

# Special Issue (Policy Brief)

## Political Vigilantes: Threat to Nigeria's 2023 General Election?

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### Introduction

Political vigilantism is a global phenomenon. [Political vigilantes](#), sometimes called “footsoldiers,” refers to resorting to illegal means to achieve local political objectives. The practice originated in the United States in the late 1700s, but in recent years, many countries, including [South Africa](#), [Ghana](#), and [Tanzania](#), have experienced incidents of political vigilantism. Nigeria is also not immune to this problem. Since the country returned to democratic rule in 1999, political vigilantism has pervaded Nigeria's political landscape. Political actors, whether in government or the opposition, are known to form and use violent individuals or groups, referred to as vigilantes, who ‘take the law into their hands’ and perpetrate violence. The vigilantes are more than hired political thugs; they include non-state armed groups who operate at the local and state level.

As Nigeria prepare for the 2023 general election, if successful, it will be the first time in the nation's 63-year history that it has managed three successive peaceful transfers of power. It would also signify how democracy has advanced since 1999 after the military handed power to a civilian government. But if unsuccessful, it will devastate a country already struggling with significant security challenges. While previous elections in the country have never been free, fair, or peaceful, additional security threats face the 2023 general elections. Chief among them is the violent actions of various non-state armed groups that have openly proclaimed a desire to undermine the country's fragile democracy. The [Indigenous People of Biafra \(IPOB\)](#) has emerged with sophistication and lethality that should raise concerns. While [Boko Haram](#), which has attempted to sabotage previous elections and has increased its operations since the last cycle, remains a threat. These groups have a history of focusing on elections, assassinating political opponents, intimidating voters or erecting barriers to keep electorates from carrying out their civic duties.

One such factor that could disrupt the incoming general election is arms proliferation in the hands of armed groups already unleashing mayhem on the citizens and government institutions, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Media reports have highlighted violence perpetrated by political vigilantes in many states across the federation. [Between 2019 and 2022](#), reports have shown that political vigilantes attacked no fewer than 134 offices and personnel of INEC in different parts of the country. Lootings, shootings, arson assaults, kidnappings, and assassinations of election officials are a few of these incidents. In November 2022, [INEC](#) reported that 24 persons were killed and over 20 others injured in elections-related violence. In the same period, the National Security Adviser (NSA), Gen. Baba Gana Monguno (rtd), revealed that there had been [52 instances of election violence](#) in 22 states in one month. Thus, the rising spate of violence, killings, and

attacks by political vigilantes may determine the outcome of this year's general elections.

The political vigilantes have become a growing threat to peace and security in the country. In the first part of January 2023, [there were four further attacks](#), two in Edo state and one each in the cities of Anambra and Enugu. The Labour party have protested against the killing and harassment of its party chieftains and supporters in Lagos, Nasarawa, Ebonyi and Katsina States. The People's Democratic Party and All Progressive Congress have [accused](#) each other of sponsoring political vigilantes to assassinate party chieftains, assault party members and candidates, and disrupt campaign rallies in different parts of the country. These politicians have developed the habit of sending their political thugs to remove, yank off or destroy the hoisted campaign banners or billboards of other political parties, in addition to using threats and intimidation.

Threats and acts of electoral violence are punishable under the existing [Electoral Act](#). Sections 116 and 128 of the Act state that anyone or group of people who disrupts a political meeting or gathering, or who directly or indirectly, by themselves or on their behalf, uses any force or threatens to use any force against any political candidates or political party, commits an offence and is subject to a fine, incarceration, or both upon conviction.

Unfortunately, the state institutions, including the security agencies, appear helpless and have proved ineffective in dealing with the threats posed by political vigilantes. The political parties that they represent may have signed the Peace Accord, but the reality is that they have not seen any reason to imbibe the spirit of the accord. Therefore, judging from the recent incidence of political vigilantism, the political actors believe it is business as usual. As the political vigilantes gain more power, the situation could get worse. Thus, to be aware of these dangers, take action to manage them, facilitate a peaceful transfer of power, and support the incoming administration, this paper recommends the following to ensure a credible 2023 general election.

### **What should be done**

**Secure affected areas:** the few days left before the election should be used by the Nigerian police force in collaboration with the military and other law enforcement agencies to drive back violent groups, secure vulnerable neighbourhoods, and free those already detained.

**Increase security operatives for election monitoring:** An adequate number of security officers should be posted nationwide in all polling stations and collation centres. Also, there is a need to redeploy security operatives and resources for election monitoring with the continued focus on containing political vigilantes and other violent groups across the country.

**National security should be placed over parochial, political and selfish interests:** State security agencies, particularly the police, should be further equipped and given reorientation on how to perform their duties. The inspector general of police and other security chiefs should remind security officers of the significance of the 2023 general election and issue warnings to them not to be involved in facilitating the activities of political vigilantes. Therefore, any security officer found aiding or encouraging political vigilantes should face severe criminal penalties. This should include dismissal where appropriate. Security patrol vans should move from one polling centre to the other to monitor the activities of security officers posted to polling centres.

**INEC should maintain impartiality:** Allegations of rigging and bias involving the electoral body and the police frequently lead to acts of violence. Over the past several cycles, INEC's and, to a lesser extent, the police's reputations for upholding impartiality during elections have improved, but this professionalism must be preserved. The electoral body should reduce or remove any action or inaction that questions its impartiality. This should include how and whom it uses for its logistics, and strategic communication, especially in being proactive to emerging issues.

**Early warning, prevention and mitigation mechanisms should be developed:** Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) should be supported to develop tools for early reporting, prevention and mitigation of electoral violence. The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, which brings together more than 60 local and national

organisations to share information, foresee issues, and respond quickly, can oversee this mechanism.

**Changing value system:** There is a need to move away from money politics, where money is often used for campaigns and soliciting for electorate votes. The poor masses are given food, false promises are made, and no rational information is given to them. Campaigns should be more issue-based. Candidates should be judged based on their leadership potential and other strengths rather than what they can give us during the campaign.

**Illiteracy, poverty and unemployment:** Most political vigilantes are young people who are unemployed in society. These occur in a society where unemployment and poverty are pervasive. The government has a duty and responsibility to combat poverty and offer its people opportunities for education and employment. The elected officials must completely change their perspective to see themselves as being there to serve and impact people's lives. Most of these vices won't find a place to flourish with good governance.

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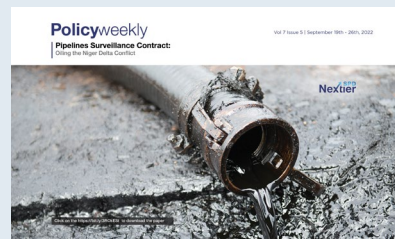
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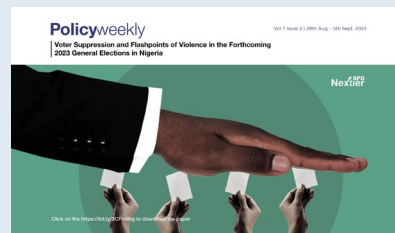
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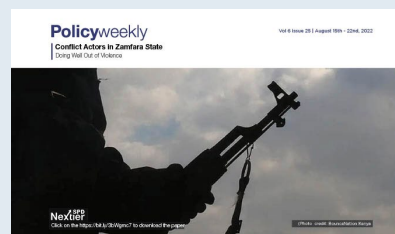
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