



THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOS) AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN SAFEGUARDING CIVIL BEHAVIOR DURING ELECTIONS IN PLATEAU STATE

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Abstract

Elections are fundamental to democratic governance, but their credibility and peaceful conduct largely depend on the behaviour of political actors and citizens throughout the electoral process. In Plateau State, Nigeria, electoral periods have often been characterized by tension, hate speech, voter intimidation, political violence, and other forms of uncivil behaviour that threatens democratic stability and social cohesion. This article examines the role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and political parties in safeguarding civil behaviour during elections in Plateau State. The paper explores how CSOs contribute through voter education, election monitoring, advocacy for peaceful participation, conflict prevention, and the promotion of democratic values, while political parties are assessed based on their responsibility in candidate selection, issue-based campaigns, adherence to electoral rules, and discouragement of violence among supporters. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, including scholarly articles, policy documents, electoral reports, and media publications, the study analyses the extent to which these actors influence electoral civility and the electoral processes in Plateau. The findings reveal that while CSOs have made significant contributions toward promoting peaceful elections and civic responsibility, political parties often undermine these efforts through inflammatory rhetoric, electoral malpractice, and weak internal democratic practices. The study concludes that strengthening collaboration between CSOs, political parties, electoral institutions, and security agencies is essential for

sustaining peaceful and credible elections in Plateau State. It recommends stronger enforcement of electoral laws, increased civic education, institutional support for CSOs, and greater party accountability to enhance democratic culture and civil electoral behaviour.

Keywords: Civil Society Organizations, Political Parties, Civil Behaviour, Elections, Democratic Governance, Plateau State, Nigeria.

Introduction

Elections are known all around the world as the cornerstone of democratic governance which provides citizens the opportunity to elect their leaders, hold them accountable, and participate in decision-making processes (Ajisebiyawo & Masajuwa, 2016). However, in spite of these, elections are often accompanied by various challenges in many parts of the world. These challenges include incidents of violence, manipulation, and irregularities that undermine the credibility of the electoral process. Elections in Nigeria are often fraught with complexities arising from ethno-religious diversity, political competition, and social tensions (Nwankwo, 2023). It is in this context that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Political Parties can play a vital role in promoting peace, ensuring transparency, and fostering civil behavior during elections.

CSOs are non-governmental organizations that represent the interests of the public, operating independently from government control. Their work focuses on promoting social justice, human rights and democracy. In Plateau State, CSOs have taken on critical roles in safeguarding civil behavior during elections by educating voters, monitoring elections, mediating conflicts, advocating for electoral reforms, and protecting human rights. This paper aims to explore in-depth the contributions, challenges, and future prospects of CSOs in promoting civil behavior during elections in Plateau State, drawing from specific case studies and examining the broader implications of their efforts.

Overview of Elections in Plateau State

Plateau State is located in Nigeria's Middle Belt and is known for its complex socio-political landscape. The state is characterized by a high degree of ethnic and religious diversity, which has historically contributed to tensions, particularly during elections (Asemah, Nwammuo & Edegoh, 2014; Ogbuleke, 2019). Elections in Plateau State, like in many other parts of Nigeria, are often marred by electoral violence, voter intimidation, fraud, and other irregularities. Political

competition in the state is often framed along ethnic and religious lines, with different groups vying for control of political power and state resources. This has led to a highly polarized electorate and heightened tensions during election periods.

The history of electoral violence in Plateau State is well-documented (Asemah, Nwammuo & Edegoh, 2014; Ogbuleke, 2019). Elections in the state have been associated with violent clashes between supporters of rival political parties, the use of political thugs to intimidate voters, and the manipulation of election results. These challenges have eroded public trust in the electoral process and contributed to widespread disillusionment with democracy. In such an environment, the role of CSOs in promoting peaceful elections and safeguarding civil behavior becomes critical.

Defining Civil Behavior in Elections

Civil behavior during elections in the context of this paper refers to the conduct of both voters and political actors in a manner that respects the rule of law, human rights, and democratic norms. It encompasses a wide range of actions, including peaceful participation in the electoral process, adherence to legal frameworks governing elections, tolerance for political opposition, and respect for the outcome of elections. Civil behavior is essential to the integrity of elections, as it ensures that the process is free, fair, and reflective of the will of the people.

However, achieving civil behavior in elections can be difficult, particularly in contexts where political competition is intense, and the stakes are high. In Plateau State, where ethnic and religious divisions often define political allegiances, elections can become highly charged, leading to instances of voter manipulation, intimidation, and violence. In such contexts, the role of CSOs in promoting civil behavior is crucial to ensuring that elections are conducted in a peaceful, transparent, and credible manner.

The Role of CSOs and political parties in Promoting Civil Behavior

Voter Education and Civic Awareness - One of the most critical roles that CSOs and political parties play in promoting civil behavior during elections is voter education. Voter education involves informing citizens about their rights and responsibilities during elections and providing them with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions. In Plateau State, where illiteracy, misinformation, and voter apathy are significant challenges, voter education is essential to ensuring that citizens understand the importance of their participation in the electoral process.

CSOs such as the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth & Advancement (YIAGA), and the CLEEN Foundation have been actively involved in voter education initiatives in Plateau State. These organizations conduct a wide range of activities, including workshops, seminars, and town hall meetings, to educate voters about the electoral process, the importance of voting, and the need for peaceful participation. In addition to face-to-face engagement, CSOs also use radio programs, social media platforms, and printed materials to reach a broader audience, particularly in rural areas where access to information may be limited (Ayinde, 2019). Voter education campaigns by CSOs and political parties help to reduce voter apathy and increase voter turnout by empowering citizens to take part in the electoral process. Moreover, these campaigns contribute to the reduction of electoral malpractice by equipping voters with the knowledge to resist voter manipulation, vote-buying, and intimidation. In the long term, voter education fosters a culture of active citizenship, where voters understand that elections are not just about selecting leaders but also about holding them accountable.

Election Observation and Monitoring - Election observation is another key area in which CSOs and political parties contribute to promoting civil behavior during elections. Election observation refers to the process of monitoring the conduct of elections to ensure that they are free, fair, and transparent. CSOs deploy trained election observers to polling stations to monitor various aspects of the electoral process, including the voting, counting, and collation of results (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2013). Observers also document any irregularities or incidents of violence, fraud, or intimidation that may occur during the elections. In Plateau State, organizations like the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, Human Rights Watch, and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) have been at the forefront of election observation efforts. These organizations send teams of trained observers to various parts of the state to monitor the conduct of elections and to document any incidents of fraud, voter intimidation, or violence. The presence of election observers serves as a deterrent to electoral malpractices, as political actors are less likely to engage in illegal activities when they know that they are being watched.

Election observation also provides valuable data that can be used to assess the overall integrity of the electoral process. Reports from election observers are often used to challenge election results in court, advocate for electoral reforms, or hold electoral bodies accountable for their conduct. Furthermore, the findings of election observers contribute to building public trust in the electoral

process. Citizens are more likely to accept the outcome of an election if they believe that it was conducted fairly and transparently.

Conflict Prevention and Mediation - Given the history of ethno-religious conflict in Plateau State, elections are often a flashpoint for violence. Political competition is frequently framed along ethnic or religious lines, leading to heightened tensions between different groups. In this context, CSOs and political parties play a critical role in conflict prevention and mediation by promoting dialogue, fostering reconciliation, and encouraging political tolerance. CSOs such as the Plateau Peace Practitioners Network and the Interfaith Mediation Centre have been actively involved in conflict prevention efforts in Plateau State. These organizations bring together political candidates, traditional leaders, religious leaders, and community representatives to engage in dialogue and commit to peaceful elections. Through peace accords and conflict resolution workshops, CSOs help to reduce tensions and prevent violence during elections (Sule, Sambo, Ahmed & Yusuf, (2021).

In addition to facilitating dialogue, CSOs also play a role in mediating disputes that arise during the electoral process. For example, if there are allegations of electoral fraud or voter suppression, CSOs can act as mediators between the aggrieved parties and the relevant authorities to resolve the issue peacefully. By providing a platform for grievances to be addressed and resolved, CSOs help to prevent the escalation of conflicts and promote a peaceful electoral environment.

Advocacy for Electoral Reforms - CSOs are also instrumental in advocating for electoral reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in the electoral process. Electoral reforms are necessary to address the structural weaknesses in the electoral system that contributes to electoral violence, fraud, and manipulation. CSOs use their platforms to push for changes in electoral laws, the strengthening of electoral institutions, and the adoption of new technologies that enhance the credibility of elections. In Plateau State, organizations like the Electoral Reform Network (ERN) and the Nigeria Civil Society Coalition for Electoral Reform have been leading the charge for electoral reforms. These organizations have called for the introduction of electronic voting systems, the strengthening of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and the implementation of stricter penalties for electoral offenses. Their advocacy efforts have contributed to several positive changes in the electoral system, including the adoption of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and improvements in the transparency of the collation process.

By advocating for electoral reforms, CSOs help to create an enabling environment for civil behavior during elections. Electoral reforms reduce the opportunities for electoral malpractice, enhance the accountability of political actors, and promote public confidence in the electoral process. In the long term, these reforms contribute to the consolidation of democracy and the promotion of peaceful and credible elections in Plateau State.

Protection of Human Rights - During elections, the rights of citizens, including the right to vote, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly, are often threatened. Security forces may clamp down on opposition rallies, political thugs may intimidate voters, and the media may face censorship or harassment. In such situations, CSOs play a vital role in protecting the human rights of citizens and ensuring that elections are conducted in a free and open environment. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International Nigeria and the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) have been actively involved in monitoring and documenting human rights abuses during elections in Plateau State. These organizations provide legal assistance to victims of electoral violence, advocate for the release of political detainees, and call for accountability for perpetrators of human rights violations. By shining a spotlight on these abuses, CSOs hold the government and security agencies accountable for their actions and ensure that the rights of citizens are protected (Onuh & Ike, 2021). The protection of human rights is essential to promoting civil behavior during elections, as it ensures that citizens can participate in the electoral process without fear of violence, intimidation,

Challenges faced by CSOs and political parties in promoting civil behavior during Elections

While CSOs play a crucial role in promoting civil behavior during elections, they face several challenges that hinder their effectiveness. Some of these challenges include:

Political Interference and Harassment - CSOs working on election-related issues in Plateau State often face political interference and harassment from state actors, political parties, and even security forces. In some cases, CSO staff members and political party agents may be intimidated or harassed for exposing electoral fraud, criticizing government policies, or advocating for electoral reforms. Political elites who view CSOs as a threat to their electoral interests may attempt to discredit or undermine their work by labeling them as biased or as agents of foreign powers. Political interference can also take the form of attempts to co-opt or control CSO activities. For example, political parties may seek to infiltrate CSOs in order to gain access to voter data or

manipulate voter education campaigns for their own benefit. In other cases, security forces may restrict the movement of election observers or prevent CSOs from holding public meetings, particularly in sensitive areas where tensions are high. Harassment of CSOs can also extend to legal restrictions, such as the imposition of burdensome regulations or the revocation of licenses needed to operate. Governments may pass laws that limit the ability of CSOs to receive foreign funding or conduct advocacy work on electoral issues, thereby curbing their ability to hold political actors accountable.

Ethno-Religious Tensions - In Plateau State, where ethnic and religious divisions often shape political competition, CSOs must navigate a complex and polarized environment. The state's diverse population includes various ethnic and religious groups, and elections often become a battleground for competing identities. In such a context, CSOs may face accusations of favoritism or bias, even when they are working to promote peace and fairness. For example, a CSO that organizes a voter education campaign in a predominantly Christian area may be perceived as being biased against Muslim communities, and vice versa. Ethno-religious tensions can also undermine CSO efforts to mediate conflicts or promote dialogue between political actors. In highly polarized environments, political parties may be unwilling to engage with CSOs that they perceive as aligned with their opponents' ethnic or religious group. This can make it difficult for CSOs to foster reconciliation and encourage political tolerance, especially in areas where trust between different communities is already low. Moreover, CSOs that focus on conflict prevention and peacebuilding may find it challenging to address deep-seated grievances related to land ownership, access to resources, and historical injustices, which often exacerbate electoral tensions. These long-standing issues cannot be resolved through short-term interventions, making it difficult for CSOs to promote lasting peace during elections.

Limited Access to Rural Areas - Many CSOs face logistical challenges in reaching rural areas, which are often the most vulnerable to electoral violence, voter manipulation, and misinformation. Plateau State has a large rural population, and many of these communities are isolated due to poor infrastructure and limited communication networks. CSOs often lack the resources and capacity to effectively reach these remote areas, which means that rural voters may not receive the same level of voter education, election monitoring, or conflict mediation as their urban counterparts. In addition, rural areas may have higher levels of illiteracy, making it more challenging to communicate complex information about the electoral process. CSOs must often adapt their voter

education materials to account for linguistic and cultural differences, but doing so requires additional resources and expertise. Without adequate engagement in rural areas, the electoral process may be skewed in favor of political actors who are able to manipulate rural voters through patronage networks, vote-buying, or intimidation.

Insecurity and Violence - Insecurity and violence pose significant challenges to the work of CSOs during elections. In Plateau State, elections are often accompanied by outbreaks of violence, particularly in areas with a history of ethno-religious conflict. The threat of violence can make it difficult for CSOs to operate safely, particularly when conducting election observation, voter education, or mediation efforts in conflict-prone areas. For example, election observers deployed by CSOs may be targeted by political thugs or armed groups seeking to disrupt the electoral process. In some cases, CSO staff members may be caught in the crossfire of violent clashes between rival political supporters. The risk of violence also makes it difficult for CSOs to hold public meetings or organize peacebuilding workshops, particularly in areas where tensions are high and security forces are unable or unwilling to maintain order. Insecurity also affects the ability of CSOs to provide timely and accurate reports on the conduct of elections. In areas where violence breaks out, CSOs may be forced to suspend their operations or withdraw their staff for safety reasons. This limits their ability to monitor elections effectively and to provide independent assessments of the electoral process.

Lack of Coordination Among CSOs - While there are many CSOs working on election-related issues in Plateau State, the lack of coordination and collaboration among these organizations can limit their overall impact. CSOs often operate in silos, with each organization focusing on its own specific area of expertise, such as voter education, election observation, or conflict mediation. While specialization is important, the absence of a unified approach can lead to duplication of efforts, gaps in coverage, and missed opportunities for synergy. For example, a CSO working on voter education may not have access to the data collected by an election observation group, limiting its ability to tailor its messaging to address specific challenges in certain areas. Similarly, a conflict mediation organization may not be aware of ongoing advocacy efforts for electoral reforms, preventing it from leveraging these reforms to promote long-term peace. A lack of coordination can also weaken the collective voice of CSOs in advocating for electoral reforms or holding government institutions accountable. When CSOs operate independently, their advocacy efforts may be fragmented, making it easier for political actors to ignore or dismiss their

recommendations. Greater collaboration and coordination among CSOs would enhance their ability to influence the electoral process and to promote civil behavior during elections.

Public Distrust of CSOs - In some cases, CSOs may face skepticism or distrust from the public, particularly in contexts where political actors or the media have questioned the legitimacy or impartiality of these organizations. In Plateau State, where political competition is often highly charged, some voters may perceive CSOs as being aligned with particular political parties, ethnic groups, or religious communities. This perception can undermine the credibility of CSO activities, particularly in areas where political allegiances are deeply entrenched. Public distrust of CSOs can also be fueled by misinformation and propaganda spread by political actors seeking to discredit election observation reports or voter education campaigns. For example, a political party that feels threatened by a CSO's election observation efforts may accuse the organization of bias or foreign interference. In such cases, CSOs may struggle to build trust with the public, making it difficult for them to effectively promote civil behavior during elections.

Conclusion

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and political parties play a crucial role in promoting civil behavior during elections in Plateau State. Through voter education, election observation, conflict mediation, advocacy for electoral reforms, and the protection of human rights, CSOs contribute to ensuring that elections are conducted in a peaceful, transparent, and credible manner. However, CSOs face several challenges that hinder their effectiveness, including political interference, ethno-religious tensions, limited access to rural areas, insecurity, a lack of coordination, and public distrust. Despite these challenges, the contributions of CSOs remain indispensable to the electoral process in Plateau State. Moving forward, greater collaboration among CSOs, increased support from the international community, and more robust legal protections for CSO activities will be essential to enhancing their capacity to safeguard civil behavior during elections. By addressing these challenges, CSOs can continue to play a vital role in promoting democracy, peace, and good governance in Plateau State and beyond.

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