and socio-economic challenges such as poverty and unemployment often create conditions for political violence (Ahmed, 2022; Balogun & Ajayi, 2024; Esiri, 2021; Abdulkadir & Abubakar, 2024). Therefore, this study conceptualizes politics as the contest for and management of political power, leadership, and governance, providing a framework for examining how political thuggery undermines democratic participation and institutional legitimacy in Adamawa North Senatorial District.

Thuggery

Thuggery refers to deliberate acts of violence, intimidation, threats, and destruction carried out by individuals or groups (thugs) to secure undue political, economic, or social advantage. Thugs are violent or lawless persons often recruited by powerful individuals to perpetrate assaults, riots, assassinations, and other criminal acts in pursuit of vested interests. The term originated from "*Thuggee*," referring to gangs of robbers and murderers in India (Los Angeles Times, 3 August 2021). Kwasau and Mohammed (2022) define thuggery as criminal behaviour characterized by violence, hooliganism, brutality, and gangsterism. Citing Shankyula (2020), they describe it as any act of intimidation or violence intended to instill fear in perceived opponents and obtain unfair advantage. Similarly, Njoku (2021), citing Idris (2020), views thuggery as the criminalization of politics, where political processes become dominated by ruffians and hooligans, discouraging responsible citizens from participating in governance.

Democratization

Democratization refers to the transition from non-democratic systems, particularly military rule, to democratic governance through the establishment of democratic institutions, the rule of law, and citizens' participation in governance. Democracy, derived from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule), is a system in which citizens participate directly or indirectly in decision-making. According to Abbass (2020), democracy is a system in which leaders are periodically elected by the people, enabling citizens to make informed electoral choices. Similarly, Abah and Nwoku (2021) define democracy as a system where people exercise governing authority either directly or through elected representatives. A fundamental principle of democracy is the conduct of periodic, free, fair, credible, and transparent elections, which enable citizens to hold leaders accountable and ensure that political authority derives from the sovereignty of the people (Abbass, 2020). Thus, democratization emphasizes inclusive governance, popular participation, and peaceful leadership transition through credible elections.

Political Thuggery

Political thuggery refers to the organized use of violence, intimidation, coercion, sabotage, blackmail, kidnapping, and destruction by politicians or their agents to intimidate opponents and manipulate electoral outcomes before, during, or after elections. Agagu (2023) defines it as the illegitimate and unauthorized use of force against others, while Oni (2014) describes it as acts of intimidation, violence, hooliganism, brutality, or gangsterism aimed at securing undue political advantage. Similarly, Shankyula (2020) views political thuggery as any violent or intimidating

act intended to threaten political opponents, whereas Mohammed (2023) argues that it involves coercive practices used to influence voters' behaviour and alter electoral outcomes in favour of particular individuals or political parties. Esiri (2021) further associates political thuggery with violence, kidnapping, assassination, hooliganism, and other criminal acts connected to political processes. Mandyen (2021) regards it as an organized strategy for subverting democratic and electoral processes through intimidation, while Ogbonna et al. (2022), citing Umar et al. (2021), describe it as organized violence and blackmail directed at political opponents to achieve selfish political objectives. Thus, this study conceptualizes political thuggery as the deliberate use of violence and intimidation, often by recruited youths, to influence electoral outcomes and suppress political participation. Such groups are known by different names across Nigeria, including Oduwa People's Congress (OPC)/Area Boys in Lagos, Egbesu Boys in the Niger Delta, Bakassi Boys in Calabar, Sara-suka in Bauchi, Yankalare in Gombe, Yan Daba in Kano, and Yan Shila in Adamawa (P.Y. Mbaya, 2023).

Theoretical framework

The study adopts Elite Theory because it best explains the relationship between political elites, power, and political thuggery. Developed by Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), and Robert Michels (1876-1936), the theory argues that society is divided into a small, wealthy, and influential ruling elite and the larger, less powerful masses. The elite control political power, resources, and decision-making to protect their interests, while the masses have limited influence. Pareto maintains that although elites may be replaced over time, power remains concentrated within the elite class. Similarly, Mosca argues that society consists of a ruling minority and a ruled majority, while Michels describes this dominance as the "Iron Law of Oligarchy." Elite Theory further assumes that the ruling class maintains its dominance through control of institutions, manipulation of public opinion, coercion, and the recruitment of selected individuals into the ruling class to preserve the status quo (Abubakar et al., 2022). Although the theory has been criticized for encouraging inequality and limiting political participation by concentrating power in the hands of a few, its major strength lies in explaining how power and resources are distributed and how elite cohesion contributes to political stability.

The theory is particularly relevant to this study because it explains how political elites manipulate unemployed youths to perpetrate violence, intimidate opponents, and influence electoral outcomes for personal and political gain (Hassan, 2020). By providing money, drugs, and weapons, elites recruit thugs to engage in ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, and other forms of electoral violence in order to retain political power. As Kayode (2020) argues, elite behaviour is largely shaped by the level of political power they possess, while Jega (2020) observes that many Nigerian political elites treat politics as a "do-or-die" affair, sponsoring violence to advance their interests at the expense of democratic governance. Consequently, Elite Theory provides an appropriate framework for examining how ruling elites sponsor political thuggery, undermine democratic consolidation, and sustain their dominance in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a survey research design, which, according to Ekott and Nseyen (2023), involves collecting and analysing data from a representative sample to draw conclusions about a larger population. The design was considered appropriate because it facilitates the collection of quantitative data from a large number of respondents within a relatively short period using standardized questionnaires. It also enables the use of statistical techniques to examine relationships between the independent and dependent variables, thereby providing reliable and comparable data for achieving the study objectives.

Population of the Study

The population of this research consist of all registered voters within the study area as follows; Mubi North 148,693, Mubi South 91,749, Maiha 62,393, Michika 114,485, Madagali 97,019, traditional leaders 5 (one each from the 5 local government), youth leaders 10 (2 from the each of the 5 local government), women leaders 10 (2 from each of the 5 local government), security heads 15 (3 from each of the local government) and political parties 8 (2 party leaders male and female from the four major selected political parties that consist of PDP, APC, LP and NNPP). (INEC 2024).

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

This study employed both simple random and purposive sampling techniques to select respondents. Mubi North, Mubi South, and Michika Local Government Areas were purposively selected due to the reported incidences of political thuggery during the 2023 general election, while respondents were randomly selected from the study population. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula to ensure a representative sample.

The sample of this research is calculated with 95% confidence level by using Taro Yamane (Yamane, 1973) technique. The calculation of the Taro Yamane formula is as follow:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where :

n= sample size required

N = number of people in the population

e = allowable error (%)

Substitute numbers in formula

$$n = \frac{514,357}{1 + 514,357(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{514,357}{1 + 514,357(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{514,357}{1 + 1285.89}$$

$$n = \frac{514,357}{1286.89}$$

$$n = 399$$

Method of Data Collection

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed in line with the study objectives. The questionnaire comprised close-ended questions on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, as well as the causes, manifestations, effects, and control of political thuggery. It was personally administered to the selected respondents by the researcher and trained research assistants, and the completed copies were retrieved for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistical approaches such as frequency (f), percentage (%), mean ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviation (SD). These were used to summaries and interpret the views of the respondents in relation to the study objectives. Responses were reported in terms of frequency and percentage. The level of agreement and the range of variation among respondents were estimated by mean and standard deviation.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	225	57.5
	Female	166	42.5
	Total	391	100.0
Age Group (Years)	18–35	212	54.2
	36–53	130	33.2
	54–71	42	10.7
	Other	7	1.8
	Total	391	100.0
Educational Qualification	FSLC	20	5.1
	SSCE	102	26.1
	ND/NCE	84	21.5
	Degree	163	41.7
	Postgraduate	18	4.6
	Others	4	1.0
	Total	391	100.0
Local Government Area	Michika	78	20.0
	Madagali	72	18.4
	Maiha	61	15.6
	Mubi North	90	23.0
	Mubi South	90	23.0
	Total	391	100.0
Occupation	Unemployed	85	21.7
	Student	123	31.5
	Civil Servant	72	18.4
	Business	87	22.3
	Others	24	6.1

Total	391	100.0
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Source: Field Survey, 2026.

Table 1 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the 391 respondents. The findings show that 225 (57.5%) were male and 166 (42.5%) were female, indicating a male-dominated sample. The majority of respondents, 212 (54.2%), were aged 18–35 years, followed by 130 (33.2%) aged 36–53 years, suggesting that young adults constituted the largest group.

Regarding educational qualification, 163 (41.7%) respondents held a degree, while 102 (26.1%) had SSCE and 84 (21.5%) possessed ND/NCE, indicating that most respondents were relatively well educated. In terms of location, Mubi North and Mubi South each accounted for 90 (23.0%) respondents, followed by Michika (20.0%), Madagali (18.4%), and Maiha (15.6%), reflecting adequate representation across the study area. Concerning occupation, students constituted the largest group with 123 (31.5%), followed by business owners (22.3%), unemployed respondents (21.7%), and civil servants (18.4%), indicating that respondents were drawn from diverse occupational backgrounds.

Table 2: Major Causes of Political Thuggery

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Remark
High youth unemployment contributes to political thuggery	220 (56.3%)	120 (30.7%)	15 (3.8%)	25 (6.4%)	11 (2.8%)	Agreed
Poverty and economic hardship encourage involvement in political violence	205 (52.4%)	140 (35.8%)	12 (3.1%)	24 (6.1%)	10 (2.6%)	Agreed
Weak enforcement of laws facilitates political thuggery	190 (48.6%)	135 (34.5%)	20 (5.1%)	30 (7.7%)	16 (4.1%)	Agreed
Low political awareness and illiteracy promote thuggery	165 (42.2%)	145 (37.1%)	28 (7.2%)	33 (8.4%)	20 (5.1%)	Agreed
Substance abuse among youths contributes to political violence	130 (33.2%)	140 (35.8%)	45 (11.5%)	50 (12.8%)	26 (6.7%)	Agreed

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The findings indicate that political thuggery significantly undermined voter participation in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election. A majority of respondents agreed that political thuggery intimidates voters and reduces turnout, with 215 (55.0%) strongly agreeing and 130 (33.2%) agreeing, consistent with findings by Ojo (2021) and Abdullahi and Umar (2023). Similarly, 200 (51.2%) strongly agreed and 140 (35.8%) agreed that electoral violence creates fear that discourages citizens from voting (Bello & Ahmed, 2022; Musa, 2022). Furthermore, 195 (49.9%) strongly agreed and 130 (33.2%) agreed that intimidation by thugs promotes voter apathy (Akinola, 2021; Olabode & Oyediran, 2022), while 175 (44.8%) strongly agreed and 135 (34.5%) agreed that the presence of thugs at polling units compels voters to vote under duress (Mustapha, 2020; Abdullahi & Umar, 2023). In addition, 190 (48.6%) strongly agreed and 140 (35.8%) agreed that repeated electoral violence weakens public confidence in elections (Ojo, 2021; Musa, 2022). Therefore, the findings show that political thuggery reduces

voter participation, promotes apathy, and weakens public trust in democratic institutions, highlighting the need for stronger electoral security, civic education, and electoral reforms (Bello & Ahmed, 2022; Akinola, 2021).

Table 3: Influence of Political Thuggery on Voter Participation

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Remark
Political thuggery intimidates voters and reduces turnout	215 (55.0%)	130 (33.2%)	15 (3.8%)	20 (5.1%)	11 (2.8%)	Agreed
Electoral violence creates fear and discourages citizen engagement	200 (51.2%)	140 (35.8%)	18 (4.6%)	23 (5.9%)	10 (2.6%)	Agreed
Intimidation by thugs leads to voter apathy	195 (49.9%)	130 (33.2%)	28 (7.2%)	28 (7.2%)	10 (2.6%)	Agreed
The presence of thugs forces citizens to vote under duress	175 (44.8%)	135 (34.5%)	30 (7.7%)	38 (9.7%)	13 (3.3%)	Agreed
Repeated incidents of violence diminish public trust in elections	190 (48.6%)	140 (35.8%)	25 (6.4%)	28 (7.2%)	8 (2.0%)	Agreed

Source: Field Survey, 2026.

The findings indicate that political thuggery significantly undermined the credibility and fairness of the 2023 general election in Adamawa North Senatorial District. A majority of respondents agreed that political thuggery manipulates election outcomes, with 210 (53.7%) strongly agreeing and 125 (32.0%) agreeing (Ojo, 2021; Abdullahi & Umar, 2023). Similarly, 200 (51.2%) strongly agreed and 140 (35.8%) agreed that thuggery compromises free and fair elections (Bello & Ahmed, 2022; Musa, 2022). In addition, 190 (48.6%) strongly agreed and 145 (37.1%) agreed that political violence weakens public trust in democratic institutions (Akinola, 2021; Olabode & Oyediran, 2022). Furthermore, 185 (47.3%) strongly agreed and 140 (35.8%) agreed that political thuggery disrupts peaceful political competition (Mustapha, 2020; Abdullahi & Umar, 2023), while 200 (51.2%) strongly agreed and 130 (33.2%) agreed that electoral manipulation by thugs undermines election integrity (Bello & Ahmed, 2022; Ojo, 2021). Overall, the findings demonstrate that political thuggery erodes electoral credibility, fairness, and public confidence, underscoring the need for stronger electoral security, law enforcement, and electoral reforms (Musa, 2022; Akinola, 2021).

Summary of Findings

- i. The study found that high youth unemployment, poverty, weak enforcement of electoral laws, low political awareness, and substance abuse among youths were the major causes of political thuggery in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election. The findings indicate that socio-economic deprivation and weak institutional capacity created an enabling environment for the recruitment of youths into political violence, thereby sustaining political thuggery in the study area.

- ii. The study found that political thuggery had a significant negative influence on voter participation during the 2023 general election in Adamawa North Senatorial District. It intimidated voters, reduced voter turnout, created fear, promoted voter apathy, compelled some citizens to vote under duress, and weakened public confidence in the electoral process. Consequently, political thuggery undermined democratic participation and the credibility of elections in the study area.

Conclusion

This study examined the effects of political thuggery on democratization in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2023 general election, with particular emphasis on its causes and influence on voter participation. The findings established that high youth unemployment, poverty, weak enforcement of electoral laws, low political awareness, and substance abuse were the major factors responsible for political thuggery in the study area. These factors created an enabling environment for the recruitment of youths into electoral violence by political actors.

The study further concluded that political thuggery had adverse consequences for democratic governance by intimidating voters, reducing voter turnout, promoting voter apathy, and weakening public confidence in the electoral process. Consequently, political thuggery undermined the credibility, fairness, and integrity of the 2023 general election in Adamawa North Senatorial District. The study therefore concludes that addressing the socio-economic and institutional drivers of political thuggery, alongside strengthening electoral security and law enforcement, is essential for promoting credible elections and sustainable democratic governance in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following thus:

- i. The Federal and Adamawa State Governments, in collaboration with relevant agencies such as the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, and vocational training institutions, should implement sustainable youth empowerment, skills acquisition, and employment programmes. These initiatives should also be complemented by public enlightenment campaigns and drug abuse prevention programmes to address the socio-economic factors that encourage the recruitment of youths into political thuggery.
- ii. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and security agencies should strengthen electoral security by ensuring strict enforcement of electoral laws, prosecuting individuals involved in political thuggery regardless of their political status, and providing adequate security at polling units. In addition, continuous voter education programmes should be intensified to encourage citizens' participation, protect voters from intimidation, and restore public confidence in the electoral process.

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