

# Policyweekly

## From Protectors to Predators: The Dark Side of Vigilantism in Nigeria



### Policy Recommendations

- 1 Regulating and integrating vigilante groups into the broader security framework is vital.
- 2 There is a need to address the underlying causes of crime, such as poverty and social exclusion, in a bid to break the cycle of violence.
- 3 Vigilante groups must be subject to rigorous regulation and oversight to prevent deviation from their intended purpose and involvement in criminal activities.
- 4 Promoting dialogue and reconciliation among diverse ethnic and religious groups is fundamental in fostering social cohesion and mitigating the risk of violence along ethnic and religious lines.
- 5 Government, civil society organisations, and faith-based and cultural institutions must champion a value reorientation campaign to fight the prevalence of cultism, which has continually made an appearance in vigilante groups.
- 6 The Nigerian government must enhance its own security capabilities and capacity for justice delivery.

### Introduction

In Nigeria, the battle against crime and insecurity has become multifaceted, revealing a complex web of challenges gripping the nation. With formal security structures encountering obstacles, communities are increasingly turning to vigilante groups for assistance. These groups range from small organisations of volunteers in rural and urban areas to big institutions established by the state governments. Some have [mandates to protect](#) certain parts of the country or ethnic/religious groups. Vigilante groups are stepping into security vacuums across many parts of Nigeria. However, poor training, oversight and supervision, human rights violations and institutional capture by political and elite classes remain major threats to vigilantism in the country. In some instances, these threats have exacerbated inter- or intra-communal tensions and increased conflict risk, especially when members of a community or citizens they are meant to serve see them as carrying out an ethnic, political, or religious agenda.

A disturbing trend has emerged: these vigilantes are undergoing a troubling transformation into cult-like gangs, exacerbating existing dangers rather than mitigating them. In recent times, Nigeria has witnessed a concerning pattern whereby vigilante groups, established initially to combat crime and maintain community safety, have morphed into cult-like factions. This evolution has spawned

rival gangs, further complicating the already intricate landscape of violence and insecurity nationwide. This edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly examines the factors propelling this transition, assesses its consequences, and suggests measures to combat this escalating threat.

## Roots of Vigilante Justice

Vigilante groups have long been a feature of Nigerian society, often arising in response to law enforcement agencies' inability to address security challenges adequately. Initially, these groups operated with the noble intention of protecting their communities from crime and violence. However, over time, many have deviated from their original mandate, morphing into cult-like organisations engaged in criminal activities and perpetuating violence. For instance, while vigilante groups like the [Bakassi Boys](#) initially curbed crime, they later became notorious for abuses like extrajudicial killings and political targeting. [Yan Sakai](#) in the North West committed serious human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings of criminal suspects, some of whom they burned alive or dismembered with machetes in public. In Zamfara state, their activities are often accused of [escalating a new brand of banditry](#) and violent ethnic rivalry between Hausa and Fulani communities.

Nigeria's socio-economic landscape catalyses the proliferation of vigilante groups. Factors such as the populace's [distrust of the police](#), elevated crime rates, and widespread unemployment create fertile ground for the emergence and expansion of these groups. Organisations like the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in the South West initially arose in response to perceived inefficiencies within law enforcement agencies. Their initial successes in addressing crime bolstered public support for their endeavours.

## Cult-ification and Gang Warfare

Reportedly, other more recent vigilante organisations are carrying on with these atrocities that have historically been witnessed. Locals are frequently exploited, particularly those who are suspected of crimes. The transformation of vigilante groups into cult-like entities and the subsequent emergence of rival gangs stem from various contributing factors. Firstly, the lack of adequate regulation and oversight has permitted vigilante groups to operate unchecked, leading to instances of power abuse and deviation from their original objectives. Additionally, the prevalence of small arms and light weapons across Nigeria facilitates the escalation of violence within these groups, often resulting in fatal consequences.

Political interference further complicates the situation, as politicians and influential figures frequently [manipulate](#) vigilante groups to serve their interests, thus eroding the objective of setting them up and fostering an environment of impunity. Moreover, socio-

economic disparities, including poverty, unemployment, and marginalisation, provide a breeding ground for disillusioned youth to be recruited into vigilante groups, where they become susceptible to indoctrination and manipulation by charismatic leaders. Furthermore, Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious demographics are sometimes exploited by vigilante groups, leading to sectarian tensions and the formation of rival gangs delineated along ethnic or religious lines. These tensions exacerbate existing social divisions and contribute to the fragmentation of community security efforts.

However, the lack of regulation and oversight over these groups poses a significant threat. Vigilante groups often operate with impunity, employing brutal tactics and resorting to extrajudicial killings of suspected criminals. This lack of accountability fosters a sense of invincibility and breeds corruption. The International Crisis Group's 2022 [report](#) sheds light on the lack of resources, supervision, and training among vigilante group members. It makes them susceptible to human rights violations and manipulation by the elite, highlighting the potential dangers of unchecked vigilante power.

## A Vicious Cycle

The convergence between vigilante groups and criminal cult gangs becomes increasingly blurred as strict oaths, initiation rituals, and hierarchical structures cultivate a cult-like environment within these organisations. Predominantly targeting unemployed youth, these groups offer a sense of belonging and empowerment. Consequently, competition for dominance within communities often escalates into [violent clashes](#) among rival vigilante factions, mirroring the brutality associated with established cult groups who operate in local communities. This trend is starkly illustrated by the recent surge of cult-related violence in Rivers State, highlighting the alarming progression.

The resultant violence perpetrated by these vigilante-cult hybrids undermines the very security they purport to uphold, trapping innocent civilians in the crossfire and instilling widespread fear. Paradoxically, this fear fuels the demand for vigilante intervention, perpetuating a vicious cycle of violence and vigilantism. The metamorphosis of vigilante groups into cult-like entities, alongside the emergence of rival gangs, carries profound implications for Nigeria's security and stability.

This evolution has precipitated an escalation of violence as rivalries between these groups intensify, with civilians bearing the brunt of the resulting conflicts. Moreover, the misconduct and criminality exhibited by these vigilante-cult groups erode public trust in law enforcement agencies, exacerbating the security crisis and impeding efforts to combat crime effectively. The presence of rival gangs has further fragmented communities along ethnic and religious fault lines, exacerbating existing tensions and undermining social cohesion.

From another perspective, the modus operandi of

vigilantes has created an avenue for some seamless infiltration of criminals. For instance, the police in Enugu state [arrested six fake vigilante](#) operatives in the Ugwuafor community of the state. Further investigations revealed false claims of employment by a private security company to protect the community. Also, the use of vigilantism as a guide to orchestrate crime and violence has occurred in other regions of the country. In South-South, particularly Edo state, [the arrest of two vigilante members](#) who were part of a cult group revealed a foiled attempt at an attack. It is no longer news that they are often used for political purposes, which often lead to deaths, as seen in River State, where [about 200 deaths](#) were recorded in three years.

Beyond its immediate security ramifications, the proliferation of vigilante groups turned cults poses a significant obstacle to economic development. This hostile environment discourages investment and perpetuates cycles of poverty and deprivation, hindering the nation's progress. Addressing these complex challenges demands holistic approaches that prioritise regulation, disarmament, socio-economic empowerment, and inter-communal dialogue to mitigate the risks posed by the blurring lines between vigilante groups and criminal gangs.

## Breaking the Cycle

To effectively address the complex challenges posed by the transformation of vigilante groups into cults and the subsequent proliferation of rival gangs, a comprehensive approach is imperative. This necessitates focusing on regulation, disarmament, socio-economic empowerment, and fostering inter-communal dialogue to mitigate associated risks. Strengthening law enforcement, enhancing access to justice, and addressing unemployment are pivotal in reducing dependency on vigilante groups.

- 1. Regulating Vigilante Groups:** Regulating and integrating vigilante groups into the broader security framework is vital. This entails establishing frameworks for oversight, training, and equipping while ensuring adherence to legal standards. Moreover, community-based policing initiatives should be prioritised to cultivate trust between law enforcement agencies and residents, diminishing the necessity for vigilante intervention.
- 2. Breaking the Cycle of Violence:** Addressing the underlying causes of crime, such as poverty and social exclusion, is paramount in breaking the cycle of violence. Investing in education and creating employment opportunities provide constructive alternatives for youth, reducing their inclination towards joining vigilante groups. Additionally, strengthening law enforcement efforts, enhancing their capabilities, and ensuring accountability for abuses of power are crucial steps in maintaining security and curbing vigilante-related violence.

- 3. Community Engagement:** Vigilante groups must be subject to rigorous regulation and oversight to prevent deviation from their intended purpose and involvement in criminal activities. Communities should be empowered to address their security concerns through legitimate means, including community policing initiatives and engagement with local authorities. Furthermore, comprehensive socio-economic development strategies are necessary to tackle the root causes of vigilante group formation, particularly poverty and unemployment, by empowering marginalised communities and youth.
- 4. Dialoguing:** Promoting dialogue and reconciliation among diverse ethnic and religious groups is fundamental in fostering social cohesion and mitigating the risk of violence along ethnic and religious lines. By implementing these multifaceted strategies, Nigeria can effectively confront the challenges posed by vigilante groups' transformation into cults and the emergence of rival gangs, thereby enhancing security and stability across the nation.
- 5. Reorientation Campaign:** Government, civil society organisations, and faith-based and cultural institutions must champion a value reorientation campaign to fight the prevalence of cultism, which has continually made an appearance in vigilante groups.
- 6. Security Provision:** In order to reduce dependence on vigilantism, the federal government can take several steps aimed at discouraging communities and regions from mobilising vigilantes for self-defence. The first is enhancing the federal government's own security capabilities and capacity for justice delivery. It is now urgent that appropriate police reforms be prioritised to reduce dependence on vigilantes.

## Conclusion

The evolution of Nigerian vigilante groups into cult-like entities, alongside the emergence of rival gangs, poses a substantial menace to the nation's security and stability. Resolving this pressing issue demands unified action to bolster law enforcement, regulate vigilante groups, empower communities, and address the socio-economic factors driving recruitment into these organisations. Neglecting to address these challenges decisively risks exacerbating Nigeria's security crisis and impeding its journey towards peace and development. Despite initial altruistic motives, the transformation of vigilante groups into cult-like gangs presents a severe threat. To effectively address this issue, a comprehensive strategy is essential. This strategy should encompass strengthening formal security institutions, fostering community engagement, and tackling the underlying causes of criminal activity.

Reference

“The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture”, Human Rights Watch, May 2002; and M.A. Rufa’i, “Vigilante Groups and Rural Banditry in Zamfara State: Excesses and Contradictions”, International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention, vol. 7, no. 6 (2018), pp. 65-73.

**Authors:**

**Joshua Biem** is a Policy Research Analyst at Nextier. He is a first-class graduate of International Relations and Diplomacy from Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State. His Research interests include governance, armed conflict, arms control and disarmament in Nigeria and Africa.

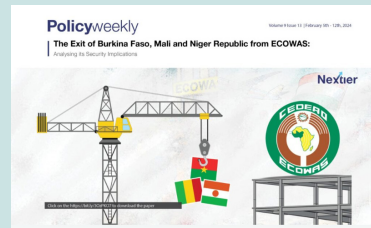
**Olive Aniunoh** is a Legal and Policy Research Analyst at Nextier, and a graduate of Law from the University of Birmingham, England. Her research interests include assessing the sustainability of international development projects in Nigeria and Africa.

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