

# Policyweekly

## The Nigerian Peace Accord:

A Symbolic Gesture or Pathway to Electoral Justice?



### Policy Recommendations

- 1** There is a need to strengthen accountability mechanisms where there are clear consequences for political candidates or parties that engage in electoral violence or incitement.
- 2** It is necessary to integrate the Peace Accord into Nigeria's legal and electoral frameworks.
- 3** There is a need to prosecute those who engage in electoral violence and address the culture of impunity.
- 4** Increased collaboration between civil society, traditional rulers, religious leaders, and electoral bodies can help build a broader coalition of support for peaceful elections.
- 5** Nigeria can learn from regional and international Best Practices. By drawing on successful frameworks from other democracies, Nigeria can adapt lessons to its unique political context.
- 6** There is a need for continuous engagement and review of the peace accord.

### Introduction

Electoral violence is a critical challenge that undermines democratic processes globally. In many countries, elections marred by violence threaten the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes and often lead to widespread instability. Nigeria's electoral history is riddled with incidents of violence, often exacerbated by the exploitation of identity politics and fierce competition for political power. Since the return to democracy in May 1999, Nigeria has experienced over [1,000 incidents](#) of electoral violence as of 2019, underscoring the severity of this problem. It manifests during campaigns, on election day, and in the post-election period, with cases of assassinations, clashes between party supporters, and attacks on electoral personnel.

The magnitude of electoral violence was recorded at its highest in 2011 when clashes between supporters of the then-ruling PDP and the Congress for Progressive Change – which later merged into the APC – claimed an estimated [800 lives](#) following the election of President Goodluck Jonathan. Likewise,

[hundreds](#) were reported to have died during the following elections in 2015 and 2019. The [2023 elections](#) were characterised by political tensions and violence across multiple states, with approximately 150 people losing their lives in election-related incidents both in the months preceding and during the elections. In many instances, political actors or their affiliates instigate these acts of violence, with little or no consequences for such perpetrators.

Historically, the failure to prosecute those responsible for election-related violence has fostered an environment of impunity. This has encouraged political elites to use violence as a tool for political gain, knowing they are unlikely to face legal repercussions. The National Peace Committee (NPC), a coalition of religious, civil society, and political leaders, introduced the Peace Accord in 2015 to address this issue. This Accord is a voluntary pledge signed by political actors, committing them to peaceful conduct during and post-election elections. However, while the Peace Accord is hailed as a significant initiative to foster a peaceful electoral process, its effectiveness as a mechanism for achieving electoral justice remains debatable.

In light of these issues, this edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly examines whether the Nigerian Peace Accord is a symbolic gesture or an effective tool for achieving electoral peace and justice. By identifying gaps and shortcomings in the current framework, evidence-based recommendations were formulated to strengthen the Peace Accord to mitigate electoral violence and foster peaceful transitions of power in Nigeria.

## Global Trends in the Use of Peace Accords for Electoral Justice

Peace Agreements have been increasingly adopted worldwide as a tool for mitigating electoral violence and fostering peaceful transitions of power. One major trend is the growing use of Peace Accords in regions with histories of electoral violence or political instability. Countries across Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia have increasingly embraced Peace Accords to address tensions during elections. This is particularly evident in post-conflict or fragile states where democratic institutions are still developing. For instance, in Kenya, following the 2007 post-election violence, Peace Accords have become a regular feature of subsequent elections, including the 2013 and 2017 polls. Similarly, Peace Accords in Sierra Leone and Liberia ensured peaceful elections after prolonged civil wars.

## The Nigerian Experience with Peace Accords

In Nigeria, peace accords have been a significant feature of the electoral landscape, particularly in recent years. The National Peace Committee (NPC), led by respected figures like General Abdulsalami Abubakar and Bishop Matthew Kukah, has facilitated the signing of Peace Accords before every major election. Nigeria's most notable Peace Accords were signed before the 2015 and 2019 general elections. The 2015 Peace Accord is often cited as a successful case, where the public commitment by key candidates, Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari, played a role in reducing pre-election tensions. Following the Accord, both leaders publicly urged their supporters to avoid violence, and the election was relatively peaceful. This period is often seen as a high point for the NPC's peace initiative. However, the 2019 Peace Accord painted a different picture. Despite the signing of the Accord by prominent political actors, widespread violence occurred during the elections. Reports revealed that about [100 deaths](#) were recorded as a result of election-related violence. Incidents in states like Rivers, Lagos, and Kano demonstrated that political actors continued to incite violence or failed to restrain their supporters, raising questions about the effectiveness of peace accords without enforcement mechanisms.

## The Peace Accord: A Symbolic Gesture?

At face value, the Peace Accord plays an important role in influencing the behaviour of political elites and signalling a collective commitment to peaceful elections. The involvement of respected figures like Abdulsalami Abubakar and Bishop Matthew Kukah lends moral authority to the process, encouraging politicians to publicly affirm their dedication to non-violence. However, the largely symbolic nature of the Peace Accord raises doubts about its effectiveness. As a voluntary, non-binding agreement, it lacks the legal force or punitive measures to hold violators accountable. Many political actors publicly sign the Accord yet privately engage in or tolerate actions that contribute to electoral violence.

The absence of sanctions or legal consequences for breaches of the Accord—such as incitement or direct involvement in violence—undermines the seriousness of the commitment made by political elites. Without the threat of penalties, politicians have little incentive to rein in their supporters or refrain from orchestrating violence. When violations go unpunished, the Accord's symbolic commitment loses its power and diminishes its ability to prevent

violence. This was starkly evident during the 2019 elections, when, despite the signing of the Peace Accord, widespread violence was reported in states like Rivers, Lagos, and Kano. Politicians, often operating behind the scenes, either incited unrest or failed to control their supporters, revealing the limitations of a symbolic accord without robust enforcement.

## Assessing the Effectiveness of Peace Accords in Achieving Electoral Justice in Nigeria

The effectiveness of Peace Accords in promoting electoral justice in Nigeria has yielded mixed results. On one hand, the accords have raised the profile of peaceful elections and placed moral pressure on political elites to avoid violence. The presence of respected figures like General Abubakar and Bishop Kukah adds weight to the process, and their involvement has undoubtedly contributed to the reduction of violence in some instances. However, Peace Accords in Nigeria have largely been symbolic gestures without the necessary legal or enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. Violations of the accords—such as incitement to violence or the failure to prevent violent actions—rarely result in consequences for political actors. This lack of accountability has created an environment where politicians sign the Peace Accords publicly but continue to engage in violent electoral practices covertly. The absence of punitive measures, such as disqualification from elections, fines, or criminal prosecution, undermines the seriousness of the commitment made by political elites. The 2019 elections are a prime example of the limitations of Peace Accords. Despite the public commitment to non-violence, political actors in several states orchestrated or condoned violence, and no significant legal action was taken against them. This situation highlights a key issue: peace accords fail to deliver electoral justice when not backed by robust judicial mechanisms.

## Electoral Justice: The Accountability Question

One of the significant challenges with the Peace Accord is its lack of a justice component, as political actors who violate its tenets—whether by inciting violence or failing to control their supporters—often face little to no consequences. This lack of accountability fosters an environment where electoral violence thrives. A key limitation of the Peace Accord is the absence of enforcement mechanisms. While the National Peace Committee (NPC) plays an active role in monitoring and

mediating conflicts among political actors, it lacks the legal authority to impose sanctions on violators. As a result, the Peace Accord relies on voluntary commitments, which, though helpful in setting norms, do not carry the force of law. This reliance on moral persuasion rather than legal enforcement has significantly weakened the Accord's ability to deter electoral violence.

Additionally, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), responsible for overseeing the election process, often lacks the political will or capacity to thoroughly investigate and prosecute cases of electoral violence, particularly when influential politicians are involved. This challenge is further compounded by lacking a well-functioning judicial framework to handle election-related offences. Although Nigeria's Electoral Act and Constitution provide penalties against electoral offences, their enforcement has been inconsistent. Prosecution of high-profile politicians or party leaders is rare. When convictions do occur, they are often limited to low-level actors or "foot soldiers" who engaged in violent acts rather than the political elites who orchestrated them.

Finally, peace accords will likely be obeyed if the state and its institutions, with the tasks of conducting free, fair and credible elections, are seen as impartial by all. Therefore, as long as the election management body and the state institutions working on elections struggle with credibility and transparency, politicians and their supporters will easily jettison the signed Accord.

## Recommendations:

- I. Strengthening Accountability Mechanisms:** One of the major shortcomings of the Peace Accord is the lack of enforcement for violators. While it encourages political actors to commit to peaceful conduct, no substantial system is in place to hold them accountable if they breach these agreements. To address this, there should be clear consequences for political candidates or parties that engage in electoral violence or incitement. Strengthening institutional capacities, such as those of the judiciary and the police, is crucial to ensuring that violations are swiftly addressed. Establishing an independent body responsible for monitoring adherence to the Peace Accord, with the authority to impose penalties, could significantly increase compliance.
- II. Legal Binding of Commitments:** The commitments made under the Peace Accords are largely voluntary and non-binding, which



limits its effectiveness as a deterrent against bad behaviour. For the Peace Accord to be truly transformative, it should be integrated into Nigeria's legal and electoral frameworks. Violators could face legal penalties by making it legally binding, including disqualification from running for office or other electoral sanctions. This would send a strong message that political violence or electoral misconduct will not be tolerated and incentivise candidates to abide by peaceful electoral norms.

**III. Prosecuting Violators and Addressing Impunity:** A major challenge in Nigeria's electoral process is the culture of impunity, where those who engage in violence or fraud sometimes escape justice. A focus on prosecuting violators is essential to ensure the Peace Accord is more than symbolic. This requires a justice system that is fair and swift in its response to electoral crimes. Establishing special electoral courts or strengthening existing ones could ensure that cases are dealt with promptly and transparently. Moreover, ensuring that high-profile political figures and grassroots actors are held accountable would foster greater public trust in the electoral process.

**IV. Building Public Trust and Institutional Collaboration:** Public trust in its principles and enforcement mechanisms is crucial for the Peace Accord to be effective. The Nigerian electorate must believe that their votes matter and that violence or rigging will not undermine the system. Increased collaboration between civil society, traditional rulers, religious leaders, and electoral bodies can help build a broader coalition of support for peaceful elections. Public awareness campaigns about the Peace Accord and education on voter rights and the legal consequences of electoral misconduct would enhance citizen engagement and reduce apathy.

**V. Learning from Regional and International Best Practices:** Nigeria has the opportunity to become a model for peaceful elections in the West African region and beyond. Drawing on successful frameworks from other democracies, such as Kenya's post-2007 election reforms or South Africa's post-apartheid reconciliation strategies, Nigeria can adapt these lessons to its unique political context. Regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union can play a vital role in supporting Nigeria's efforts by offering technical assistance, monitoring compliance, and fostering regional dialogue on best practices in electoral justice and conflict prevention.

**VI. Continuous Engagement and Review of the Peace Accord:** Finally, the Peace Accord should not be seen as a one-time event but as a living document that requires constant review and engagement. Periodic assessments of its effectiveness, involving all stakeholders—from political actors to civil society—would help identify areas for improvement and ensure that the Accord evolves to meet emerging challenges in Nigeria's electoral landscape. Integrating feedback mechanisms, where the general public and observers can report violations or concerns, would also enhance its responsiveness and effectiveness.

## Conclusion

While the Nigerian Peace Accord represents a critical step towards peaceful elections, it must be backed by real consequences for violators and integrated into the country's legal and institutional frameworks to ensure long-term electoral justice. Strengthening accountability, prosecuting violators, and building public trust are essential to transforming the Peace Accord from a symbolic gesture into a powerful instrument of peace and justice. By doing so, Nigeria not only paves the way for more peaceful and transparent elections within its borders but also sets a positive example for other democracies in the region.

## References

- European Union Election Observation Mission (2019). Nigeria: Final Report on the 2019 General Elections. Available at [https://www.eods.eu/library/nigeria\\_2019\\_eu\\_eom\\_final\\_report-web.pdf](https://www.eods.eu/library/nigeria_2019_eu_eom_final_report-web.pdf)
- International Crisis Group (2023). Nigeria's 2023 Elections: Defusing Tensions and Preventing Violence. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org>
- Council on Foreign Relations. (2019). Nigeria's 2019 Elections and the Risk of Violence. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/tracking-election-violence-nigeria>
- Human Rights Watch (May 16, 2011). 'Nigeria: Post-Election Violence Killed 800.'. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800>
- Kunle Adebajo, (June 2022). 'Nigeria's Deadly History of Electoral Violence In Five Charts,' Hum-Angle, 27. Available at <https://humanglemedia.com/nigerias-deadly-history-of-electoral-violence-in-five-charts/>

**Authors:**

**Dr Chibuike Njoku** is an Associate Consultant at Nextier, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Advance Studies, Ile-Ife, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute Francais De Recherche en Afrique (IFRA-Nigeria).

**Dr Ndu Nwokolo** is a Managing Partner at Nextier and an Honorary Fellow at the School of Government at the University of Birmingham, UK. He is also a Visiting Research Fellow at the Nathanson Centre on Transnational Human Rights, Crime, and Security at York University Canada.

**Nextier Sample Publications**



**Public or Private Refinery in Nigeria: Something Less Than Nothing?**

Healthcare delivery and the system remain one sector in development that is often significantly impacted during violent ...



**Health Care Delivery in Conflict Zones: Examining the Situation in North East Nigeria**

Healthcare delivery and the system remain one sector in development that is often significantly impacted during violent ...



**Changing the Game Against Kidnapping**

The recent history of kidnapping in Nigeria goes back to the 1990s when Niger Delta militants used it for political pressure on government and multinational oil companies and for ransom to finance their activities. It later became a



**Impact of Debt Servicing on SDG Implementation in Africa**

When one thinks of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria, the mind often conjures images of makeshift camps in the northern region, teeming with victims of relentless violent conflicts. Yet, this image, while stark, is incomplete.



**Strengthening Youth-Focused Institutions in the Era of Protests**

When one thinks of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria, the mind often conjures images of makeshift camps in the northern region, teeming with victims of relentless violent conflicts. Yet, this image, while stark, is incomplete.



**The Invisible Population: Displacement in South East Nigeria**

When one thinks of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nigeria, the mind often conjures images of makeshift camps in the northern region, teeming with victims of relentless violent conflicts. Yet, this image, while stark, is incomplete.