



Vigilante Groups: Protectors or Predators?

Policy Recommendations

1. The Nigerian Police and NSCDS should be strengthened, this will hugely reduce the space occupied by vigilante groups/organisations
2. Security roles carried out by vigilante organisation should remain ancillary, with no powers to detain and punish offenders.
3. There should be proper registration of vigilante groups and their members in their local government of operations. This will ensure proper control and monitoring of their activities
4. They should be subjected to training and continues training as a condition for registration and to remain in operations.

Nextier SPD Policy Weekly provides an analysis of topical conflict, security, and development issues and proposes recommendations to address them. It is a publication of **Nextier SPD**.

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On November 10, 2018, [Kogi State government commissioned 2,900 vigilante guards](#) to complement the efforts of security agencies in crime detection and prevention in the state. The Kogi State House of Assembly had enacted a law establishing the State Vigilante Service to recruit, train, and arm the selected men and women with light weapons to provide security across the communities in the state. Indeed, [modern vigilantism in Nigeria had emerged in the context of political marginalisation and heightened criminality over two decades](#) ago when the Oodua People’s Congress (OPC) and Bakassi Boys blazed the trail respectively in 1994 and 1998. There has been a recent upsurge in the establishment of vigilante organisations across Nigeria: Anambra Vigilante Group, Rivers State Neighbourhood Watch, Civilian Joint Task Force in the Northeast, etc. However, while some vigilante organisations operate within the ambit of the laws, [others flout such laws and even perpetrate the crimes they are supposed to fight](#). Following this [double-edged sword character](#) of vigilantism in Nigeria, this edition of Nextier SPD Weekly examines the attractions of, and objections to, vigilante organisations as well as makes recommendations for better engagement of the civic militias.

Civic militias and vigilante organisations [hold attractions for both strong and weak states](#). In better governed societies, [they support state security agencies](#) and operate in localised contexts. As a result, such paramilitary civic organisations are characterised by hierarchical structures and leadership patterns as well as oversight monitoring by state authorities as done the [United States](#).

In much of the weak states in Africa, vigilante groups have emerged in the context of state fragility, in general, and growing security threats and poor police

response to crime, in particular. In Nigeria, [OPC \(which was found only in the Southwest region\) arose as result of the ethnic marginalisation of the Yoruba sub-nation following the annulment of the general elections on June 12, 1993 by the Babangida-led military dictatorship](#). However, despite this noble goal, [OPC overtime became an ethnic militia with notoriety for perpetrating violence against members of other ethnic groups](#) especially the Hausa-Fulani and Igbo in Lagos and other Southwestern cities. Similarly, even though the “Bakassi Boys” was a formidable anti-crime group in the Igbo-speaking Southeast, it was subsequently [hijacked by politicians](#) who deployed the militia against political opponents leading to [human rights violations](#) and extra-judicial killings.

Recent re-awakening of vigilantism is propelled by the ubiquity of insurgency, terrorism, and criminal violence such as armed robbery and kidnapping in Nigeria. The security agencies have been unable to rise to the security challenge posed by non-state violent actors for several reasons including [inadequate manpower, poor training, inadequate equipment, low pay resulting in low morale, and inadequate decentralisations of operations](#). Indeed, the Nigeria Police Force which is saddled with the responsibility of maintaining internal security is controlled from Abuja, thus limiting the reach and response of its rank and file.

There has been a clamour for state or community policing in response to these ever-growing security challenges. Such structures are implemented in various federations such as the United States of America. However, [the Buhari administration, like its predecessors, has not been favourably disposed to state policing](#). People who oppose state policing argue that the decentralisation of the force

can lead [to abuse and hijack by politicians](#) as was the case with the regional police forces in Nigeria in the pre-independence years up to 1967. They also opine that the states do not have the required fiscal resources to fund such policing arrangements. In contrast, [proponents of state policing argue that it will make the force more effective since the structure will be staffed with people familiar with local culture, language, and environment](#). The emergence of vigilante organisations seem to be a reflection of the continued yearning for state policing in Nigeria. Thus, the recent passage of [the bill authorising the establishment of vigilante groups](#) and local community security outfits by the House of Representatives is a pointer that it has become part of our security architecture in the country.

Considering the past and present challenges faced by vigilante organisations, there is need for better policy formulation for the engagement of vigilante groups:

1. Strengthening of the Nigerian Police Force will obviate the usurpation of policing roles by vigilante organisations. The need for vigilante structures will be drastically reduced with an increase in the manpower of the police, better training, equipment, and remuneration to fight crime and violence.
2. Vigilante organisations should be restricted to ancillary crime control functions. Vigilante groups should not be empowered to conduct any arrests or to prosecute offenders. This is to ensure there is no risk of human rights violations or abuse. Rather, they should report offenders to the police and other agencies with the statutory responsibility for arrest and prosecution.

3. All vigilante organisations and their members should be registered with the local government in their areas of operation and provided with unique identification numbers and cards. This will enable the government to monitor and detect abuses when they occur.
4. As part of their registration, vigilante groups must submit evidence of participating in continuous education. The training curriculum should be standardised to address all the relevant aspects of policing with emphasis on the upholding the rights of the citizens. Organisations such as [J4A](#) and [CLEEN](#) have relevant experience in providing training in informal policing and probably access to donor funding to support such programmes.

In conclusion, Nigeria has growing security challenges that are stretching the security agencies to the limit of the abilities. While there might be a role for local vigilantes especially in the area of intelligence gathering, it is important that their modalities for operation are standardised and agreed. Earlier efforts at vigilante groups led to cases of significant human right infringements. There is also a risk of capture by the political elites. Nigeria, with its vast land mass and population of over 180 million people, is too large and complex to be protected by a centralised police force. The constitution should be amended to allow for both federal and state police forces as obtains in other federations and jurisdictions. This is not only in tune with our federal practice, but it will also bring policing closer to the people resulting in more effective internal security.

