

Port Harcourt Boys politricks = war

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By Chxta

There is something that my friends who are ancestrally from Rivers have always told me, that they have not had elections in their state since 1999. I had always found that a little funny, but today I realised that they were dead serious. Every four years, while those of us in the rest of Nigeria pick up our voter cards, assorted groups in Rivers state pick up their guns, knives and cudgels, and go to war.

The introduction to what was to come started early enough, when on arrival in Port Harcourt a few days ago, I noticed that while people were interested in discussing the elections, they were distinctly uninterested in getting photographed, or in giving their names. All the people I spoke with before today had a similar opinion - on Saturday, people would die.

For security purposes, I was observing the elections, riding under the wing of an American NGO, so myself and my driver were instructed to be at their office by 7 in the morning. However, such was the fear that when I wanted to step out of my hotel this morning, the receptionist asked me point blank where I was going, then pleaded with me not to go. Reason, there are elections.

Upon arriving the premises of the NGO, the first call had already come in. There was trouble at the Rivers State School of Arts, so off we went, and indeed, at 8 in the morning, it was clear that things were not going to be kosher. At the School of Arts which for the election doubled as a distribution centre, APC agents had wrecked the INEC materials. They were looking for the

results sheets, which, as was the case two weeks ago, had somehow not made it to the elections. Soon after, the state governor, Rotimi Amaechi, arrived. He listened to what the INEC officials had to say, then drove off. As he was driving off, a shot was fired, from someone in a police uniform. The crowd descended on him, and could well have lynched him if other policemen had not intervened. They quickly realised that he was not a policeman, and gave him a bit of the mob treatment, before arresting him.

By the time this was done and we headed towards the next point, we had already started hearing of all sorts of mayhem from the radio. This proved to be a very reasonable guide for the rest of the day.

Our next point of call was The State School at Moscow Road. Asides from the fact that materials were clearly late in arriving, the school was orderly, so we took a few pictures and moved on. Next stop was Chief ART Okiri Road, where accreditation had started. By this time, I was beginning to relax and tell myself that it could not be so bad, and that things would improve over the day.

Then from the other vehicle, my companions received a message about trouble at Abonnema Wharf, so off we went. That turned out to be a waste of petrol as the wharf was dead. Quiet. We saw a few wharf rats who tried to extort some money from us, but thanks for small mercies and the security provided by my companions, we were able to continue unmolested. As we were leaving, it was clarified that the trouble was at Abonnema town, not the wharf, so we had a debate as to whether to go there.

In the meanwhile, on the radio we heard that there was serious trouble in Buguma in Asaritoru LGA, and there was an awkward moment as I wanted to go there, and my driver quite seriously assured me that were I to insist on going there, I would have to drive myself, and without a passenger. He promised that not even the Almighty would make him go to "that place where they don't value human life". Given that I'd paid him for the luxury of taking me anywhere I wanted, it was decidedly inconvenient, but the situation was resolved by the chaps in the other car when they told us that they already had a comrade on the way to Buguma, and since we were riding under their security cover, where they went, we went. We were going to Abonnema.

On the way to Abonnema from the wharf, we drove first along the entire length of the Ikwerre Road, one of the longest roads in Port Harcourt I gather, and then along another very long road, Mguogba Road. In all polling units along both roads, there was not a single sign of activity. I was informed that the distribution centre at the School of Arts covered quite a number of wards in Obio-Akpor LGA, which is the largest in Rivers state, and the covered polling units (PUs) included all of the PUs along both roads. Essentially, because of the results sheet palaver, quite a number of people had effectively been disenfranchised.

The next stop along the way to Abonnema was Ozuoba Primary School. On the radio we'd heard that there was trouble there, so it was a good place to stop and see what was happening. It turned out that aggrieved APC supporters had locked up INEC staff in the school premises, another distribution centre. Reason, missing voting materials, especially result sheets. The police were trying to resolve the situation just about the only way they knew how, violently.

We had to move on and save Ozuoba for later. As we moved on towards Abonnema, the report came in from our man in Buguma. What we had heard on the radio was true. Someone had been decapitated, and seven vehicles had been set on fire at the local office.

Over the radio, we kept hearing tales of mayhem in other parts of the state. Then, shortly after Choba, cellular network died, and we had to ride in silence until we got to Degema.

The ride to Degema was serene, as was the drive through Degema itself. As we had seen in all the communities en route, polling units were empty of people save the occasional INEC staff, and about two or three policemen. Finally we crossed the bridge into Abonnema.

Abonnema is a picturesque looking town by a body of water. We parked on the main road, with the front facing the way out, then proceeded on foot into the main polling unit, and this was where it happened.

When we got there, there was no accreditation going on. Youths in the town were going around and asking people not to vote, so as a result, INEC staff were idling away while townspeople were watching with disinterest. Then a young woman walked up to be accredited, and in a flash, a young man took a bottle and broke it on her head. Everyone, including the INEC officials, prospective voters, my driver, and myself, at that point decided to call it a day.

The drive back was in silence, this time not enforced by the lack of a phone signal. Myself and my driver were quite sober following what we had seen. I have, in my three and a half decades, seen quite a few acts of violence, but not one so brazenly targeted at a woman. The radio, and its tales of people being killed in so many places, was our only companion.

Back in Choba, and we got off the main road so we would ride through the town. The story was the same all the way. There was simply nothing election related, happening in Choba. So we made our way back to the Ozuoba Primary School, and spoke with an INEC official there, who declined to give his name. He confirmed that as of that moment, just after midday, his fellow officials were still locked up in the primary school, and it did not look like being resolved so soon. Meanwhile on the radio, it was report after report of violence in different parts of the state.

Finally, we returned to Port Harcourt, and proceeded straight to the Methodist Primary School at Banham, where Hallelujah, accreditation had finished, peacefully, and people were waiting in an orderly fashion to vote. We hung around a bit while my NGO friends went about collecting their own data, then we moved on to a mini-stadium in Phalga, to meet some small drama. An APC agent was soliciting for votes, which is illegal, and he was promptly approached by some young men from the area. A few slaps later, and he had realised the error of his ways. The guys made sure that he stayed on the naughty step just outside the polling unit.

Next place to go was the State Primary School at Rumuomasi. Unfortunately, we arrived a few minutes after the mayhem. However, the scattered INEC property all over the place told its own story. There was going to be no voting at that centre, so we moved on, to the Old GRA.

At Old GRA, among the middle class, the vote was orderly, and things had gone on without incident. So we stayed there for almost an hour taking a rest. It had been an eventful day so far.

By the time we were ready to resume, voting had started in places where voting was going to happen so we decided that there was no need to go outside of Port Harcourt again. We then proceeded to St. Mary's School at Aggrey Road, and there I saw the highest turnout I witnessed in these polls. Five polling units, each with between a hundred and two hundred voters. We observed them for a while, and realised that against INEC regulations, even though accreditation was still going on, voting had started. But we moved on.

As we headed back to the Methodist School, a friend from Abonema called to inform us that accreditation had finished there, as well as voting, and that counting was now in progress. No, no, and no. This, to be honest, was simply not possible, given what we had witnessed in that town earlier in the day. However, we were far off, so we took it in stride and pressed on.

Back at the Methodist School, and voting was over, a crowd of young men and women passed right in front of me, having an argument over their takings that day. Apparently, they'd been paid to vote, and were arguing over what each person would get. They eventually settled for N200 each.

The rest of the day was a matter of hopping from polling unit to polling unit within a small area, listening to their vote count. It was clear to me, that in that area of Port Harcourt, the triangle between Banham, Borokiri and Phalga told me something: Wike, the PDP candidate is genuinely popular in those areas, and given that those, and a very few other places were the places where voting actually took place, I expect that he would win the vote. However, there were enough malpractices all over the election area to arm Dakuku Peterside, the APC candidate with enough material to mount a legal challenge.

To improve the electoral process in Rivers, this may be needed. I don't see how there can be decent elections in this state as long as it continues to remain in sync with the rest of the country. A state like Rivers needs to be on its own calendar like the seven states in which elections did not hold today. Any other way, and thuggery will continue to reign supreme, stunting the growth of this beautiful state.