

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	692
Land:	Nigeria
Kilde:	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)
Titel:	'Do not come out to vote'
Udgivet:	Oktober 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	19. december 2023



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

'DO NOT COME OUT TO VOTE'

GANGS, ELECTIONS, POLITICAL
VIOLENCE AND CRIMINALITY IN
KANO AND RIVERS, NIGERIA

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OCTOBER 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to several collaborators who played key roles in making this research possible. We are grateful to the researchers who conducted a significant portion of the fieldwork, whom we cannot name for their safety. We are also thankful for the insights and feedback provided by Mark Shaw, as well as the statistical analysis conducted by Lyes Tagziria. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of the publications team at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). As part of the COPIGoG project, this report is partly funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, and administered by the DANIDA Fellowship Centre. The research results are independent, and the views and opinions expressed by project partners based on the research findings do not necessarily reflect those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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FROM VISION TO ACTION: A DECADE OF ANALYSIS, DISRUPTION AND RESILIENCE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime was founded in 2013. Its vision was to mobilize a global strategic approach to tackling organized crime by strengthening political commitment to address the challenge, building the analytical evidence base on organized crime, disrupting criminal economies and developing networks of resilience in affected communities. Ten years on, the threat of organized crime is greater than ever before and it is critical that we continue to take action by building a coordinated global response to meet the challenge.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

APC	All Progressives Congress
EFCC	Economic and Financial Crimes Commission
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission
LGA	Local government area
MEND	Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta
NDLEA	National Drug Law Enforcement Agency
NDPVF	Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force
NDV	Niger Delta Vigilante
NEPU	Northern Elements Progressive Union
NNPP	New Nigeria People's Party
NPC	Northern People's Congress
NSCDC	Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps
PDP	People's Democratic Party



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Political violence is a major obstacle to democratic processes worldwide. Violence perpetrated in pursuit of electoral victory has widespread consequences: the destruction of lives and property, the displacement of people, undermining the credibility of the electoral process, and the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions.¹ In countries throughout Africa, including Nigeria, Kenya, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone, gangs play a pivotal role in political violence. When they are not perpetrating political violence, the same gangs often engage in a range of illicit markets.² Yet, so far, analyses have not adequately scrutinized the link between gangs, political violence and illicit markets, predominantly understanding them as separate phenomena.³ The intersection between them has been understated, with important implications for response strategies.

Background

Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, criminal gangs have played an increasingly pivotal role in driving political violence in the country. These criminal actors engage in a broad spectrum of activities, including intimidation of voters and political opponents, assassinations and disruption of political rallies on behalf of political actors. Gangs are remunerated in cash, material gifts and other favours from political actors, including state appointments and protection.

Despite the deployment of security forces, election periods in Nigeria have long been characterized by high levels of violence – the 2023 elections were no exception.⁴ Although data collated regarding political violence in Nigeria broadly demonstrates a decrease in lives lost compared to previous electoral cycles, the number of violent incidents recorded has grown. Furthermore, the research presented in this report underscores that number of incidents of political violence fails to capture the full impact of political violence in determining Nigeria's most recent political outcomes. Disenfranchisement was a clear consequence of covert forms of threat and intimidation: the 2023 elections saw the lowest voter turnout in Nigeria's history, with President Bola Tinubu's mandate effectively granted by less than 10% of Nigeria's electorate.

Though electoral violence is a countrywide concern in Nigeria, Kano in the north and Rivers in the south are repeatedly among the states hit hardest by political violence. In 2023 both became flashpoints for election violence.⁵ Both states are highly politically competitive and have a strong presence of criminal gangs with links to politicians, which play a leading role in electoral violence. The long history of election violence, coupled with the incidents of attacks and clashes leading up to and during the 2023 elections, had a major impact on voter turnout, the voting process and, consequently, the outcome of the elections in these areas.

Criminal gangs are not the only actors that have been associated with violence in Nigeria. For example, different groups, including violent extremist organizations such as Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'adati wal-Jihad (JAS), armed bandits in the north, as well as secessionists such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the south-east have allegedly been involved in violence in different parts of the country. However, this report focuses on criminal gangs because they have featured more prominently in election-related violence and they have comparatively deeper roots in the country's social and political landscape in the states under study.

As case studies, the situations in Kano and Rivers demonstrate that political violence in Nigeria cannot be dismissed as a phenomenon limited to a particular geography or political party. The states are positioned in different regions, beset by different criminal and conflict dynamics, and have contrasting histories of political affiliation. Yet the centrality of political violence – and the pivotal interlinkages between crime and politics it reveals – is a common thread corroding democratic processes across both states, and Nigeria as a whole.

In Kano and Rivers, the current dynamics of political violence emerged when political parties contracted elements of pre-existing groups (hunters' associations and cult groups, respectively) to attack opponents, voters and election officials. The contracted groups benefited from this political alignment, and over time there emerged a mutually beneficial ecosystem between gangs and politicians. This ecosystem – the exact contours of which are shaped by complex local factors – is highly damaging for the Nigeria's democracy. The two case studies presented in this report attempt to untangle this complex ecosystem and explore key questions: did gangs or political violence emerge first? What happens to gangs on the losing side of the political contest?

Furthermore, elections are cyclical, and political gangs seem poised to service the demands of their political contractors at each four-year interlude. But what do these gangs do in the interim? This question – what do political thugs do when they are not doing political violence?⁶ – underpinned this research. Criminal markets provided the answer. This report argues that outside of election cycles, criminal gangs involved in political violence are engaged in a range of illicit markets for their sustainability and resilience. The link between political violence and illicit markets is a significant concern as it provides criminal actors with political cover and access to the means to perpetrate further acts of violence and criminality. Exploring the implications of such intersections for politics and governance, and identifying potential ways to disrupt such links, is therefore urgently required.

Methodology

The research process behind this report involved several different steps, beginning with a review of literature on political violence in Kano and Rivers. This was followed by a series of internal discussions among different teams within the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) with expertise in analyzing criminal gangs and political violence across an array of urban locations in Africa, and with external researchers in Nigeria and beyond. Fieldwork was then carried out in different parts of Kano and Rivers states between November 2022 and June 2023. Interviews were conducted with 76 people (32 in Kano and 50 in Rivers), including active and former gang members, victims of violence, eyewitnesses, civil society, law enforcement, community leaders, journalists and vigilante members. In addition to the interviews, the field researchers in Kano and Rivers also conducted direct observations of political events before and during the elections held on 25 February for president and federal legislators and on 18 March 2023 for governors and state lawmakers.



The 2019 governorship election saw massive mobilization of gangs in Kano, resulting in deadly clashes and an inconclusive first round of voting. © Pius Utomi Ekpei/AFP via Getty Images

The research also drew on secondary sources, including media reports, social media, videos and other media circulated on WhatsApp, expert analyses and reports by civil society organizations. These were supplemented by monitoring of social and traditional media between November 2022 and January 2023, and an additional round of media reviews in June 2023.⁷

Findings

To effectively respond to election-related violence, it is important to understand and disrupt the link between the criminal gangs that perpetrate the violence, political actors and the illicit markets that sustain these gangs when they are not engaging in political violence.

This report highlights seven key findings regarding the link between gangs, political violence and illicit economies:

- While political violence pre-dates the role of gangs in politics, it previously took the form of state repression. Political actors' engagement of members of pre-existing but apolitical groups to perpetrate direct attacks on political opponents, electoral officials and voters transformed the landscape of election violence, and birthed a mutually beneficial ecosystem that undermines democracy and empowers criminal gangs.
- Only a fraction of political violence is measurable. The threat of violence, built up through consistent use of violence in previous election cycles and arguably at unprecedented heights in the 2023 elections, is just as powerful in shaping electoral outcomes and driving disenfranchisement. A surge in covert political violence likely contributed to record low turnout in the 2023 elections.
- The gangs that perpetrate political violence coordinate other criminal activities outside elections seasons. In Kano, the Yandaba predominantly coordinate local drug markets, while in Rivers political thugs are central players in oil bunkering, piracy and kidnapping. These criminal activities are central to the economic resilience of gangs between election cycles.
- Gangs aligned with the losing side in elections face various costly outcomes. In addition to losing access to benefits such as political appointments, patronage or protection, gang members become targets of persecution, crackdowns, raids and sometimes lethal action. These consequences intensify the stakes, motivating gangs to take significant measures to secure electoral victory by all means.

- The ways that politicians engage criminal actors to provide services (namely, perpetration of political violence), and the complex web of remuneration flowing from this, highlights the risks of political protection of criminal markets.
- The engagement of gangs for political thuggery has led to increased weaponization within criminal markets. Politicians supply arms to gangs to perpetrate violence during election seasons. After elections, these same arms are used to carry out violent crimes, such as piracy and armed robbery.
- While the impact of political violence is primarily local, the perpetrators are also engaged in other criminal activities with regional and international consequences. The financing, protection and arming of such groups in the context of elections can therefore have impacts that reverberate beyond national borders, affecting international concerns such as piracy.

This report sheds light on the complex interplay between gangs, political violence, and criminal markets in Nigeria, focusing on the 2023 elections. Addressing this issue demands comprehensive strategies that go beyond isolated responses to political violence such as security deployments. Efforts should encompass disrupting the criminal networks involved, tackling the illicit activities that sustain these groups and, importantly, pursuing the sponsors of political violence to ensure they face justice.

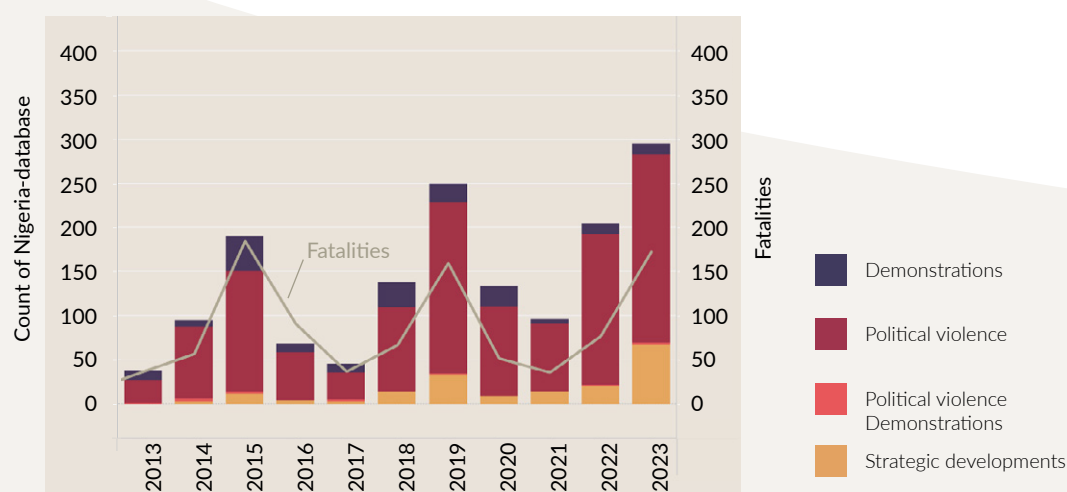


FIGURE 1 Incidents of election-related violence and fatalities in Nigeria, 2013–2023.

NOTE: Close observers in Kano and Rivers unanimously agreed that ACLED figures are likely to be a significant under-representation of political violence events. Consequently, while these figures provide some insight into trends, they certainly do not show a holistic picture. Furthermore, ACLED's data collection sources were expanded in 2017 and 2018, and they have remained consistent since then. Consequently, while data for the 2019 and 2023 elections allows for direct comparison, shifts in data collection are likely to affect comparability before 2019.



EVOLUTION OF GANGS AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN KANO AND RIVERS

To understand the role played by political gangs in Nigeria's 2023 elections, it is necessary to track how they evolved alongside the country's political landscape. Throughout Nigeria, the prevalence of political gangs can be attributed to underlying structural factors, such as unemployment, poverty, corruption in political institutions, the acceptance of violence as a political tool, and perceptions of inequality and marginalization.⁸ However, the emergence and development of gangs are influenced by specific contextual factors that vary across regions. In Kano, political gangs originated in the 1950s and immediately established close connections with local politics. By contrast, in Rivers, political gangs started as campus 'cult groups' and later expanded their influence to the streets. Unlike in Kano, they did not have significant ties with politicians until Nigeria transitioned to a democratic system of government in 1999.

The contextual differences in the emergence and evolution of gangs in Kano and Rivers have implications for their interactions with politicians, motivations for engaging in political violence, involvement in illicit markets and the strategies required for effective responses.

Terminology of political violence and criminality in Nigeria

Cult groups: Groups that started as campus confraternities in the 1960s and 1970s but have evolved into street gangs that have engaged in various criminal activities since the 1990s.

Election violence: Violence perpetrated to increase the chances of electoral victory or undermine political opponents before, during or after elections.

Political violence: Violent acts perpetrated to further political interests.

Oil bunkering: All actions encompassing oil theft, such as oil diversion, smuggling and the illicit loading of ships without authorization, as well as illegal refining of crude oil in a process known as 'cooking' or 'kpo fire'.

Piracy: Any unlawful acts of violence or detention, or any act of robbery, carried out for personal gain by the crew or passengers of a private ship or aircraft on the open seas against another ship or aircraft, or against individuals or assets on board such ship or aircraft.

Talakawa: Hausa word for the poor or peasants.

Yanbanga: Hausa word for vanguards, used to describe a group of men recruited by political parties to protect their ideals through violence. Yanbanga were common in parts of northern Nigeria in the early 1950s and the early 1980s. In other parts of Nigeria, Yanbanga is used to refer to local vigilantes and neighbourhood watch groups.

Yandaba: Criminals who derived their name from the Hausa word *daba*, meaning gangs. The groups are associated with different forms of violence and criminal activity.

Yanfarauta: Hausa name for hunters or a group of hunters.

Yantauri: A group of men believe to have protection against knives. Yantauri are prevalent in northern Nigeria. ■

Emergence and evolution of gangs in Kano

Locally known as Yandaba, the gangs at the forefront of political violence in Kano today are the product of over six decades of evolution. The first instance of gangs being utilized to perpetrate violence against political rivals dates back to 1951. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), a political party backed by the colonial administration and the Native Authority, launched a campaign of suppression against its more popular rival, the Northern Elements Progressives Union (NEPU) – a populist party with a substantial following in impoverished communities.

Although political violence pre-dates the role of gangs in Kano's politics, it was in the form of state repression. The NPC had used the instruments of the state to suppress the opposition NEPU, arresting and using security forces to harass opposition leaders. However, when NPC elements feared the growing popularity of the opposition, particularly among the poor, they paid members of the pre-existing hunters' associations (previously unlinked to politics) to operate as instruments of political violence, directly attacking NEPU members, thereby birthing the Yandaba. In reaction, NEPU also resorted to the use of gangs. The key difference between the two parties' first use of gangs was that gangs working for NEPU originally primarily did so due to ideological alignment, unlike those engaging with the NPC where material incentives were central from the beginning.⁹ Thus, gangs became progressively more central to political dynamics.

Successive military coups intermittently cut the gangs off from their major source of finance: rents paid by politicians. The return to a protracted period of military rule in 1983 after a brief democratic spell ushered in a long stretch of financial difficulties for the gangs. In parallel, structural adjustment programmes adopted in 1986 led to shrinking formal employment opportunities, making many young people vulnerable to recruitment into criminal markets.¹⁰

The Yandaba sought alternative funding streams, and Kano's growing drug market was well situated for this purpose. From the 1980s, the Yandaba transitioned from drug users to significant players in drug distribution, strategically positioning themselves as dealers of commonly abused drugs, such as cannabis, diazepam and, since the early 2010s, tramadol.¹¹

Since the return of democracy in 1999, gangs have gradually consolidated themselves as key actors in Kano's politics by strengthening their links to politicians and asserting their influence over the outcome of polls. The number of politicians who recruit gangs has also increased, leading to growing violence in Kano State.¹²

By the 2003 electoral cycle, gangs had become embedded in the security architecture of government officials, performing services that conventional security personnel were unable or unwilling to perform. Such services included attacking opponents, intimidating voters and disrupting campaign rallies and elections.

As gangs were recruited by a growing number of politicians from all political parties, intra-group clashes between Yandaba factions hired by opposing politicians became frequent. In contrast to the characteristic ideological leanings of the Yandaba in the 1950s, most Yandaba gangs have now lost their ideological bent and are recruited by all sides. Political gangs played an increasingly central role in the election cycle of 2007, and even more so in the 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections.

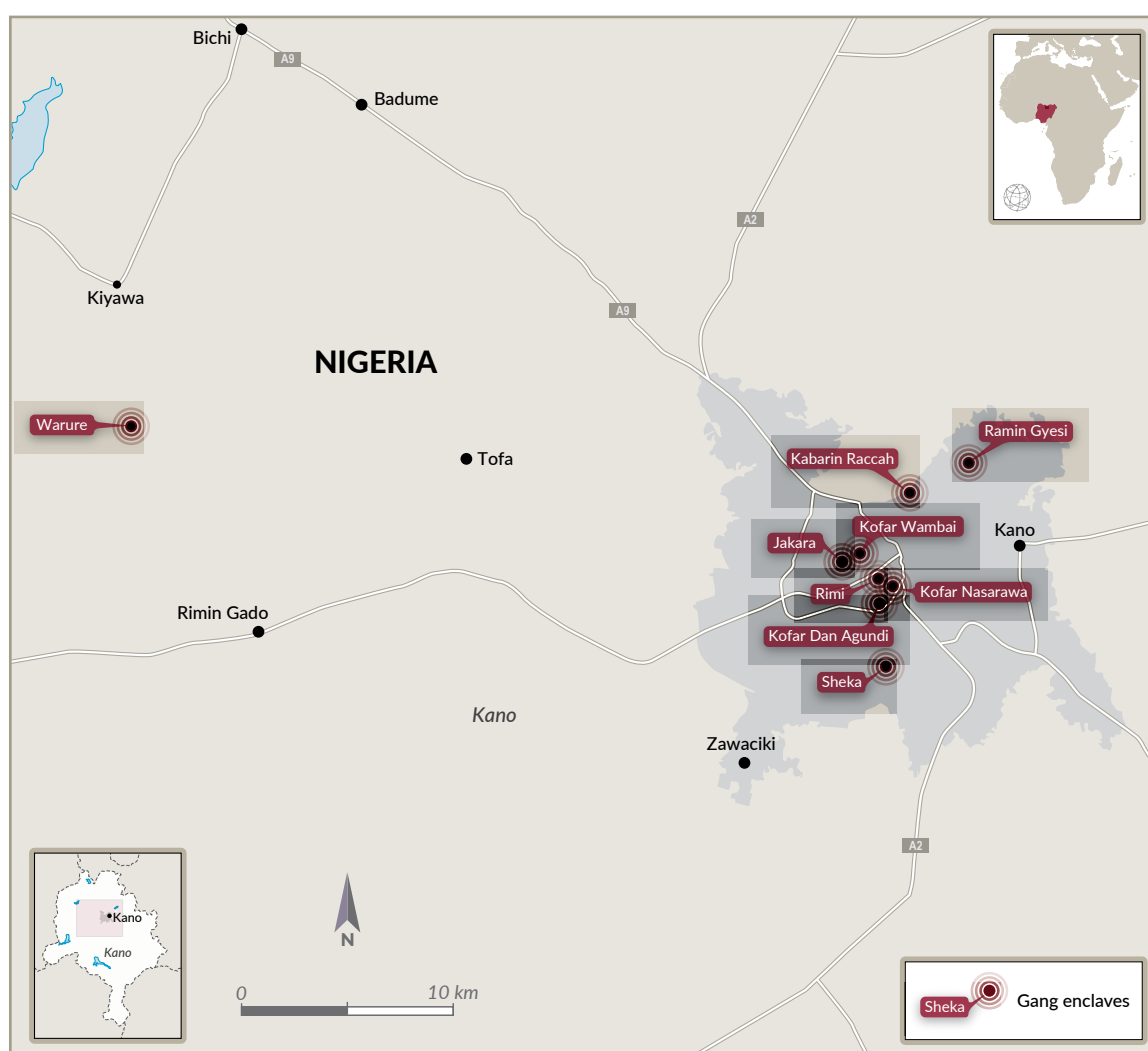
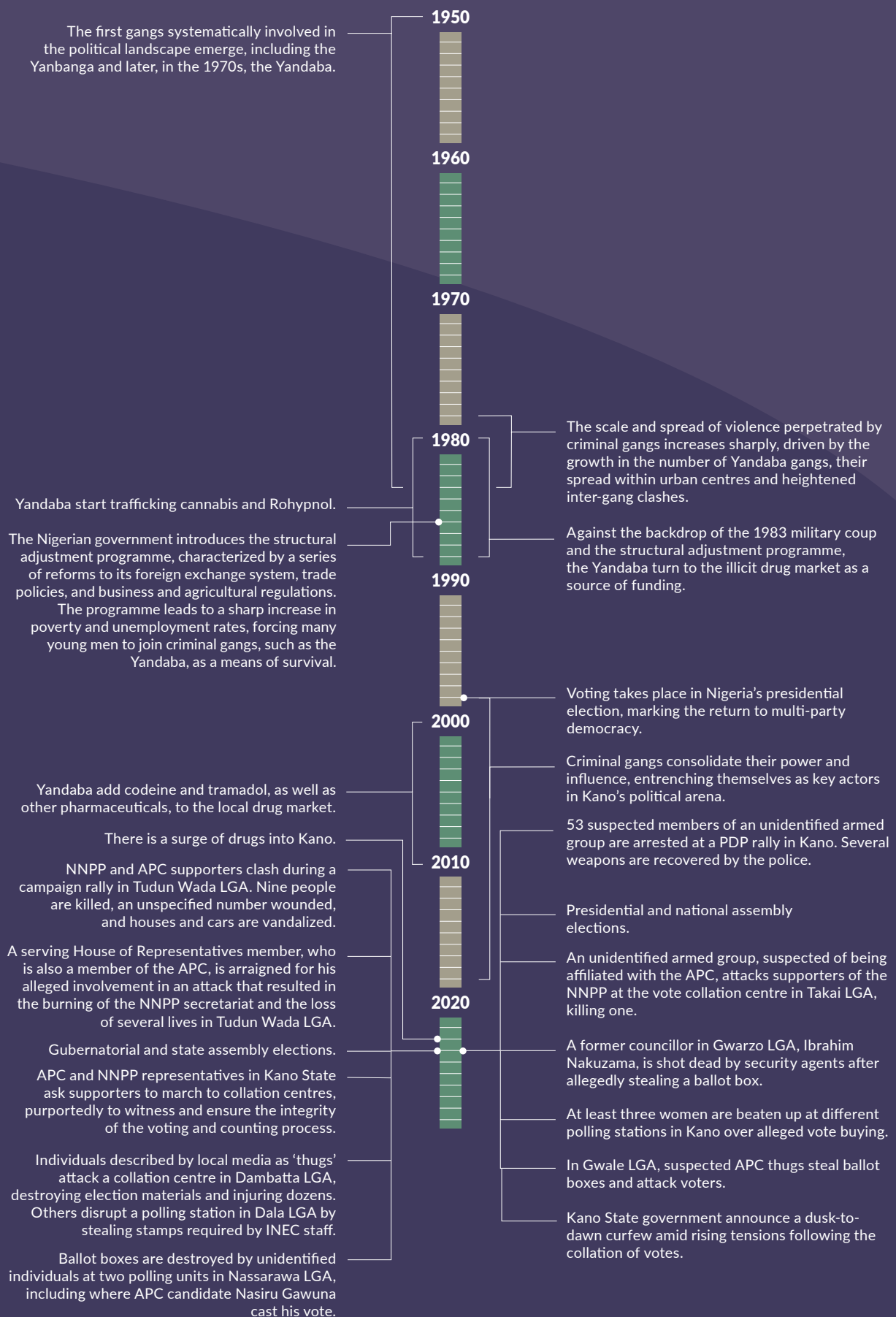


FIGURE 2 Gang strongholds around Kano.

TIMELINE OF THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL GANGS IN KANO





Weapons provided by politicians to gangs to perpetrate violence during the election season are later used in other criminal activities, including armed robbery. Photo: Kano Police Command

In 2019, the Yandaba adopted a markedly more significant role in determining the outcome of the elections in Kano. During the 2019 governorship election in particular, there was a massive mobilization of gangs in Kano.¹³ In response to a rerun following an inconclusive first round of elections, there was a surge in political violence and voting was stopped across a number of local government areas (LGAs) due to unprecedented violence.¹⁴ The outcome of this rerun is widely believed to have been influenced by the threat of violence from gang members allegedly linked to both major political parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP).¹⁵

Emergence and evolution of gangs in Rivers

The emergence of fraternities in Nigerian university campuses that would later evolve into cult gangs began in the 1950s, with such groups proliferating across Rivers State and the wider Niger Delta region from the 1980s.¹⁶ Campus fraternities were originally formed to advocate for students' needs and concerns, and were initially peaceful until spats broke out and members began carrying knives and machetes. In the late 1980s and 1990s, these fraternities began evolving into cult gangs, expanding their presence and activities to the streets, where younger (and more reckless) boys began forming junior cults, such as Deebam and Deewell, which engaged in petty crimes and acts of violence. In the early 1990s, cult groups began to control low-level drug distribution.¹⁷

Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 was a pivotal point in the integration of cult groups into Rivers' political landscape. Leading up to this point, mirroring the situation in Kano, political violence had been predominantly characterized by state repression. The ruling party wielded state resources and apparatus to suppress opposition parties. For instance, it was a common practice for the ruling party to monopolize transportation resources by booking all buses, cars and boats, leaving the opposition with no options for campaigning. Additionally, state security agents were used to detain opposition party members, releasing them only after elections had concluded. However, between 1999 and 2003, political parties started contracting members of pre-existing cult groups to conduct direct attacks on political opponents, electoral officials and voters,¹⁸ as well as hijack ballot boxes and rig election results.¹⁹

According to civil society representatives, it was at that point that Ateke Tom, once a seller of mud blocks cut from the riverbank, rose to power as a key leader of political gangs and started influencing political outcomes. Ateke overpowered the previous leader of the Iceland cult group – an offshoot and street wing of Vikings university campus cult – and took control of the group.²⁰

Notably, both Ateke and the secretary of the state government for whom Ateke Tom was directly working at the time were from Okrika, an island in Rivers State. In the lead-up to the 2003 elections in Rivers, the Icelanders played a key role in securing a PDP victory in Okrika LGA. This area had been under the control of the opposition All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) since 1999.²¹ According to Human Rights Watch, the Icelanders effectively expelled the ANPP-affiliated Bush Boys from Okrika under the leadership of Ateke Tom, securing a PDP victory in the local government.²²



Yandaba members at a campaign rally in Kano. Yandaba gangs are at the forefront of political violence in the state.

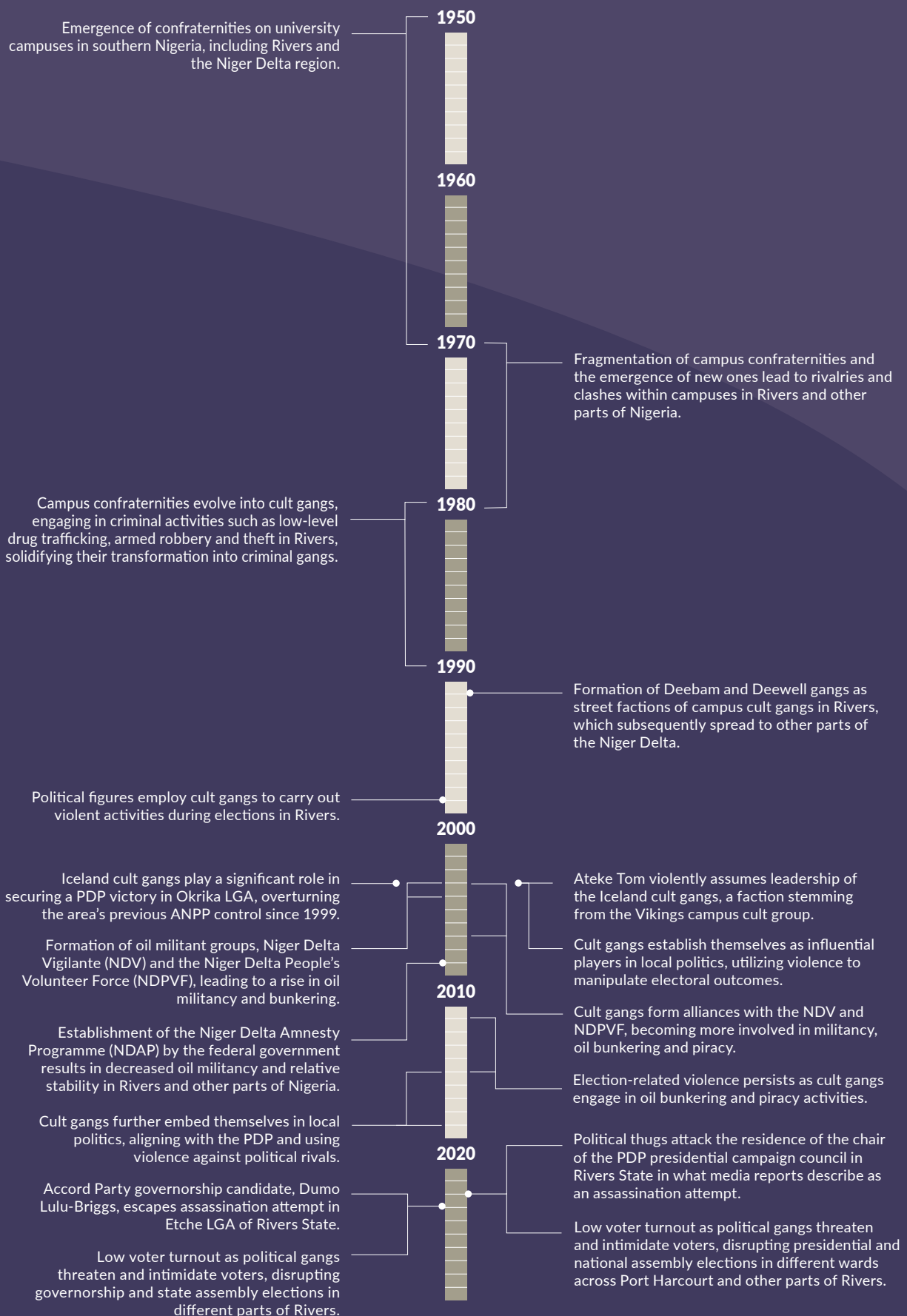
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The 2003 elections in Rivers marked the consolidation of cult groups as key actors in political violence and shaping electoral outcomes. The elections that followed in 2007, 2011 and 2015 were characterized by varying levels of violence with cult groups playing a central role in aggressive attacks against political opponents of the ruling PDP, as well as rival cult groups working for the opposition.²³

The Niger Delta has a very long history of oil bunkering, as well as different forms of piracy.²⁴ While the exact moment that cult group members started becoming involved in these activities is unclear, such connections appear to have been established by 2019.

With growing resources from oil proceeds flowing to Rivers and other parts of the Niger Delta, cult gangs were recruited for electoral violence with more and increasingly sophisticated weapons. Additionally, a significant number of security personnel were compromised through bribery, allowing election-related violence to thrive openly.

TIMELINE OF THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF CULT GANGS IN RIVERS



TYPOLOGIES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE 2023 ELECTIONS IN KANO AND RIVERS

The indications that gangs would play bigger roles in the February 2023 elections started manifesting in 2022 and persisted in the pre-electoral period. The increased involvement of gangs in previous episodes of election violence in Kano and Rivers had underscored the utility of gangs to politicians, cemented their impunity and heightened the fear of gangs among residents. Governorship elections have consistently exhibited higher levels of violence compared to presidential elections, both in the specific contexts of Kano and Rivers, as well as on a national scale (Figure 3).



A political party office torched by suspected thugs allegedly led by the Majority Leader of Nigeria's House Representatives, 26 February 2023, a day after Nigeria's presidential and national assembly elections. *Photo supplied*

Importantly, incidents involving threats and intimidation were prominently reported across the entire election timeline. However, in the lead-up to the elections, violence across Nigeria, and in both Kano and Rivers states, increased at two specific points: around party primaries between May and June, and around the official start of political campaigns between September and October 2022, remaining relatively high from until the elections in February 2023.²⁵

According to ACLED data, Kano and Rivers presented contrasting trends in levels of election-related violence incidents during the elections of 2019 and 2023. While Kano reportedly experienced an upswing in election-related violence in 2023 compared to 2019, Rivers had a reduction in violence in the same time period (Figures 4 and 5). These trends are also mirrored in the statistics related to fatalities from multiple sources.²⁶ Standing at odds with the data, Rivers respondents repeatedly reported that the 2023 elections had been the most violent ever: 'We have never had it this bad when it comes to elections in Rivers State.'²⁷ This discrepancy may be due in part to the difficulties of collecting accurate data on political violence, and partly shaped by higher levels of covert violence.

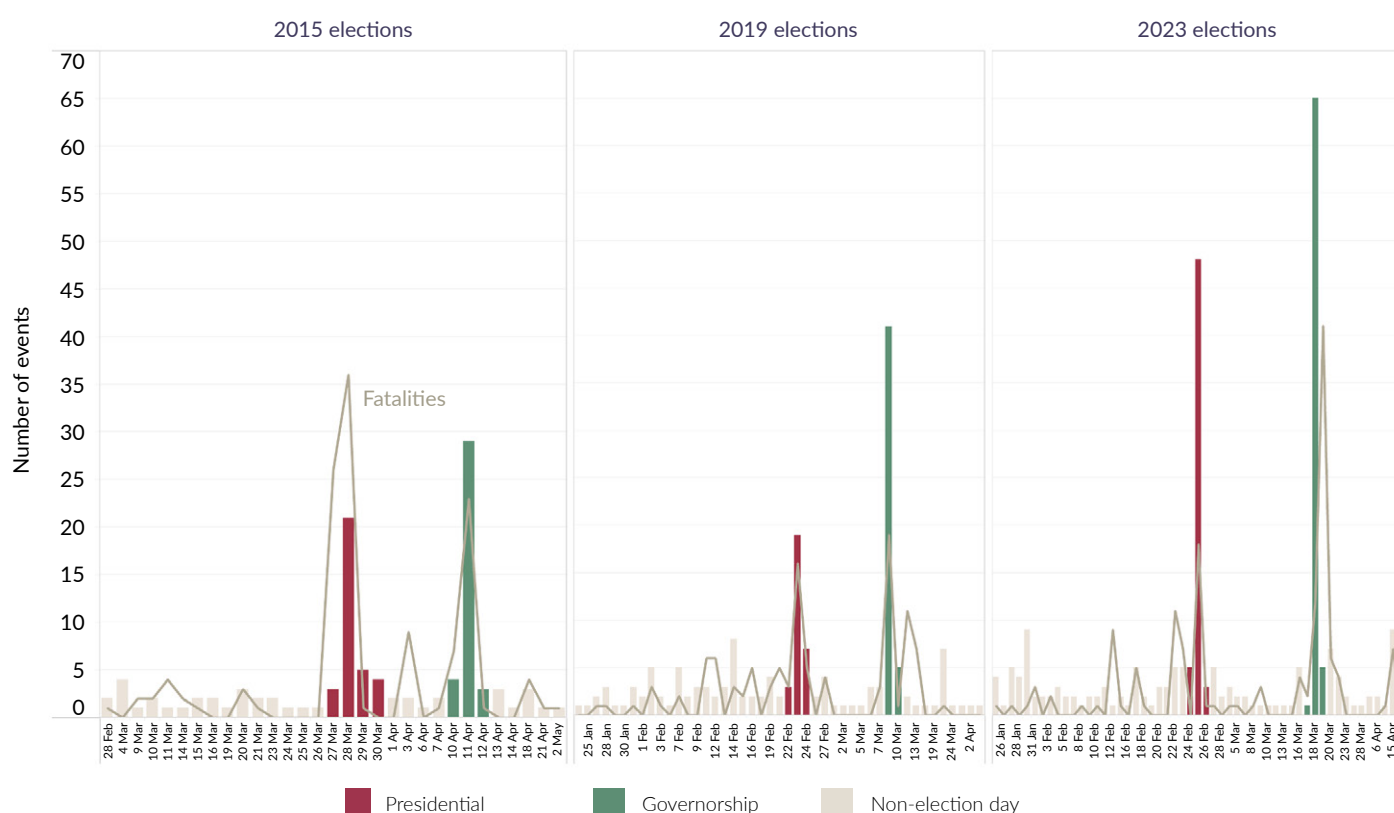


FIGURE 3 Incidents of election-related violence and fatalities in presidential and governorship elections in Nigeria, 2015, 2019 and 2023.

NOTE: The number of deaths associated with election violence decreased from 240 in 2015 to 197 in 2019 and to 161 in 2023. In the Niger Delta, the number of deaths decreased from 82 in 2015 and 2019 to 56 in 2023. ACLED data collection improved in Nigeria from circa 2019, meaning comparing data before and after this point is challenging, with differences potentially shaped by data collection approaches. ACLED data records an increase in national election-related violence over time, with the 2023 elections the most violent on record. However, nationwide data of fatalities generally shows a downward trend. This trend is corroborated by other data sources, including Nigeria Watch and PIND Peace Map, which also show a steady decline in fatalities associated with political violence between 2015 and 2023. Nigeria Watch shows that deaths caused by political violence in elections months dropped from 184 in 2015 and 881 in 2019 to 636 in 2023. See: Nigeria Watch, <https://www.nigeriawatch.org/index.php?urlaction=evtStat>.

SOURCE: ACLED

Both Kano and Rivers saw a significant surge in the utilization of threats and intimidation by political gangs to exert influence over the electoral process. Key stakeholders in both contexts emphasized the increased prevalence of such tactics during the 2023 elections in comparison to earlier electoral cycles.²⁸

The violence before, during and after the 2023 elections falls into five main distinguishable typologies, which apply across both Kano and Rivers states: protection for politicians, attacks against political opponents and rival gangs during campaigns, attacks on voters and electoral officials, hijacking and destruction of voting materials, and threats and intimidation of voters and political opponents. An additional two typologies manifested in Rivers – namely, assassination and kidnapping – but were not widely reported in Kano (although individual incidents of such violence have occurred).

Protection for politicians

Gangs assumed the role of guards at political rallies, campaign offices and the residences of politicians, effectively serving as security personnel for many political aspirants. Some gang members were given vehicles as part of politicians' convoys. Protection services often led to violent clashes with rival gangs, with members of the public sometimes becoming unintended victims.

In Rivers, gang members interviewed highlighted that their primary responsibility was to safeguard the politicians, with one noting: 'Anytime they need our help, we go for it, we protect them.'²⁹ The provision of protection has been a recurring phenomenon in both states, with some of the same individuals repeatedly called up. Illustratively, one gang member in Rivers said that he had worked with politicians for the past eight years.³⁰ Ironically, increasing reliance on gang protection also results in growing clashes, further fuelling the need for additional protection in a vicious cycle of escalating violence.

Attacks on political opponents and rival gangs during campaigns

During campaigns, gangs violently disrupted opponents' rallies and attacked convoys or supporters, often leading to violent clashes with the gangs protecting opponents.

In Rivers, incidents of violence against political opponents before the elections were widespread, with 'politicians us[ing] thugs to stop other candidates from campaigning', according to one former agitator.³¹ A young person in Rivers explained how 'when we went to campaign [...] thugs came and shot, they threw dynamite. One person had injuries on her leg. We had to leave the scene because of the violence that was meted on us.'³² Others referred to the 'sporadic shooting of guns'³³ and how 'they scattered, destroying canopies, chairs and their equipment'.³⁴

According to interviewees, political violence includes violent attacks on opponents in rural parts of Rivers State, including Dumo Lulu Briggs, the Accord Party candidate, and Senator Magnus Abe.³⁵ The perpetrators of the attack on Lulu Briggs have not been identified, but Lulu Briggs, in press interviews, subsequently accused the governing PDP of being involved in the attacks, notwithstanding the fact that the governor of Rivers State had issued orders to protect the electoral process. But several interviewees claimed that it principally appeared to be opposition parties that were being targeted by the violence. 'The governor and his thugs were out to ensure that no other party campaigned.

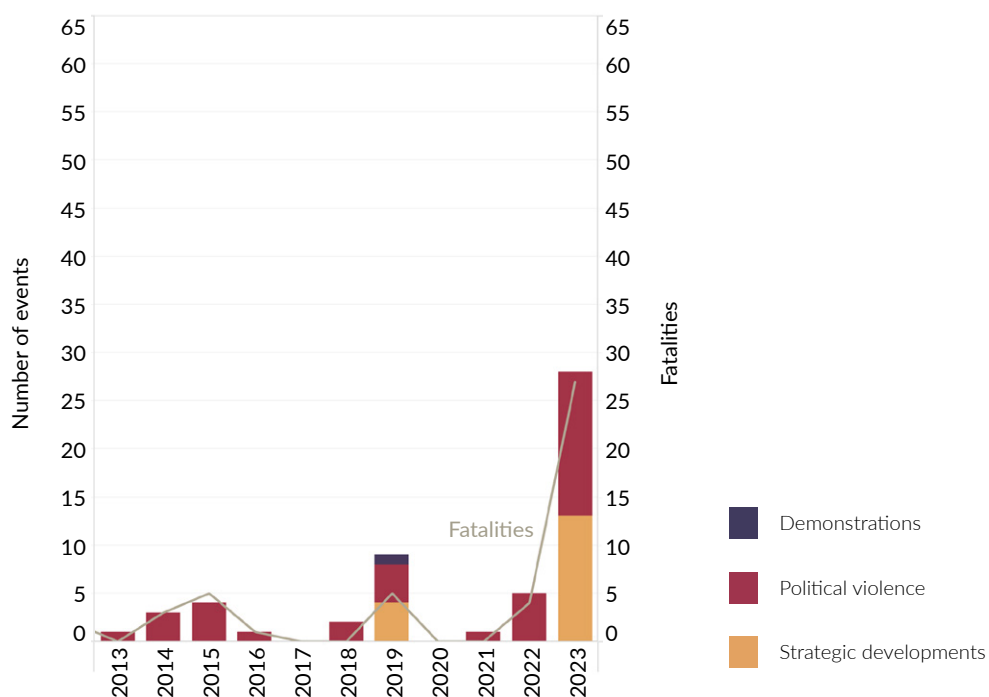


FIGURE 4 Incidents of election-related violence and fatalities in Kano, 2013–2023.

SOURCE: ACLED

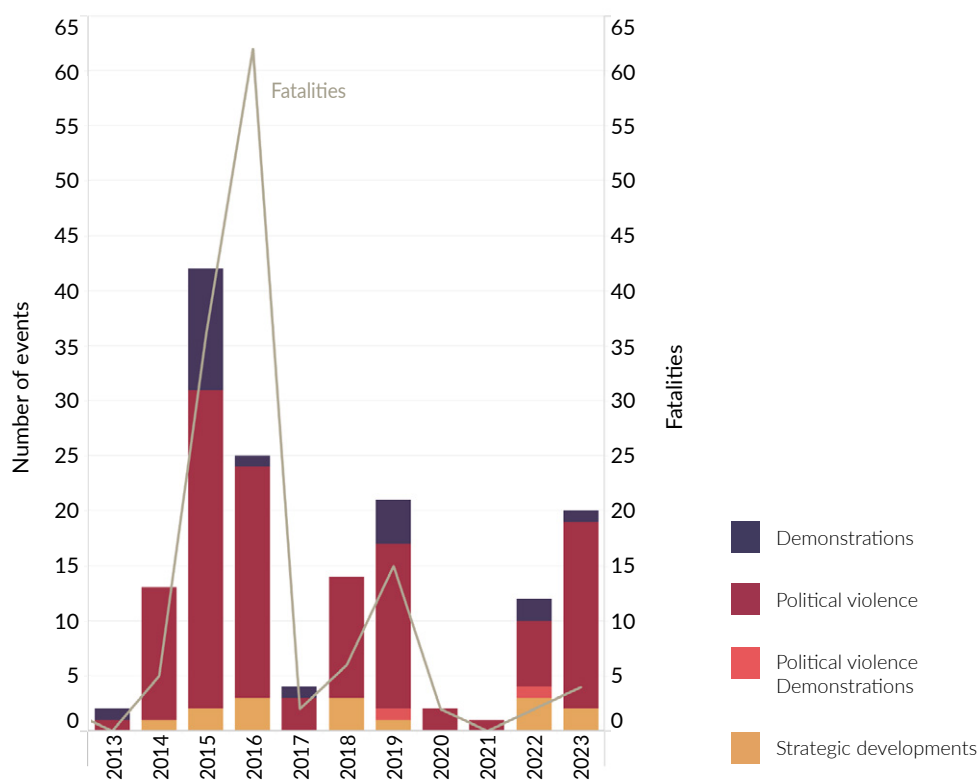


FIGURE 5 Incidents of election-related violence and fatalities in Rivers, 2013–2023.

SOURCE: ACLED

I remember when Dumo went to Ahoada West, he was shot [at]. The same thing happened to Magnus Abe, in Etche,' one person claimed.³⁶ Senator Abe's convoy was shot at in what was reportedly an assassination attempt in January 2023, but he came out unharmed.³⁷ Tonye Cole, the governorship candidate for the APC in the 2023 elections, was reportedly also attacked.³⁸ Several interviewees referred to attacks on supporters of opposition parties during campaigns³⁹ and attacks on those perceived to be opponents.⁴⁰

Attacks on voters and electoral officials

Gangs in both states also attack voters and electoral officials in areas where the outcomes do not favour their principals during elections. Although these attacks are less frequent than those against political rivals, there is consensus among stakeholders in Kano and Rivers that they are sanctioned by politicians with the aim of disrupting the process and preventing a favourite candidate from gaining votes.⁴¹

For example, during the Kano gubernatorial elections on 18 March 2023, gangs chased away voters from polling units, and destroyed ballot papers and ballot boxes. By noon, the attacks had multiplied and spread to numerous localities, including Dala, Filin Chiranchi, Kabuga, Kankarofi, Gawuna and other parts of the municipality with a high concentration of voters. At one voting station in Layin Maiunguwa in Dala, for instance, police had to use tear gas to disperse a rampaging Yandaba gang that had attacked and injured voters.⁴²

Yandaba also targeted collation centres where election results were being counted, including in Tudun Wada and Takai LGAs. In Tudun Wada, for instance, Alhassan Doguwa – a parliamentarian and a member of the APC – reportedly led a group of Yandaba to attack a campaign office of the opposition New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP). Three people were reportedly burnt to death in the attack, while 10 others sustained injuries. In a promising move, Nigerian authorities later arraigned the lawmaker for murder and placed him in prison custody. He denied the allegations.⁴³ In May 2023, a former Attorney General and Commissioner of Justice in Kano dismissed the charges against the lawmaker, freeing him.⁴⁴ Doguwa was released on bail. However, a newly elected state governor from a different political party has pledged to revisit the case.⁴⁵ Doguwa is currently on bail and serving as a member of the House of Representatives in the national assembly.

The elections in Rivers were also marred by incidents of violence, though many eyewitnesses stress that there was less violence compared to previous elections. An eyewitness in Kuru described what happened in one voting station in Ikuru: 'Hoodlums came out with guns to chase away voters. Even the elderly have no access to vote. If you want to vote, they'll force you to vote against your choice.'⁴⁶ A politician in Andoni LGA said:

People saw the kind of guns and arms [Yandaba] were brandishing and couldn't come out for the election. Those who came out were injured – just to come out and vote. [...] I have about four or five relatives who sustained various degrees of injury.⁴⁷

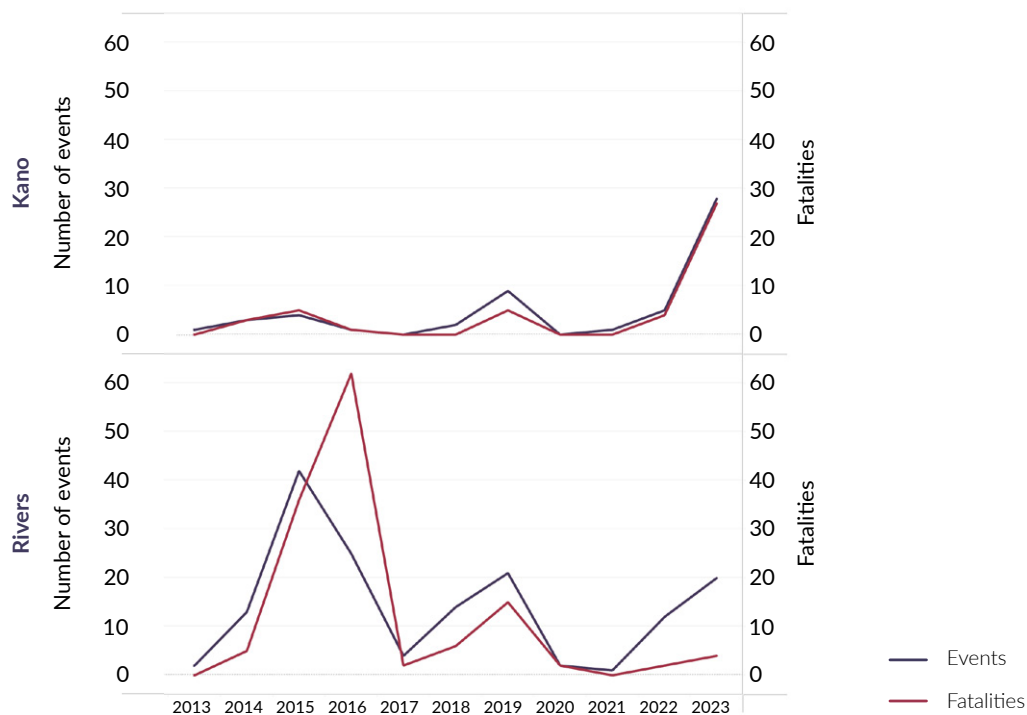


FIGURE 6 Incidents of election-related violence and fatalities in the presidential and governorship elections in Kano and Rivers, 2013–2023.

NOTE: Close observers in Kano and Rivers unanimously agreed that ACLED figures are likely to be a significant under-representation of political violence events. Consequently, while these figures provide some insight into trends, they certainly do not show a holistic picture.

Hijacking and destruction of voting materials

Gang members engage in snatching or destroying election materials when they sense imminent failure for their sponsor. Most of the time, snatching ballot papers and ballot boxes is a ploy for massively thumbprinting the ballots in favour of the gangs' candidate. However, when the opportunity to seize the materials is not available, they resort to destroying the items.

Such snatching and destruction occurred across polling units during Kano's 2023 elections. As an ad hoc staff member hired by the electoral commission explained:

Gang members converged on the school premises that was to serve as the polling unit in the night and smoked cannabis until daybreak. Some of them perched on the fence, brandishing weapons and swearing. As soon as voting started the next day, they chased away everyone and carted away the election materials.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, while the theft of ballot boxes and ballot papers has been a central element of Yandaba election violence since 1999, and continued to some extent in 2023, this practice was significantly less common in the 2023 elections. Instead, more efforts appeared to be directed towards intimidating voters. This shift away from stealing ballot boxes and papers was due in large part to the introduction of a new electronic voting system, known as the Bimodal Voter Registration System, which has made ballot box theft redundant.

Similar scenes unfolded in Rivers, with gang members describing how they 'scatter' voters at polling stations, often hijacking ballot boxes in the process: '[We] shoot on sight, we go, we carry the ballot box, we run.'⁴⁹ Observers also detailed how gang members brandishing weapons surrounded people at the polling units to disrupt the election.⁵⁰

The provision of such ‘scattering’ and ‘ballot snatching’ services, which one gang member called ‘political violence contracting’, has been normalized among gang members working across electoral cycles in Rivers. As one gang member said, ‘For this election coming now, I will play my normal role. To scatter, that is what I do. We clear everybody and our box goes anywhere we want [to] make the box go.’⁵¹

High-level state officials have been visibly involved in such activities. For example, in Ikwerre, a high-ranking local government official was seen, along with police and cult members, engaging in the hijacking of ballot boxes in several voting stations. ‘He went round the entire ward with a combined team of Nigerian army, police and civil defence members. They were hijacking ballot boxes, unit by unit, in the company of some other bad boys,’ said one resident.⁵²

Threats and intimidation of voters and political opponents

The four typologies of election violence outlined above have been consistently present, to varying degrees, across general elections in Kano and Rivers since 1999. Responses to election violence to date have primarily concentrated on addressing these well-known forms of violence. However, the 2023 elections were characterized by a rise in threats and intimidation in both states. These subtle forms

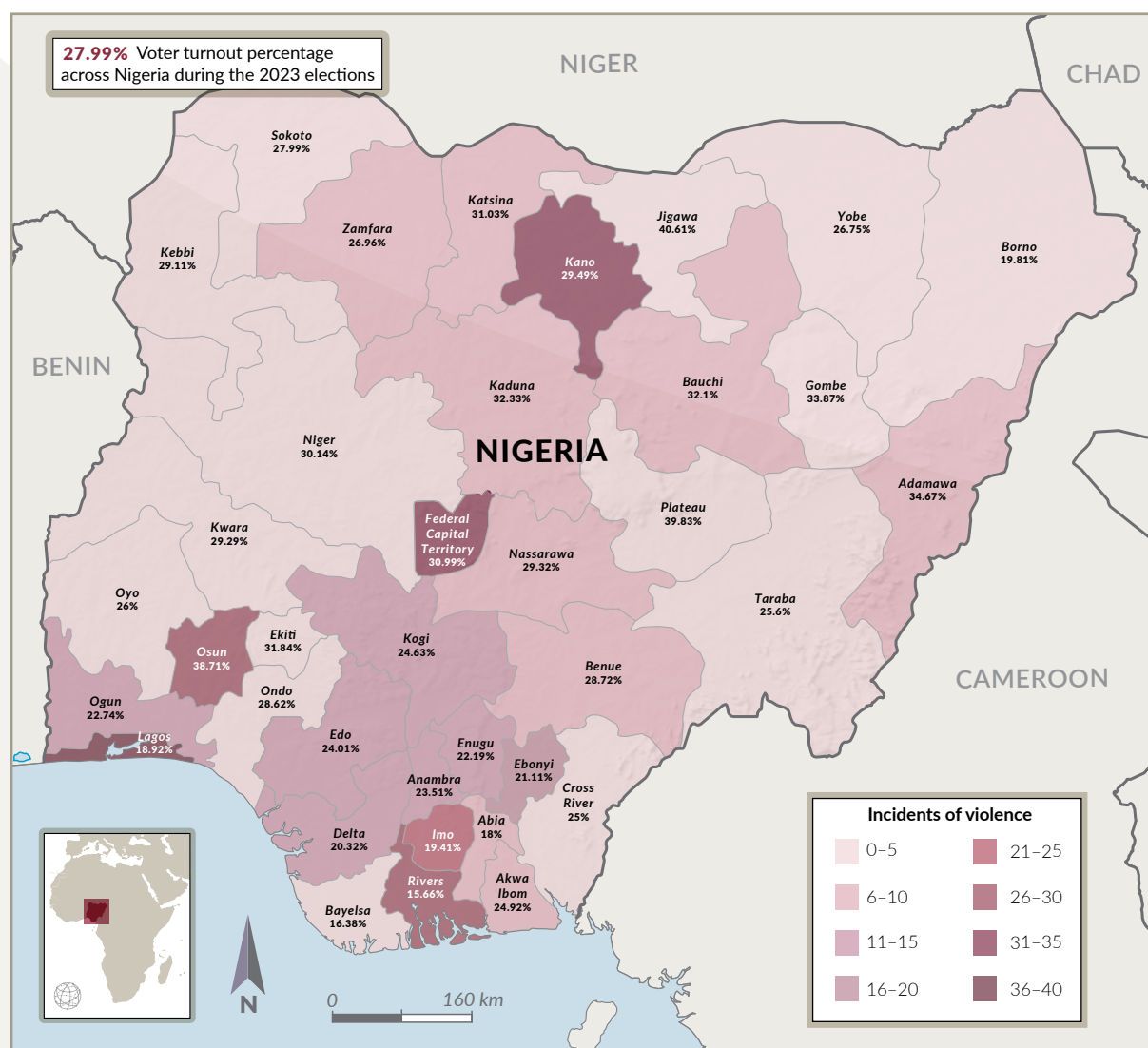


FIGURE 7 Incidents of election-related violence and voter turnout by state, 2023.

of violence are covert, making them harder to detect and difficult to address with existing response measures. Yet, their impact on the electoral process and its outcomes is significant.

Though threats and intimidation had been used in previous elections, many people in Kano emphasized that the degree of their deployment in the 2023 elections was unprecedented. These tactics are aimed at depriving likely winners at the polls by preventing their supporters from voting either before or during the electoral process. Longstanding precedents ensure that those threatened are well aware of the consequences of breaching orders. For example, an elderly woman, who had voted in most of Nigeria's previous elections since the 1980s, said that she did not go out to vote in the 2023 elections due to fear of violence: 'I was afraid of violence, so I didn't go out or allow my daughters to go and vote [...]. Even while I remained at home, I kept praying that nobody should fight.'⁵³ Many other residents of Kano emphasized that they had not voted in the 2023 elections due to fear of violence.

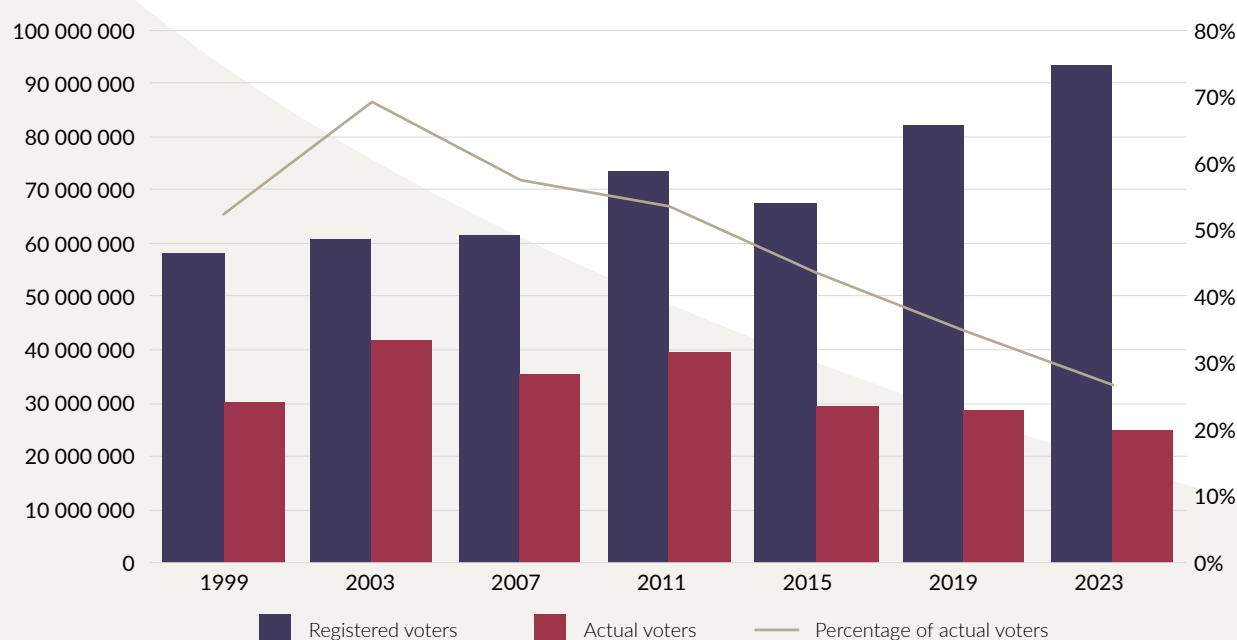


FIGURE 8 Voter turnout in Nigeria's presidential and national assembly elections, 1999–2023.

SOURCE: Dataphyte

In Rivers, covert violence also surged during the 2023 elections, with interviewees referring to cult gangs 'armed with G3s, AK-47s, Mach 4s, axes, machetes and knives for the job of perpetrating violence to scare away voters perceived to be opposition supporters'.⁵⁴

Another respondent said: 'They said that if you are not going to vote for the PDP, don't come out.'⁵⁵ The phrase 'don't come out' was described by many respondents as a key message of the 2023 elections.⁵⁶ The message was widely circulated by chiefs in many LGAs that people should not come out unless they were willing to vote for a particular party, namely the PDP. A former agitator explained that this scared people so that they could not walk freely and would not come out to vote.⁵⁷ The messaging was clearly effective, with Rivers becoming the state with the lowest voter turnout in the 2023 elections, as illustrated in Figure 9.

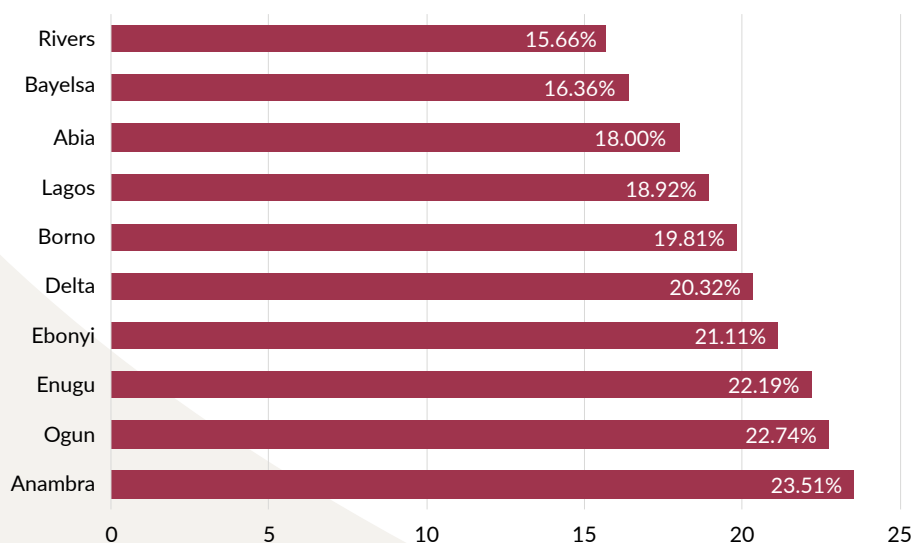


FIGURE 9 The 10 states with the lowest voter turnout in the 2023 presidential and national assembly elections.

SOURCE: Dataphyte

Cumulatively, it became clear that across both states, the recorded incidents of violence reflected only a fraction of the violent undercurrents shaping outcomes. As one former agitator explained of the 2023 elections:

This one was very violent. Though we didn't record any loss of life, the threat was great. We saw guns, machetes that were brandished by hoodlums saying that if you belong to a particular party, don't come out. So why would I come out? I have four children.⁵⁸

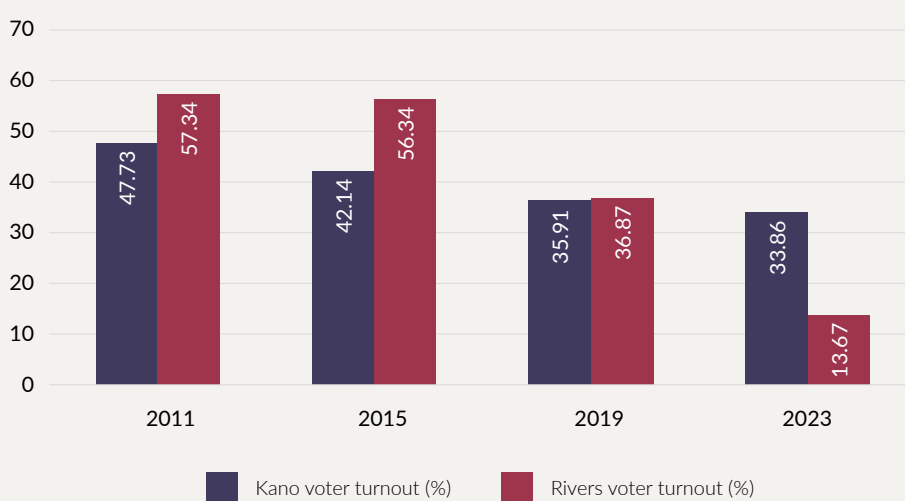


FIGURE 10 Voter turnout in Kano and Rivers in the 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections.

SOURCE: GI-TOC analyses of different media sources⁵⁹

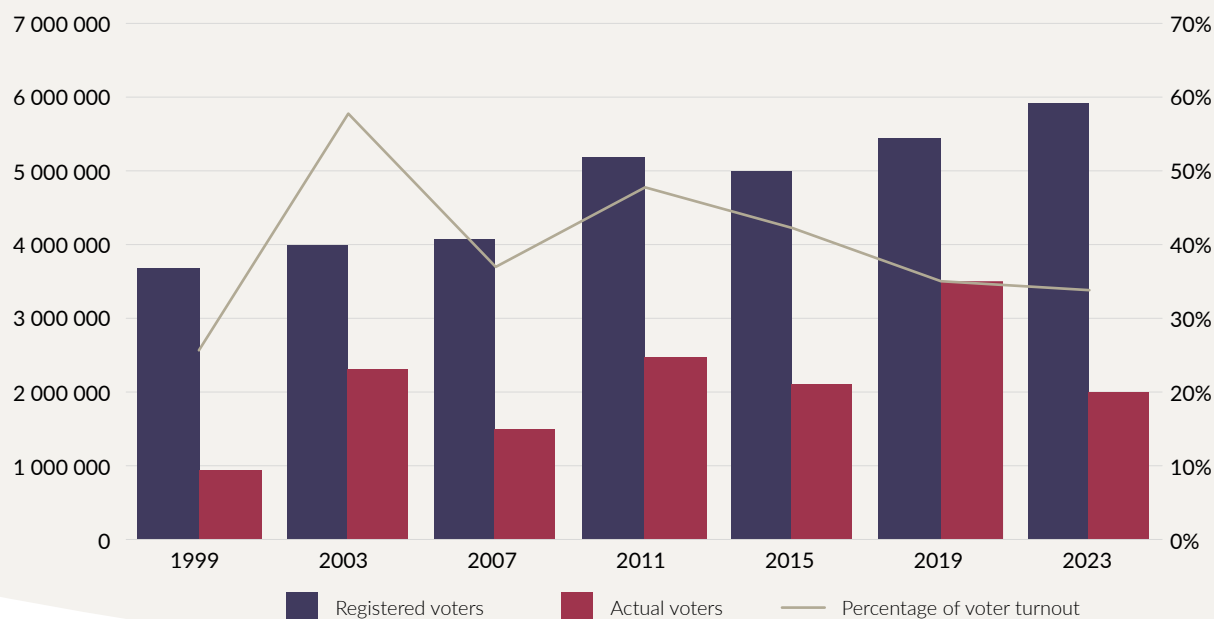


FIGURE 11 Voter turnout in Kano, 1999–2023.

SOURCE: Dataphyte

While the 2023 elections saw lower levels of killings recorded across Nigeria than in previous election cycles, voter turnout was also at record lows nationwide and across the two focus states (Figure 8). One community elder said, ‘The effect was that a lot of people didn’t venture out of their houses on election day because of the threat. This made the turnout at the polling units very low.’⁶⁰

‘I condemn it in its entirety. They used arms to chase away people,’ said a member of a pressure group.⁶¹ While low voter turnout was likely shaped by a wider set of factors, the reported growth in intimidation appears to be a central driver.

Assassination of political opponents

Political assassinations were not widely reported in Kano and were concentrated in Rivers State. Here, gang members indicated that it was common practice for politicians to hire them to assassinate political opponents. ‘In Ogoni, there were killings, killings everywhere.’⁶²

For example, the APC campaign coordinator for Ahoada-West LGA, Chisom Lennard, was shot dead during the governorship and state assembly elections held on 18 March 2023. Abiye Sekibo, the director general of the PDP Presidential Campaign Council in Rivers, accused the state governor of an assassination attempt – an allegation that the government denied. The incident nevertheless reflects the atmosphere of violence that preceded the 2023 elections in Rivers.⁶³ According to media reports, thugs stormed the residence of Lee Maeba, a former Rivers national senator and state chairperson of the PDP Presidential Campaign Council in an apparent assassination attempt. Although the assassination attempt did not succeed, the incident left some members of his household with gunshot wounds after the thugs fired shots indiscriminately.⁶⁴

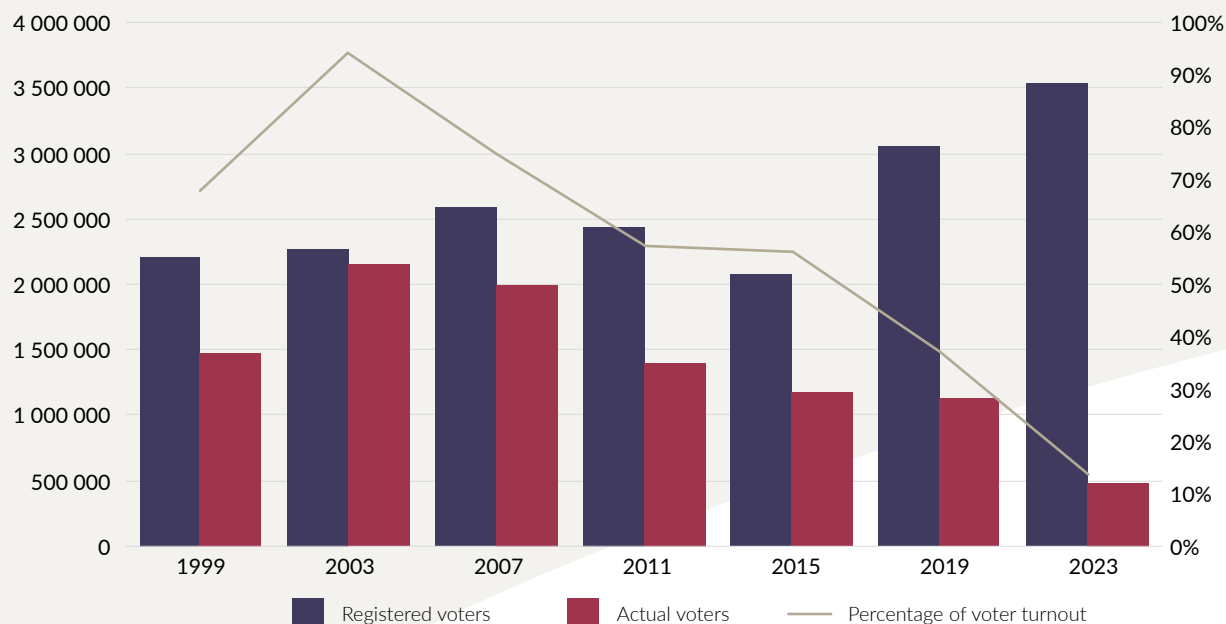


FIGURE 12 Voter turnout in Rivers, 1999–2023.⁶⁵

SOURCE: GI-TOC analyses of different media sources

Interviewees shared instances where politicians directly instructed gang members to kill opponents, offering monetary rewards for doing so.⁶⁶ Assassinations have become a livelihood for some cult group members, with one stating: 'For me, killing is what I do. Just call me if you want any assassination carried out, and I will do it for you. It is through this that I earn a living to survive.'⁶⁷ Interviewees indicated different categories of assassins, including 'a group we call suicide men. They don't mind if they are going to die; they are ready to die with you.'⁶⁸

Kidnapping of political opponents

Similarly, kidnapping was a commonly reported phenomenon in Rivers, but not a central element of the political violence reported in Kano. Rivers gang members shared accounts of being hired to kidnap political rivals, and hold them captive until the conclusion of the elections. One interviewee stated, 'They use us for, you know, if there is an opponent. We kidnap them and hold them until the election has finished.'⁶⁹

Political gangs in Rivers do not typically demand ransom before releasing victims, underscoring the political rather than financial motivations of abductions.

Remuneration and incentives for engaging in political violence

Across both Rivers and Kano, financial remuneration from politicians varies depending on the service offered. Low risk services such as securing posters or providing security at rallies tend to attract relatively meagre payments. For example, a gang member in Kano disclosed that he was paid N20 000 (€24)⁷⁰ to protect a politician's posters from being pulled down during one month in the lead-up to the 2023 polls.⁷¹ Cult gang members in Rivers reported being paid N5 000 (€6) for similar services.

Intimidation services appear to be better paid. One Rivers resident described how a group of Deebam cult members were paid to intimidate political opponents and voters in the 2023 elections: 'They were given US\$200 each. So they should be able to work according to the instructions of [a local politician]. They were about 23 of them [...]; they came with sophisticated weapons.'⁷² Similarly, kidnappings and assassinations attract much higher payments. One gang member in Rivers said politicians pay N20 million–N50 million (€24 509–€61 274) for eliminating a political opponent.⁷³

Remuneration – in scale and modality – also varies based on the hierarchical positions of gang members. For example, in 2023 and in previous elections, Yandaba leaders in Kano who operated as touchpoints between gang members and politicians received cash, political appointments, government contracts, houses, cars, plots of land or sponsorship for the hajj to Mecca in exchange. Their foot soldiers received money and motorcycles through official government empowerment programmes.⁷⁴ Yandaba groups reportedly used the cash to buy weapons and drugs.⁷⁵

In Rivers, gang members reported that rewards from politicians extend beyond money to include weapons,⁷⁶ and protection for criminal businesses such as oil bunkering. Gang members interviewed referred to receiving 'reward points' from politicians they had helped into power, or business opportunities in the wake of elections.

Financial remuneration appears to have increased between election cycles, with non-financial incentives increasingly widespread. For example, according to an academic observing dynamics in Rivers, in 2019, politicians were paying around N20 000, compared to a minimum of N75 000 in 2023.⁷⁷ 'Another change is that most of the boys used for election violence are currently serving as members of the Rivers State House of Assembly or as local government chairpersons. The bad boys are gradually becoming political leaders,' he claimed. One Rivers resident described the pattern as follows:

The man [who] is demanding cash now for survival will get to a level where he may demand control. At that level, negotiation changes. And that is the reason we now have cultists in our government. Today, significant numbers of House of Assembly members and local government chairpersons were perpetrators of violence until they graduated into leadership positions.⁷⁸

Similarly, another Rivers respondent described how the Rivers State government also used political appointments strategically: 'The 200 000 unit advisors that [were] appointed by [Nyesom] Wike, most of them are thugs, cultists, and he used them to stop other candidates from campaigning.'⁷⁹

Hierarchical position	Remuneration
Top actors/sponsors (e.g. governors, senators, federal House of Representative members, LGA chairs, state House of Assembly members)	Electoral victory, political and economic power
Middlemen (gang leaders, local politicians, local organizers)	Political appointments, large amounts of money (between hundreds of thousands and millions of naira), protection of criminal interests (bunkering businesses, kidnapping, etc.)
Foot soldiers (low-level cultists)	Relatively small amounts of money (between 1 000 and 10 000 naira), post-election jobs (at bunkering sites run by the middlemen)

FIGURE 13 Structure of remuneration for political violence.

SOURCE: Interviews with gang leaders and stakeholders, Rivers, June–July 2023

Lower-ranking gang members are largely rewarded with cash and post-election jobs at bunkering sites, while higher-level appointments, such as special advisers and large amounts of money, are reserved for gang leaders.⁸⁰

Not all promises of remuneration to gangs are honoured. A central theme that came out in the interviews in Rivers was betrayal, a sense of agitation and abandonment. Interviewees described being used by politicians and discarded once the election is over, with politicians refusing to pay, killing some gang members or having them arrested.⁸¹

One gang member said, ‘These are our political leaders; we’ve worked for them, but after we have finished working for them, they abandon us.’⁸² Furthermore, interviewees explained how this abandonment may have various negative consequences, such as an increase in crime rates.⁸³ For example, according to one interviewee, some members were paid 40% of the promised sum up front, but were denied the remaining 60% after the election.⁸⁴ According to him, these gang members will now use the weapons they received for criminal ends in order to compensate for their losses.

What is the fate of gang members aligned with the losing side in elections?

Analyses have tended to focus on the gains that gangs aligned with the winning side in elections derive from engaging in election-related violence, often overlooking the fate of gang members aligned with the losing side. In Kano and Rivers, being on the losing side carries significant costs for gang members. Beyond being deprived of access to material and non-material benefits, like political appointments, patronage or protection, gang leaders on the losing side typically face varying degrees of persecution, while their followers may become targets of crackdowns and raids on their hideouts, potentially resulting in arrests and prosecutions.

An illustrative example of a gang member losing political protection and facing persecution is Nazifi Nanaso, a notorious gang leader in Kano. For eight years, between 2015 and 2023, Nanaso operated with impunity, aligned with the ruling APC, and was accused of orchestrating attacks on the opposition.⁸⁵ During this time, he faced no consequences.⁸⁶ However, within four months of

the APC losing the governorship election in March 2023, and an opposition member becoming governor, the police demanded that Nanaso and 15 others surrender or be declared wanted, accusing them of leading the Yandaba gangs in the state.⁸⁷

In Kano, being on the losing side typically results in persecution in the form of arrests and prosecutions. However, in Rivers, the consequences can be even more severe, often leading to fatalities. A 2018 joint operation involving the army and state security services resulted in the killing of Don Waney, a prominent cult gang leader in Rivers who had relocated to Enugu. According to news reports and discussions with civil society representatives, Waney was allegedly killed because he had fallen out of favour with the ruling party and had lost the protection that he and his fellow gang members had once enjoyed.⁸⁸ Whether or not this is true, the widespread belief in this narrative points to the perceived risks political gang leaders face when they lose their political protection.

Crackdowns on gang members aligned with the losing side are common, with law enforcement arresting and parading them publicly. Meanwhile, gangs aligned with the ruling party often operate without scrutiny.⁸⁹ According to a legal practitioner in Kano, members of opposition-linked gangs are frequently detained on various charges, potentially influenced by the ruling party's intention to clear the path for its own gang members.⁹⁰

Gang leaders and members who fear persecution or arrest may choose to lie low, reducing their visibility and avoiding encounters with law enforcement. In some cases, they may opt to leave their current location or town altogether to evade capture. For instance, following a series of raids and crackdowns on cult hideouts in Rivers in August 2023, the police reported that many cult gang members either surrendered or left town.⁹¹ It is worth noting that while these raids may not always be politically motivated, it is the gang members lacking political protection who are most vulnerable and likely to face prosecution.

To avoid the costs of being on the losing side, certain gang members may face pressure to switch their political allegiances and align themselves with the winning party. In certain instances, politicians and their associated groups may provide incentives or protection as enticements for these individuals to change their loyalties. In the context of Rivers, it is a common practice for the victorious party to reach out to gang leaders who, despite being aligned with the losing side, have demonstrated power and influence within their respective communities.⁹²

This outreach typically targets a small group of influential leaders who have accumulated enough power and influence to make them indispensable to politicians. This select group is in high demand from politicians of various parties. In Rivers, such influential gang leaders have successfully maintained alignment with the winning side, regardless of the political party in power.⁹³

However, most high-level gang leaders who fall outside this smaller grouping of particularly powerful leaders face greater difficulty in seeking to switch allegiances if their patrons lose. By contrast, gang members occupying lower rungs of the gang hierarchy, who often lack affiliations with specific politicians, are able to switch relatively seamlessly. The lower rungs of gangs function more like 'guns for hire', readily adapting to new political alignments with victorious politicians.⁹⁴ ■



WHAT DO POLITICAL THUGS DO WHEN THEY ARE NOT METING OUT POLITICAL VIOLENCE?

Given that general elections in Nigeria occur every four years, between February and March, it becomes essential to question how these gangs sustain themselves during non-election periods. Understanding their sources of income beyond election violence is crucial for mapping the intricate relationship between politics and crime, as well as for developing effective strategies to address political violence and the diverse illicit activities intertwined with it.

Yandaba and drug trafficking in Kano

Outside election periods, drug trafficking – more specifically, distribution to consumer markets across Kano State – is a key source of revenue for the Yandaba. Analyses of gangs and drugs in Kano have primarily portrayed Yandaba members as drug users and have paid less attention to their role as drug dealers. Whereas drug use is allegedly important for ‘identity formation and demonstration of toughness’,⁹⁵ drug trafficking has become a key aspect of Yandaba financing. This started after 1986, when the Yandaba were cut off from their political sources of funding and deprived of alternative licit opportunities, in part by structural adjustment programmes.

The Yandaba are prominent distributors and low-level dealers of commonly abused drugs, including cannabis, tramadol and codeine. The Yandaba occupy a critical role in Kano’s drug market structure, serving as the link between major drug traffickers and wholesalers (mostly located outside the state), and people who use drugs within local communities.

The Yandaba have diversified their involvement in drugs since the 1980s, supplying tramadol, Rohypnol and codeine, in addition to cannabis and other pharmaceuticals since 2010.⁹⁶ Although cocaine and heroin are known to be consumed by some leaders of the Yandaba, there is no evidence to suggest that Yandaba are engaged in the distribution of these substances. Though the Yandaba primarily distribute drugs within Kano, the drug market is bolstered by the position of Kano as a major transit point for illicit drugs, broadly serving parts of northern Nigeria and markets in Niger, Mali and Libya.



Cannabis recovered from gang members after arrest. Election periods see an influx of illicit substances into Kano, with Yandaba members consuming drugs before carrying out operations. *Photo: Kano Police Command*

Kano's drug distribution markets are largely male-dominated, but women also work with the Yandaba by acting as distributors, supplying drugs to different parts of the state. The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) has described repeated instances of women selling food at campaign rallies who also have drugs concealed within their wares.⁹⁷

While comprehensive quantitative evidence is lacking, observers have reported growth in Kano's drug consumption markets.⁹⁸ This would likely track against increased profits for the Yandaba. The persistent growth of Kano's drug markets, despite law enforcement measures, can be attributed to several causes.

First is the interdependency between politicians and the drug market. According to one politician in Kano, billions of naira (N) are budgeted for the purchase of drugs and weapons by political parties and politicians during elections.⁹⁹ Many politicians believe drugs make gang members aggressive and ready to fight violently for their cause.¹⁰⁰ Drugs are usually supplied before the gang members are deployed to an intended place of operation. One gang leader explained that his gang of about 70 members consume drugs (specifically codeine, tramadol and cannabis) worth N500 000 before carrying out an operation.¹⁰¹ 'That is why during politicking, there is a lot of influx of these substances and that is also when we make a lot of arrests and seizures,' said an officer with the NDLEA.¹⁰²

Indeed, in the run-up to the 2023 elections in Kano, in parallel to escalating political violence, anti-drug law enforcement officers observed increased drug trafficking to Kano State. Part of this surge is destined for consumption by the gangs themselves for the aforementioned reasons. However, a sizeable quantity of the supply financed by politicians is believed to be sold on by the Yandaba in Kano's retail markets. By purchasing drugs for the Yandaba, politicians contribute to the sustenance and expansion of the drug market.

Secondly, Yandaba gangs involved in drug trafficking often enjoy cover and protection from the politicians they have assisted in gaining power. These politicians leverage their influence to swiftly secure the release of traffickers shortly after their arrest. This collusion between politicians and Yandaba gangs further hampers the effectiveness of crackdowns since the very individuals responsible for enforcing the law are involved in shielding and safeguarding those involved in drug trafficking.

The combination of financial support and protection from politicians to criminal gangs creates a challenging environment for law enforcement agencies.

While drug trafficking is the main source of revenue for Yandaba gangs, since 2022 the Yandaba have been expanding their criminal revenue streams, engaging also in extortion. With construction projects commencing in some areas within Yandaba territories, gangs have exploited the presence of construction workers at such sites to run extortion rackets. Construction workers report growing demands by armed Yandaba gang members for 'settlement fees' that range from N50 000 (€61) to N100 000 (€122). Non-payment is threatened with the Yandaba putting a stop to the work. While some developers and building engineers have yielded to the financial demands, others have been forced to abandon projects.¹⁰³

Cult groups, oil bunkering, piracy and kidnapping in Rivers

Like their counterparts in Kano, gangs in Rivers rely on illicit economies – primarily oil bunkering, piracy and kidnapping – for revenue outside political financing. Leaders of criminal gangs involved in kidnapping or illegal oil bunkering often pause their activities prior to elections. One gang leader described the illicit activities that his gang engages in: 'We do bunkering and sea piracy. I don't allow my boys to do drugs. It's the Iceland [gang] that does drugs. We do oil and sometimes touch other territories close to Andoni. We don't do robbery.'¹⁰⁴

Interviewees repeatedly identified illicit economies as sources of revenue for gangs outside electoral periods. One respondent said: 'When [politicians] finish using them during the election, then the hoodlums [those carrying out the election violence] go back to their normal business, which involves staying in the creeks, doing bunkering, robbery and sea piracy.'¹⁰⁵

Once political actors have gained electoral victory, they reportedly provide protection for the oil bunkering activities of the gang leaders who worked for them, shutting down bunkering activities by gang members who had worked for their opponents instead. In this way, politicians leverage protection of oil bunkering as a form of blackmail, forcing individuals to engage in political violence. One gang leader explained:

We don't want any issues with our bunkering business. We were told if we do not join them our points will be closed down and they'll use the law enforcement agencies to come after us. So we have no option other than to partake.'¹⁰⁶

As a result, a member of the elders council in Ikuru explained that gang members will drop whatever activities they are doing at election time to engage in election violence.¹⁰⁷ A gang member supported such analysis, reporting: 'If you want government cover, you have to join in the election violence. Elections happen once in a while, but our business is on [a] daily basis.'¹⁰⁸



An illegal oil refining site near Port Hartcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. © Rey T Byhre/Alamy

The link between political violence and piracy is different. While the weapons obtained through participation in political violence are used to perpetrate piracy, there is no clear evidence that shows political actors provide cover for piracy. One gang leader explained: 'They told us that after the inauguration, we'd be given opportunities for empowerment and provided with government cover for our bunkering business. But if you are caught carrying out robberies or sea piracy, you are on your own.'¹⁰⁹

Nonetheless, it is widely recognized that after elections are over, politicians abandon gang members who are still armed with the weapons they provided them for carrying out election violence.¹¹⁰ Rivers residents described how members go on to use these weapons for piracy and bunkering.¹¹¹ Consequently, regardless of whether politicians directly protect piracy, they are widely perceived to indirectly finance and arm the individuals who perpetrate acts of piracy.

Piracy, oil crimes and election violence are generally recognized to be strongly interwoven in Rivers State. Some respondents even pointed to the logistical links: 'When the pirates operate, they have coves and havens in which to hide. And the coves and havens they hide [in] are manned by bunkerers who control the pipelines that lead to the ocean-going vessels that the crude oil is supplied to.'¹¹²

Many respondents pointed to arms as the unifying factor: 'All these things they are doing entail arms, and the same arms they'll use on the day of elections too.'¹¹³



CRIMINAL INTERESTS, POLITICS AND IMPACTS

The protection extended by politicians to gangs that engage in political violence significantly contributes to the persistence, violence and complexity of illicit markets. In both Kano and Rivers, politicians not only provide gangs with financial and non-financial incentives but also shield them from law enforcement. Through their positions and influence, politicians actively prevent the arrest of gang members or secure their release from police custody. This protection has become a crucial incentive for gangs to engage in political violence.

Political protection of criminal markets

In Kano, politicians have reportedly repeatedly intervened to protect Yandaba gang members from arrest, prosecution or imprisonment. A divisional police officer explained that politicians often pressure police officers to release particular gang members who have been arrested for drug offences or acts of violence, and that when the officers refuse to comply, the politicians either accuse the police of siding with their opponents or have them transferred.¹¹⁴

A legal adviser to one of the political parties in the state explained that if gang members are charged, political parties mount legal efforts to get them acquitted or allow them to escape with paltry fines.¹¹⁵ On some occasions, the lawyer said, the government grants pardon to gang members serving jail terms. As a result, gangs operate with relative impunity. 'There was a gang member I arrested and charged to court, and the next day he came to the station asking for his shirt. I knew he was not there just to pick up his shirt. He had come to pass on a message, that he had been released,' the divisional police officer said.¹¹⁶

Facing little risk of arrest, gangs in Kano have increasingly turned political rallies, campaign offices and politicians' homes into places where drugs – most commonly, cannabis and tramadol – are sold and used, sometimes despite law enforcement presence.¹¹⁷

In Rivers, once elections conclude, gangs reportedly resume their criminal pursuits, and if apprehended for criminal activities such as oil bunkering, they are often released due to political intervention. As outlined previously, protection is greater for oil bunkering than for piracy, which garners greater international attention and condemnation.

While politicians often provide gangs with financial rewards and protection, they frequently distance themselves from the gangs when it becomes politically convenient to do so.

Impact of gangs, political violence and illicit activities

Gangs, and their close relationships with politicians, have significant impacts not only on Nigeria's democratic processes and state legitimacy, but also on the criminal markets that constitute a major source of violence across the country.

In both Kano and Rivers, gangs wield substantial influence over local politics due to the violent roles they play in shaping electoral processes and outcomes. The support of influential gang leaders can heavily influence electoral victories, thereby determining who assumes executive and representative positions in government. Recognizing their influence, some politicians prioritize aligning with powerful gang leaders to secure electoral success. This undermines the principles of a fair and transparent electoral system, directly shaping the quality of regional governance and rendering effective responses to gangs and the illicit activities they undertake unlikely.

An increasingly important consequence of gangs' influence over local politics is the pervasive atmosphere of fear they have instilled around elections, perpetuated by their repeated use of violence in past electoral cycles. In both Kano and Rivers, elections have become synonymous with violence. A significant proportion of residents of both states have either witnessed violence or personally know someone who has been a victim.¹¹⁸ In Rivers, some respondents said the 2023 election 'was like a war'.¹¹⁹

This widespread fear surrounding the election period has a detrimental impact on democratic participation. Many people are discouraged from going out to vote due to concerns for their safety, leading to the disenfranchisement of a considerable number of potential voters. The fear of violence not only suppresses voter turnout but creates an environment where intimidation and coercion can sway election results, undermining the legitimacy of elected representatives.



All Progressives Congress Party (APC) supporters celebrate after results were released by the Nigerian Independent National Electoral Commission in Kano.
© Luis Tato via Getty Images

Once in office, some politicians are indebted to gangs, and misuse their authority to shield gangs and protect their illicit interests, perpetuating cycles of corruption. The interference of political actors in criminal justice processes to ensure impunity for gang members erodes public confidence in criminal justice institutions, contributing to a crisis of state legitimacy.

The reported practice whereby politicians arm gang members in order to engage in political violence on their behalf has widespread ramifications for the levels of violence experienced not only during elections, but beyond, including within the country's criminal markets.

While the impacts of the Yandaba's involvement in drug markets are primarily local to Kano – affecting consumption and violence – in Rivers, gang involvement in oil bunkering and piracy has significant consequences for Nigeria's national economy, and internationally. Nigeria's oil sector is a significant contributor to the country's GDP, and has long been hampered by large-scale oil theft, which has been a major driver of international oil companies leaving the country, diminishing foreign direct investment in Nigeria.¹²⁰ The Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission, Nigeria's oil regulator, stated that in the first quarter of 2022 alone, Nigeria lost US\$1 billion to oil theft, sums that the country's struggling economy can ill afford.¹²¹ The emergence of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is closely tied to oil bunkering in the Niger Delta. Piracy disrupts maritime commerce, leading to increased costs for shipping companies and supply chain impacts. In 2021, it was estimated that the combined financial loss caused by piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (whose actors are primarily based in the Niger Delta) was around US\$1.925 billion annually.¹²² The political protection of these markets – whether direct or indirect – carries devastating consequences.

The relationship between gangs and politicians provides criminal actors with access to resources (financial, weapons, etc.), influence and protection. This shields perpetrators from consequences for engagement in criminal markets, including drug trafficking, oil bunkering, and piracy, severely damaging health, trade and security at local, national, regional and international levels.



CONCLUSION

In Nigeria, election-related violence poses a significant security concern, perpetuating instability and eroding trust in the democratic process. This is contributing to a deep-rooted crisis in state legitimacy, which the central state – facing myriad conflicts and separatist movements – is struggling to overcome. Participants in this research process repeatedly emphasized their disillusionment, fear and disenfranchisement from political processes in the country, and were unanimous in tracking an intensification of the political violence surrounding electoral outcomes.

Furthermore, it is key to recognize that available metrics of violent incidents capture only the tip of the iceberg. Cycles of violent political processes have entrenched systems of intimidation, which heavily influence political outcomes and undermine democratic participation – systems that appeared to reach new heights during the 2023 elections.

Traditionally, responses have targeted the gang members perpetrating the violence but have overlooked the critical connections between these gangs, politicians and the wider criminal markets that sustain them beyond elections. This report has focused on unravelling these intersections, shining further light on the nexus between politics and crime in Nigeria, and underscoring how involvement in political violence grants gangs access to weapons, shields them from law enforcement and carries far-reaching implications for the resilience of harmful criminal markets. Arresting and prosecuting gang members engaging in political violence alone has proven ineffective for quashing this growing phenomenon. A comprehensive response must prioritize dismantling the links between gangs and politicians, disrupting channels of weaponization and ensuring gangs are denied political protection.

Recommendations

By recognizing political violence as more than an isolated phenomenon and acknowledging its complex intersection with other illicit markets, authorities can adopt more effective strategies to dismantle criminal networks, enhance law enforcement efforts and work towards establishing a safer and more secure society. Context-sensitive approaches that consider the specific illicit markets gangs engage in outside of political processes – such as drug trafficking in Kano and oil bunkering and piracy in Rivers – will be key. Here, we offer some building blocks that different stakeholders can adopt to create an effective response.



Gang members arrested by the police and confiscated weapons.
Photo: Kano Police Command

Local communities and civil society

While power is concentrated in the hands of high-ranking politicians, community support is an essential underpinning of regional power structures. Consequently, long-term work with communities is urgently required to combat the normalization of violence as a tool of politics and to undermine support for violent entrepreneurs.

Community engagements, partnerships and governance: Foster partnerships between local communities and law enforcement agencies to facilitate information sharing and joint crime prevention efforts, including in the constitution of election observatories in the run-up to elections. Shape interventions to strengthen community governance structures that have been eroded by cycles of political violence and undermined by governors themselves, reverting to community appointment of leaders rather than appointments by governors and realigning loyalties.¹²³

Youth empowerment: Develop local programmes that provide education, skills training and recreational activities to divert youth from gang involvement.

Civic education: Implement community-based civic education initiatives to empower citizens with knowledge about their rights, responsibilities and the importance of legitimate democratic participation.

Leveraging the power of the media to hold politicians to account: Nigerian media organizations and investigative journalists have a role to play in curbing publication of inflammatory rhetoric inciting violence, fake news and threats. They also can assist with investigating and holding accountable the politicians who contract gangs to perpetrate political violence, and with tracking the connections of these individuals to criminal markets.

State government

Police and judicial reforms: Collaborate with state law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to implement comprehensive reforms aimed at enhancing professionalism, transparency and accountability.

Protection of communities: The patron/client relationships between police and politicians need to be disrupted as they fully undermine the provision of security around elections, including at polling stations. Merely enhancing deployment of more individuals to hotspots of electoral

violence is pointless when the police cooperate with political powerholders in their use of violence, rather than protect communities from perpetrators of violence. Although, practical steps towards achieving this are complex, the current dynamics must be disrupted. Supporting local initiatives that promote community policing and encouraging cooperation between law enforcement and residents are part of this process.

Protection of whistle-blowers: Currently, communities are discouraged from reporting malfeasance because, even if arrested, perpetrators are typically released mere days afterwards. This leaves them free to intimidate the reporting stakeholders, who are unprotected from assault.

Youth programmes: Allocate resources for youth empowerment programmes that create opportunities for education, vocational training and skill development to reduce their vulnerability to gang recruitment.

National government

Remote voting systems: As a long-term goal, remote voting systems would enable votes to be cast anonymously and collated outside the region by individuals unlinked to the political infrastructure. Such systems are in place across many regions globally, and there are established systems, checks and balances to mitigate the risks of distortion. Although there are significant challenges facing the enactment of remote systems in Nigeria, in terms of technology infrastructure and ensuring the integrity of the process, remote voting systems could offer a pathway for weakening the role of political violence in electoral processes.

Structural factors: The factors that drive young people to join criminal gangs and adopt political violence as a source of livelihood need to be targeted. Creating employment opportunities and equipping youth with relevant skills for the job market are necessary steps in addressing the scourge of criminal gangs and political violence in the long term. Tackling narratives that romanticize gang life – through social media campaigns and engagement with community leaders – could mitigate recruitment in the short term.

Challenging impunity: Expedite cases related to collaborations between gangs and politicians, ensuring prompt and fair trials that capture both the sponsors and perpetrators of violence. While numerous legislative frameworks exist outlining penalties for political violence – including the Public Order Act, the Nigeria Police Act and the Electoral Act of 2022 – these are rarely enforced. The enactment of the National Electoral Offences Commission Bill – which has languished in legislative processes – should be accelerated, and the bill implemented, in order to punish political violence offences going forward.¹²⁴

There should be a push for legal reform to amend the constitution to remove immunity for presidents, vice presidents, governors and deputy governors, particularly for serious violent crimes. This action would revive a previous drive sponsored in 2021 by a member of the PDP.¹²⁵ While this legal reform challenges entrenched interests, it is crucial to pierce the current blanket of impunity enjoyed by political actors.¹²⁶ Furthermore, publicizing attempts to achieve reform at least ensures widespread focus on the challenges posed by immunity.

Politicians who sponsor violence should face arrest and prosecution through the criminal justice system, and be banned from participating in elections and expelled from political parties. This may deter other politicians from using gangs to perpetrate violence. Similarly, political parties that support or sponsor the use of violence should face sanctions that can include suspension, withdrawal of registration certificates or prosecution of party officials.

Inter-party dialogue: Political candidates and leaders from rival parties should engage in dialogue sessions on the topic of political violence and agree on non-violence as a guiding principle for campaigns and the resolution of differences and disputes. Rival parties should come together to agree on protocols of non-violence, and on banning the mobilization of gangs. While this occurred in the run-up to the 2023 elections at a national level – where, on 29 September 2022, major candidates for the presidency signed an accord committing to a peaceful 2023 campaign – this could be mirrored at a regional level.

International community

Sanctions: International actors should continue to impose diplomatic sanctions on Nigerian politicians perceived to incite violence or otherwise compromise the vote.¹²⁷ Both the US and the UK affirmed their commitment to continuing this practice in the run-up to the 2023 elections.¹²⁸ In the wake of the elections, both confirmed they were sanctioning relevant individuals, but did not publicize the names of those under sanction. In order to maximize the reputational impact of sanctioning, international actors should consider publicizing the names of individuals sanctioned under these powers. Failing to do so hugely weakens the impact of sanctions.¹²⁹ Politicians found to be protecting individuals who are later involved in piracy should be considered for sanction, given that piracy significantly impacts international interests.

Additionally, sanctions should be expanded to have strong financial elements, including freezing of foreign bank accounts of politicians who sponsor and fuel election-related violence. Foreign governments, such as the US and UK, have significant power to impose strong financial sanctions on Nigerian politicians known for hiding dirty money abroad, especially in the UK.

NOTES

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 - 32 Interview with a youth, Port Harcourt, 10 May 2023.
 - 33 Interview with an academic, Khana LGA, 10 May 2023.
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 - 104 Interview with a member of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in Rivers, May 2023.
 - 105 Interviews with a cross-section of stakeholders and eyewitnesses, May–June 2023.
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