

Policyweekly

Nigeria's Off-Cycle Elections and the Impending Violence



(Photo credit: [Viewpointnigeria.org](https://www.viewpointnigeria.org))

Policy Recommendations

- 1 Security agencies should use data from think tanks, CSOs and NGOs to understand election-related violence.
- 2 Security deployments and monitoring in hotspot communities should be extended beyond election days to ensure sustained peace, law, and order.
- 3 INEC and the police should rebuild their image during the off-cycle elections by curtailing or eliminating actions that question their integrity.
- 4 Collaboration between CSOs and CBOs is crucial for early reporting, prevention, and reduction of electoral violence. Nigeria's Civil Society Situation Room can manage this strategy, while security agencies should strengthen their collaboration with CSOs.
- 5 Security forces should be retrained to perform better and punished if found assisting or inciting violence during elections.

Introduction

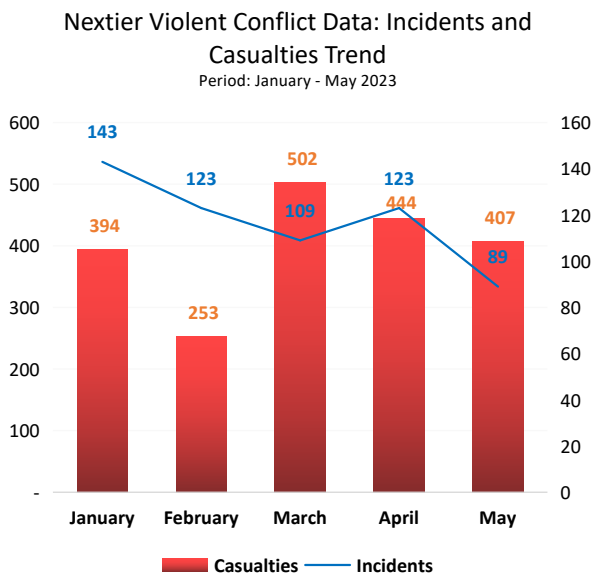
[Off-cycle elections](#) are held outside the regular elections calendar. General elections take place in the same year in Nigeria as part of the country's four-year election cycle. However, off-cycle elections are held when a vacancy arises due to a resignation, court nullification, impeachment, or other reasons. Following Nigeria's recently concluded general elections, another round of elections is set for November 2023. Gubernatorial elections are scheduled to hold in Kogi, Imo, and Bayelsa. According to the [Independent National Electoral Commission \(INEC\)](#), 18 political parties fielded candidates in Kogi, 17 in Imo, and 16 in Bayelsa. Per Section 94(1) of the Electoral Act 2022, public campaigning has been slated to commence on Wednesday, June 14, 2023, and end on Tuesday, November 9, 2023 (24 hours before election day). In this edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, Nextier examines the forthcoming off-cycle elections in Kogi, Imo, and Bayelsa. It discusses the actors, political development, the dominant conflict types in the off-cycle states, and the possible use of violence by the political class and their supporters to attain political positions.

Given the controversies surrounding the general elections on February 25, 2023, there is no doubt that the outcome of these upcoming off-cycle elections will further define INEC's reputation and legitimacy. INEC's Chairman Professor Mahmud Yakubu [declared the official results](#), stating that Bola Tinubu received 8,794,726 votes to defeat his closest challengers, Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) and Rabiu Kwankwaso of the

New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), who received 6,984,520, 6,101,533, and 1,496,687 votes, respectively. This result was against [widespread claims of anomalies](#) and logistical failures despite INEC's spending of over [300 billion](#). For one, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), an electronic device designed to read Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and authenticate voters before voting, [cost an estimated 105.25 billion](#). However, reports indicate that the device [failed to accredit voters](#) in some locations due to technical issues relating to login details, configuration or internet connectivity.

Amid these challenges, how violence will play out in these states is a concern. Notably, [pockets of violence](#) were recorded during the general elections. However, there appears to be an uptick in violent casualties post-election. Data from the Nextier Violent Conflict Database shows that 253 casualties were recorded in February 2023, while in March and April, there were 502 and 444 casualties, respectively (see Figure 1). The rising violence may impact the processes and outcomes of the upcoming off-season elections. As a result, it is necessary to identify the specific and intersecting violent conflict types affecting the states where elections are scheduled to occur. Political and power conflicts can also exacerbate pre-existing conflict situations.

Figure 1: Nextier Violent Conflict Data: Incidents and Casualties Trend (January - May 2023)



Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database

How Kogi, Imo, and Bayelsa Landed in the Off-Cycle Pool

Bayelsa state began to [conduct off-cycle elections in 2007](#) when Timipre Sylva of the PDP was declared the winner. Ebitimi Amgbare, an Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) candidate, challenged the election outcome and won at the Court of Appeal. The Court of Appeal ordered INEC to conduct a fresh election in 2008. Sylva won the election and returned to office.

In Kogi state, Ibrahim Idris won the April 14, 2007, gubernatorial elections against Abubakar Audu of the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), the main opponent. Audu petitioned the tribunal and the Appeal court. The election [was nullified, and a fresh election](#) was conducted. However, Ibrahim Idris won the election on March 29, 2008.

Imo state joined the ["off-cycle" elections pool in 2019](#) when Hope Uzodinma of the All Progressive Congress (APC) challenged the victory of Emeka Ihedioha, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) candidate. The legal tussle went from the election tribunal to the Supreme Court. On January 14, 2020, the supreme court declared Uzodinma the duly elected state Governor.

State Level Political Development and Violence

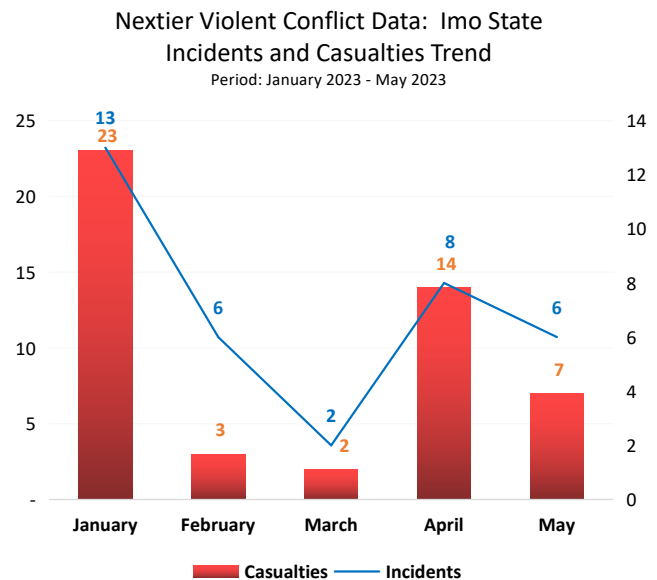
IMO STATE

Despite ranking fourth in the polls, Hope Uzodinma was declared Governor by the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that [388 polling units' results were unjustly omitted](#) during the collation of the final governorship election, in which Hope Uzodinma polled the majority of the valid votes. Following this event were legitimacy tussles, fierce criticisms, opposition suppression, and extreme violence.

(a) Separatist Violence

Imo state is a [hub of violence](#) perpetrated by suspected separatists who go by the appellation "Unknown Gunmen." Despite security forces' efforts, killings and destructions by unknown gunmen have increased in different parts of the state. Most attacks target security personnel, government facilities and officials, politicians and innocent citizens. Some identified [flashpoints](#) include Orlu, Orsu, Ideato North and South, Okigwe, Oguta-Izombe, Njaba, Oru East and Oru West. In Oru East, the Governor's Local Government Area (LGA), thousands of indigenes have fled their communities due to intense violence. For example, on April 24, 2021, hoodlums numbering about 15, [stormed the Governor's country home and attempted to burn down the house](#). In the violence that ensued, an unarmed personnel of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC) was killed in the process. Before the 2023 general election, the gunmen warned that elections would not hold in Imo state. As a result several attacks on INEC staff and facilities have been recorded. An INEC staff was killed in Ihitte Uboma Local Government Area (LGA). In [another attack](#), some parts of the premises of the INEC headquarters in the state was razed. Consequently, the persistence of this form of violence may impact the process and outcome of the November 2023 gubernatorial elections in the three states.

Figure 2: Nextier Violent Conflict Data: Imo state Incidents and Casualties Trend (January - May 2023)



Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database

(b) A Three-Horse Race

The incumbent Governor, Senator Hope Uzodinma of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Senator Athan Achonu of the Labour Party (LP), and Senator Samuel Anyanwu of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) are the [leading candidates](#) in the governorship race. Remarkably, these leading aspirants come from the three senatorial zones. While Hope Uzodinma is from the Orlu zone, Athan Achonu and Samuel Anyanwu are from Okigwe and Owerri zones. One defining context is the Governor's ambition to retain political power. During the 2023 state assembly elections, Hope Uzodinma's party, [APC, won all 27 seats](#). Although [violence, threats, and killings marred the process](#), the move tactically demonstrates the incumbent's goal of building his political base and maximising his re-election chances. And, coming from the dominant party at the centre, it raises the question of whether the Governor will deploy the state security apparatus to secure his re-election.

KOGI STATE

The outgoing Governor of Kogi State, Yahaya Bello, ensured that his favourite candidate [emerged as the gubernatorial flagbearer](#) of the All Progressive Congress (APC) for the Kogi state off-cycle election. Ahmed Ododo, emerged winner after polling 78,704 votes to beat six other contestants. Following the Governor's unveiling of Ododo, some candidates withdrew from the contest, [including Edward Onoja, the Deputy Governor](#), a close ally of the Governor. Some contenders who participated in the primary election have protested that the process was [undemocratic](#). Other [prominent contenders](#) for the governorship election include Dino Melaye of the (PDP) and Alhaji Muritala Yakubu Ajaka of the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

(a) Power Tussle

The Independent National Electoral Commission [threatened to cancel](#) the presidential and national assembly elections

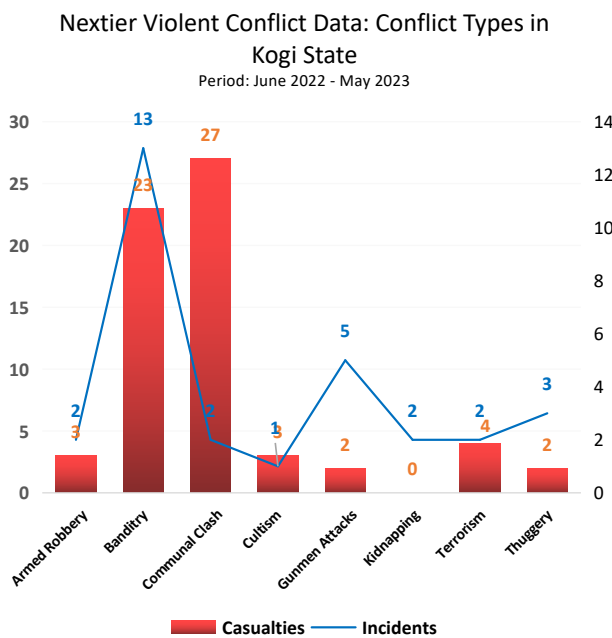
held on February 25, 2023, due to the violence in areas such as Anyigba and Dekina. Recently, clashes between competing political party members have been recorded in the run-up to the Kogi gubernatorial elections. According to reports, the Kogi state [Governors' convoy was ambushed](#) along the Abuja-Lokoja Highway. The incident was carried out by thugs suspected to be supporters of Alhaji Muritala Yakubu Ajaka, the Social Democratic Party's (SDP) gubernatorial candidate.

Conversely, Muritala Ajaka alleged in another story that the [state Governor and his team attacked him](#). Muritala was expelled from the Governors' Party, the APC, in March 2023 for anti-party activity before joined SDP. Given the current situation, retaliatory attacks, threats, and intimidation between opposition camps could become a recurring challenge. Using political thugs and security officials to orchestrate violence dominates Kogi's political landscape. [Kogi state](#) will likely pose a security challenge considering the political rivalry and the tendency to win at all costs.

(b) The Existing Insurgency

Amid the political tension, the state is overwhelmed with violent conflicts. The activities of non-state armed groups in Kogi state have steadily risen. On October 18 2022, suspected members of the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) [attacked a Celestial Church in Lokoja, Kogi State](#), killing two people and injuring others. On December 29, 2022, [a bomb attack occurred in Okene, Kogi State](#). According to reports, the explosion caused property loss and killed three people. The Vehicle-Borne Explosive Device (VBIED) exploded on the street leading to Ohinoyi of Okene's palace. A few hours after the explosion, the president was scheduled to arrive in the state to unveil projects in Okene. Other conflicts include banditry, terrorism, farmer-herder conflicts, and communal clashes, among others (see Figure 3)

Figure 3: Nextier Violent Conflict Data: Conflict Types in Kogi State (June 2022 - May 2023)



Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database

BAYELSA STATE

Duoye Diri, the incumbent Governor of Bayelsa state and Timipre Sylva, a former Governor and former Minister for State Petroleum Resources, are the major contenders for the gubernatorial election in Bayelsa state. Like Governor Hope Uzodinma of Imo State, Duoye Diri became Governor after the Supreme [Court sacked former Bayelsa State Governor-elect David Lyon and his deputy, Biobarakuma Degi-Eremieoyo](#). Lyon's election was declared null and void when his deputy was accused of presenting falsified certificates to the Independent

National Electoral Commission (INEC).

(a) The Return of Sylva

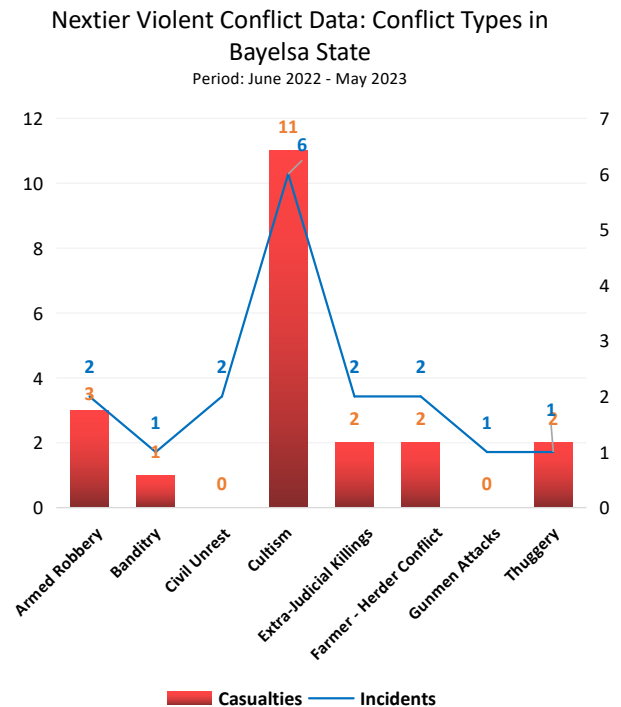
Timipre Sylva could not secure his party's gubernatorial ticket and re-election in 2011. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) [disqualified Timipre](#) from participating in the state primaries for the elections. Several sources traced the decision to a rift between Sylva and former President Goodluck Jonathan. However, Goodluck Jonathan stated that Timipre Sylva was barred from running on the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Governorship primaries in Bayelsa State because [he failed to stimulate economic development and complete pending projects initiated by previous administrations](#). After joining the All Progressive Congress, he was appointed Minister of State for Petroleum Resources in 2019.

In April 2023, Sylva [contested and polled](#) 52,061 votes to win the APC governorship ticket for Bayelsa State. The incumbent Governor may fiercely battle to retain his seat. Sylva possesses a formidable political base and belongs to the ruling party at the centre, which may influence the election. However, the incumbent Governor successfully led the [PDP to win a majority of at least 17 seats](#) in the Bayelsa State House of Assembly, even though there were records of electoral violence.

(b) The Festering Cultism

Bayelsa is rife with [cult and gang-related](#) violence. The violence has sparked armed conflicts and retaliatory attacks across the state. As the state sets for the November 2023 elections, the scenario could descend into protracted battles for supremacy among the many cult groups striving for political relevance. These cult groups are also supported by politicians who also serve as [members](#). Politicians use cult groups to disrupt the electoral process and achieve their political pursuits. Therefore, with the shift from militancy to politics by many former militant leaders and their foot soldiers, political positions and elections are highly contested.

Figure 4: Nextier Violent Conflict Data: Conflict Types in Bayelsa State (June 2022 - May 2023)



Source: Nextier Violent Conflict Database

Recommendations

There is no definitive solution to the problem of election violence and violent conflicts. However, significant efforts can be made to limit violence during the run-up to the off-cycle elections. To this end, the following recommendations are proposed:

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Nextier SPD (www.thenextier.com/spd) is an international development consulting firm that uses evidence-based research to develop and build knowledge and skills to enhance human security, peace, and sustainable development as means to achieving stability and prosperity in Nigeria, and in the African region.

1. Security agencies should collect and use data on the most common election-related violence in the 2023 presidential elections to prepare for forthcoming off-cycle elections. A strategic approach will include sourcing data from relevant think tanks, CSOs and NGOs. This data can be examined with security intelligence to understand violent issues and election-related violence better.
2. Security deployments and monitoring in hotspot communities should not be restricted to election days. Such areas are equally vulnerable to pre- and post-election violence, necessitating troop deployments and adequate operational logistics to ensure peace, law, and order. Known offenders and harbingers of election violence should be personally cautioned and their engagements monitored during, on and after the elections. This should include the monitoring of their activities posted on social media.
3. Violence frequently results from accusations of rigging and bias involving the election body and the police. The reputations of INEC and, to some degree, the police for keeping neutrality during the 2023 general elections deteriorated immensely. It is expected that they rebuild their image with the off-cycle elections. Any action or inaction that questions the electoral body's integrity should be avoided. This should include how and whom it uses for logistics, strategic communications, and response to emergent issues.
4. Developing mechanisms for early reporting, prevention, and reduction of electoral violence should be improved by civil society organisations (CSOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs). This method can be managed by the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, which brings together

more than 60 local and national organisations to share information, anticipate problems, and take swift action. Security agencies can improve their partnership with CSOs to make the most of these systems.

5. Security forces, notably the police, should be better equipped and retrained in performing their duties. Security officer(s) caught assisting or inciting violence or criminality should face sanctions.

Conclusion

The outcome of the general elections will surely impact Nigeria's off-cycle elections. However, election security depends on the readiness and sincerity of INEC and the security agencies doing their part in making November 2023 better. Other election participants, such as political parties, supporters, voters, and the general public, also have to play their role in maintaining a peaceful process. The likelihood of election violence may be reduced if the relevant election stakeholders consistently uphold their legal obligations.

Authors:

Charles Asiegbu

Senior Policy and Research Analyst, Nextier
Bridge Fellow, Nigeria Economic Summit Group (NESG)

Dr. Ndu Nwokolo

Managing Partner Nextier and Honorary Fellow at the School of Government at the University of Birmingham, UK.

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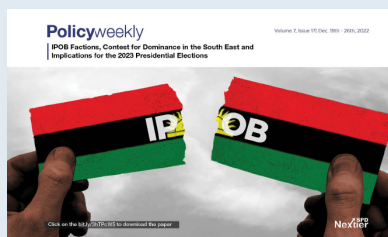
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