

Policyweekly

Nigeria's 2023 Elections

Potential Flashpoints in the South-South Geopolitical Zone



Policy Recommendations

- 1 Security agencies should adopt measures to deter cult groups and militants from perpetrating violence.
- 2 Security agencies and other election stakeholders should establish and collaborate closely with local actors to discover networks of cult groups and militants involved in electoral violence.
- 3 INEC facilities and personnel should be properly protected before and during the elections.
- 4 In collaboration with local communities, security agencies should identify politicians sponsoring cult groups and militants.
- 5 The Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs must work towards effectively rehabilitating ex-militants by equipping them with the requisite skills for gainful employment.
- 6 There is a need to support the incoming Niger Delta Regional Peacebuilding Strategy (NDRPS).

In less than 100 days from today (November 21 2022), Nigeria's electoral umpire - the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) - will be conducting the Presidential and National Assembly elections. It will be the seventh general election conducted by INEC since the return to civil rule in 1999. One of the low points of successive elections in Nigeria is the level of electoral violence that occur before, during and after the election. The states of the South-South geopolitical region have gotten their fair share of this violence owing to the intense struggle by political parties to control the oil-rich states, which would grant them access to control of a substantial amount of oil wealth used by political elites to sponsor party activities.

Moreover, years of agitation for the control of oil resources in the region and [ineffective response mechanisms by the Nigerian state](#) have contributed to the proliferation of cult gangs and militant groups who have become prominent non-state actors in the politics of the South-South geopolitical region. Data from Nextier SPD violent conflict database show that between January and October 2022, the South-South region has experienced at least 24 cult clashes leading to at least 60 deaths. As the 2023 election draws nearer, this figure may soar during and immediately after the elections. The three last Nextier SPD Policy weeklies have x-rayed potential flashpoints in the South West, South East and North West. In continuation, this Nextier

SPD Policy weekly examines the potential flashpoints in South-South geopolitical region with a particular focus on the saliency of cult groups and militants as non-state actors with considerable impact on the character of electoral violence in the region.

Cults, Militia and Ballots

Election violence is perpetrated by different actors who have incentives to advance their objectives through violence during the different phases of the electoral cycle. In their typologies of electoral violence, Birch and Muchlinski (2020) identified three categories of actors involved in electoral violence as perpetrators and victims to include: state (including incumbent parties/politicians as well as formal state institutions like the police and military); non-state (including opposition party actors, ethnic and religious groups, ordinary citizens); and international (intergovernmental and transnational organizations). Birch and Muchlinski further categorized violence perpetrated by actors into two – threats (incitement and coercion falling short of actual bodily harm) and attacks (assaults and violent physical confrontations). The cult groups and militants in the South-South geopolitical region stand out as visible non-state actors with strong incentives to perpetrate electoral violence.

Although cult groups are mostly involved in struggles over territorial control and organized crime, they join or mutate into militants to pursue wider political objectives within the oil politics of the region (Ibeanu & Momoh, 2008). Election periods allow cult groups and militants to negotiate power and resources with state actors, particularly politicians. The politicians may deploy some cult groups and militants for violence by promising them favourable policies and programmes, including access to oil wealth and immediate financial payment to the groups. The incentives from state actors usually influence some cults or militant groups to engage in violence with opposing groups, within themselves or the wider society, as they struggle to gain a greater share of resources. The South-South region has a long history of clashes among cult and militant groups from the struggle over election-related issues. In 2004, six people were killed, 50 houses were razed, and about 6,000 were rendered homeless in a clash between two militant groups – the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Mujahid Asari Dokubo and Niger Delta Vigilantes led by Ateke Tom, both members of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Rivers State and who participated actively in securing electoral victory for the party in the widely contested 2003 elections (Ibeanu, 2006).

As the 2023 elections draw closer, there will likely be a spike in violence connected to cult groups and militants who may be deployed by politicians for various forms of electoral violence ranging from voter intimidation to harassment of political opponents. There are [reported clashes](#) between rival cult gangs across the South-South region as they battle for supremacy and territorial control in preparation for the 2023 election. In June, for example, [disagreement over the sharing of cash gifts from some politicians](#) in Bayelsa State led to the death of four persons during clashes between rival cult gangs at different locations in Yenagoa, the state capital.

Potential Flashpoints

Of the six states in the South-South geopolitical region, Rivers State stands out as the most contested state. The state has always been hotly contested because of the high number of voters and oil resources. This has exposed the state to high levels of violence and other forms of electoral fraud. A preliminary voter register released by INEC reveals that Rivers State is [among](#)

[the six states](#) in Nigeria with the highest number of registered voters. With a total of 3,532,990 voters, Rivers is home to 3.77 per cent of the total 93.5 million registered voters in Nigeria. [The result of the 2019 general election](#) shows that Rivers is the only state in the South-South geopolitical zone where the ruling APC could not secure up to 25 per cent of the votes cast during the presidential election. The implication is that Rivers State will remain a highly contested election battlefield in the 2023 general elections.

Meanwhile, the state has gained notoriety as having the region's highest number of active cult groups and militants (Ibeanu, 2008). Between January 2019 and September 2022, [more than 400 fatalities](#) related to cult and gang activities have been reported in Rivers State. As the 2023 election draws closer, there may be a spike in cult-related activities as desperate politicians may fund cult and militia groups to attack opponents and intimidate voters in locations considered strongholds of their opponents. Cult and militia groups would want to maintain their supremacy and territorial control over various locations to position themselves for negotiation with politicians seeking to fraudulent secure votes in such locations. For instance, on [November 05, 2022](#), five persons were reportedly killed during a series of clashes over a battle for supremacy and territorial control between the Greenlander and Icelander cult gangs at a housing estate in Ahoada town, Ahoada East LGA.

According to one key informant, these recent clashes may be connected to the attempt by cult groups to properly position themselves ahead of the 2023 elections (Personal Communication). [The internal crisis of the PDP](#) with Nyesom Wike, the Governor of Rivers State, leading one faction, may further worsen the conflict in the state as various factions would struggle desperately to secure high votes in the state.

Edo State is another flashpoint where cult groups are prominent. [In June](#), eight persons were reportedly killed during a series of clashes between rival cult gangs at different locations in Benin City, the state capital. The power tussle between the incumbent governor, Godwin Obaseki of the PDP and his predecessor, Adams Oshiomhole of the APC, will make it a hotly contested zone. [The attack](#) on the convoy of a prominent pastor, Apostle Johnson Suleman, on Friday, October 21, 2022, by gunmen near Auchu on his way from Benin City suggests the level of insecurity already building up in Edo State.

Delta State is another flashpoint that requires attention. [With 3,368,791 registered voters](#), Delta State is one of the ten states with the highest number of registered voters in Nigeria as of August 01, 2022. [The result of the 2019 presidential election](#) shows that Delta State gave the PDP presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, the highest number of votes in the South-South region, while the APC struggled to obtain 27.1 per cent of the votes cast in the state. The emergence of the incumbent state governor, Ifeanyi Okowa as the vice presidential candidate of the PDP for the 2023 election makes the state an attraction for cult groups and militants who would want to maintain their territorial control, extract material resources and promises from politicians in order to help deliver electoral victory in their territories. Already, there are [reported cult clashes](#) in places like in Ogwasi-Uku community, Aniocha South Local Government Area (LGA) and Sapele town, Sapele LGA of Delta State.

Mitigation Strategies

Based on the threats to a peaceful election in the South-South geopolitical zone, the following strategies should be put in place before, during and after the election to mitigate electoral violence, particularly

those perpetrated by cult groups and militants:

1. Security agencies should deepen deterrence and confidence building: security agencies should adopt measures to deter cult groups and militants from perpetrating violence through strategies such as visibility policing, immediate arrest, detention and prosecution of groups involved in gang wars and violence. Security agencies should also build the confidence of the masses to participate in the electoral processes by providing physical security at electoral events such as campaigns, during actual voting, result declaration and days after the election. There is also a need to deepen security arrangements to ensure the protection of marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women and minorities, during the different phases of the electoral process in order to ensure they are not suppressed or punished by cult groups and militants.
2. Ensure close collaboration with local actors: security agencies and other election stakeholders should establish and maintain close collaboration with local actors to discover networks of cult groups and militants involved in electoral violence. There should be functional monitoring and reporting mechanisms to facilitate easy identification and reportage of these violent groups so that their activities can be curtailed early.
3. Protection for INEC Facilities: INEC facilities and personnel should be properly protected before and during the election to ensure that violent groups and disgruntled politicians seeking to frustrate the conduct of the election do not launch attacks on these facilities.
4. Identify and sanction politicians funding cult groups and militants: security agencies, in collaboration with local communities, should identify politicians sponsoring cult groups and militants to prosecute such politicians in line with the electoral act.
5. Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs to effectively rehabilitate ex-militants: as part of a long-term strategy of addressing violence perpetrated by cult groups and militants, the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs must work towards effectively rehabilitating ex-militants by equipping them with requisite skills for gainful employment. The rehabilitated militants should be monitored regularly, particularly during elections, to ensure they do not go back to cultism and militancy.
6. Support to the Niger Delta Regional Peacebuilding Strategy (NDRPS): The soon-to-be-inaugurated Niger Delta Regional Peacebuilding strategy (NDRPS), led by PIND (Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta) and The Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs(MNDA), which Nextier is a

member of the Technical Working Group (TWG), should be supported by all stakeholders to achieve the expected result as the violent conflicts in the region cannot be dissociated from years of structural violence arising from oil resource activities and management, which if not resolved will make peacebuilding a difficult task (Nwokolo, 2017).

Conclusion

The South-South region is home to a large number of cult groups and militants who consider elections as lucrative events for making material gains and renegotiating power positions through perpetrating violence. As the 2023 election draws nearer, cult groups and militants are already positioning themselves for the lucrative venture by fighting for territorial supremacy. Relevant electoral stakeholders must adopt necessary strategies to mitigate electoral violence to ensure peaceful elections, particularly in potential flashpoints like Rivers, Delta and Edo states.

References

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Weekly Update

THE ELECTRICITY HUB **Power Dialogue**

Nigeria's Energy Transition: The Decarbonisation Journey

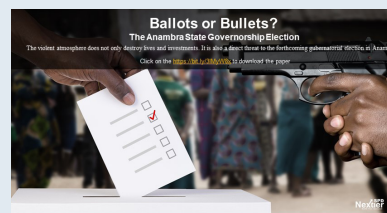
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Nextier Sample Publications



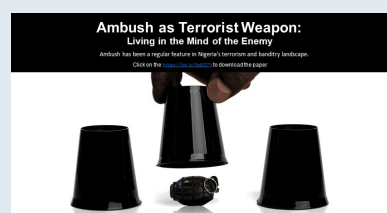
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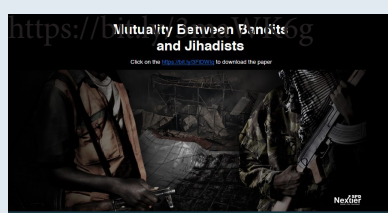
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