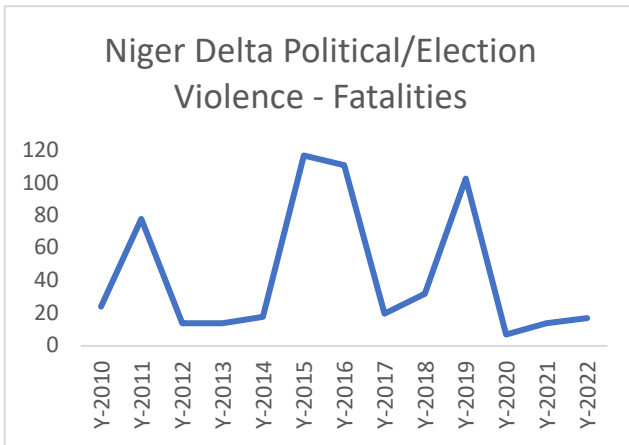


Niger Delta Election Conflict Early Warning Brief

Three Possible Election Scenarios

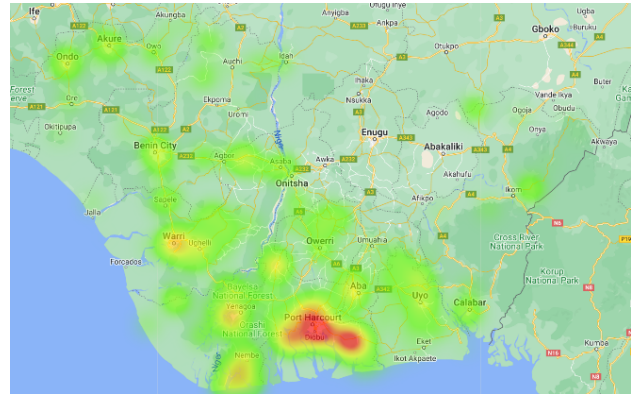
The Introduction of electronic voting through the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in Nigeria’s February 25 and March 11 elections will prevent traditional forms of election violence associated with ballot box snatching. However, perpetrators are shifting their tactics toward voter suppression and vote buying. Meanwhile, social and political realignments within the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the ascendance of the Labour Party (LP) open a range of possible scenarios from widespread violence on the one hand, to very minimal violence on the other, depending on how the election unfolds.

Based on historical trends, however, this election is shaping up to have lower levels of violence than the last two cycles in the nine oil-producing states, as there were fewer incidents and fatalities two months to this election, than there were two months to the elections in 2019 and 2015.



Fatalities (sources include ACLED, Nigeria Watch, P4P IPDU, and CIEPD CWC uploaded to the P4P Peace Map)

Over the last 13 years, the Niger Delta states with the highest level of election-related violence on a per capita basis have been **Bayelsa**, **Rivers**, and **Delta** states. The violence in **Bayelsa** is often missed by many observers because it has fewer raw



Election Violence Fatalities 2010-2022

numbers of incidents and fatalities and many of those occur around the gubernatorial election which unlike in most states, takes place in November, several months after the Presidential election has been completed same year. However, in a very small state like **Bayelsa** with a population of only about 2.5 million, those numbers of incidents and fatalities are quite high when divided by the population, meaning that for the average resident, the risk of exposure to violence is high compared to those living in other states.

Rivers has historically been among the most violent states in the entire country with regard to political/election violence, due to hotly contested elections, the legacy of militancy, the politics around the Presidential Amnesty Program, and the role ex-militants and cult gangs play in voter intimidation, political assassinations, and the theft of ballot boxes.

In **Delta State**, longstanding ethnic tensions going back to the Warri Crisis in 2003, had contributed to elevated levels of election violence cycle after cycle, as competition over wards and local government area (LGA) chairmanships often trigger clashes.

This year, however, there are three developments that could change these dynamics for the better. First, is the Warri Multistakeholder Platform (MSP) that has helped in reducing tensions between the major ethnic nationalities in the area. Second is last year's ground-breaking passage of the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA), which creates new opportunities for inclusive development and may reduce some of the narrow, zero-sum, winner-take-all partisan sentiment on the part of voters, to the extent that people believe they will have a more of a voice in the allocation of resources no matter who wins the election. Third is the introduction of a new electronic voting system that will render traditional methods of violence moot, such as the hijacking of voting materials and the snatching of ballot boxes. With the plans to electronically transmit the results from the polling unit to INEC central database, there will be fewer opportunities to disrupt the transfer or alter the results mid-way to INEC office.¹

Political Developments

There are also several political developments and realignments which make the level of violence more unpredictable than usual.

Inter-Party Ethnic Dynamics in Rivers and Delta.

Unlike the 2019 governorship election in **Rivers** where the PDP was the only major political party, the 2023 election has additional political parties with determined candidates – Tonye Cole of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Magnus Abe of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Ethnic politics could also play a role as Abe would be the first Ogoni governor of Rivers State should he win, which raises the stakes particularly in the Rivers South-East Senatorial District. APC Tonye Cole is Ijaw while his running mate is Ogoni.

Some election related violence has already been reported in **Rivers** State. In December 2022, for instance, gunmen reportedly shot a PDP youth

mobilization officer and allegedly forced him to renounce his support for the party in Aluu community, Ikwerre LGA. Separately, in January 2023, two explosions reportedly occurred and injured three persons at an APC rally in Rumu-Woji community, Port Harcourt LGA.

In **Delta**, internal divisions within the PDP over the outcome of its primary elections in the state has weakened the party. This may heighten political tensions against the APC which is presenting an unexpectedly strong challenge for the governorship position. Both the APC and PDP candidates are ethnic Urhobos with enormous political resources at their disposal as they both currently occupy influential political offices.

Influence of Cult Gangs and Militias. Historically when elections have been very competitive, cult gangs such as the Greenlanders, Icelanders, Deybam, Deywell, and others have been implicated in political violence. These groups were militarized during the period of agitation and guerrilla warfare in the early 2000s and are deeply entrenched in the political economy of the Niger Delta.

The potential involvement of ex-militant leaders could also make the situation unpredictable, some of whom are highly politically influential and have strong economic interests in the continuation of the Amnesty Program or otherwise benefiting from the lucrative security sector in the region. Raising eyebrows, for instance, a former leader of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Chief Government Ekpemupolo (AKA Tompolo), was recently awarded a lucrative oil pipeline surveillance contract by the APC-led federal government.

Crosscurrents in the South East. In a country with a strong tradition of alternating political leadership from one region to the next as a tool of conflict management, there has never been a President

¹ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/549890-2023-inec-clears-air-on-mode-of-transmitting-election-results.html>

from the South East since the Biafran War in 1967. This year, however, the Labour Party candidate, Peter Obi, from Anambra State, has been the leading Presidential candidate according to some polls². In addition to the unprecedented nature of Obi's political prominence as an Igbo from Anambra State, there has never been President from any party except PDP and APC since the beginning of the Fourth Republic. In 2019 the Labour Party candidate for President only received 5,074 votes in the entire country of over 200 million people. Obi's supporters are young, diverse, and very active on social media, which is significant as newly registered voters skew young by over 70%.³ Even longtime Nigerian statesman, former President Olusegun Obasanjo has endorsed him.⁴ While Obi's popularity seems to have increased significantly among Christians in Nigeria, his running mate, Yusuf Baba-Ahmed is a Hausa- Fulani Muslim from the North West. None of this guarantees a win by any means. But it does raise the stakes for those who are galvanized by the campaign, particularly in the South East.

On the other hand, also in the South East there is a long standing Biafra secessionist and Igbo nationalist movement, which has been increasingly radicalized under the banner of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) organization. As a tactic to discredit elections in the South East, IPOB has historically attempted to suppress the vote by threatening boycotts and violence. In the run-up to the 2023 election there have been a series of attacks on INEC facilities in Imo that have been attributed to IPOB. In April 2022, gunmen suspected to be supporters of a faction of IPOB released a video in which they threatened to disrupt the 2023 elections

in the South East unless their detained leader, Nnamdi Kanu is released.⁵

But as Peter Obi has become increasingly popular among Igbo partisans, IPOB has begun nuancing their message to say that they would not seek to stop the election after all.⁶ A youth wing of IPOB went so far as to preemptively cast blame for any acts of voter suppression on "Fulani imported terrorists and locally recruited criminals who are demonizing IPOB before the international community."⁷

Considering the historical trends and the new political developments, three possible election violence scenarios are as follows:

Most Likely Scenario (lower levels of violence than the last two cycles – see chart on page 1 showing annual levels of political/election violence from 2010-2022)

During the month of January 26 - February 25 there has been less violence than at the same period in the last two cycles. Although election violence is relatively low so far, inter-party, inter-ethnic, and inter-communal tensions remain high and will likely lead to some level of election violence.

The deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) will likely reduce violence at polling stations. However, the increasing deployment of fake news, false or misleading information and hate speech mostly through the social media, will strain ethnic and religious coexistence and may trigger violence during and after the elections.

²<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/571717-again-poll-projects-peter-obi-to-win-2023-election.html>

³<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/10/inec-announces-93-5m-voters-for-2023-polls/>

⁴<https://punchng.com/obasanjo-endorses-obi-as-atiku-tinubu-camps-protest/>

⁵<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/525327-trending-gunmen-release-video-threaten-to-disrupt-2023-elections-in-south-east.html>

⁶<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/12/we-ve-no-intention-to-disrupt-2023-polls-ipob/>

⁷<https://leadership.ng/nobody-can-stop-election-in-south-east-ipob-declares/>

The youths who make up 40% of the registered voters⁸ will participate more in the elections and go all out to “protect their votes”. While this is considered positive, it can lead to violence, injuries and possibly, fatalities where voters stand guard even in the face of election violence perpetrators who may want to disrupt the voting process.

Worst Case Scenario (*higher levels of violence than the last two cycles – see chart on page 1*)

The worst-case scenario is that due to the introduction of electronic voting, cult gangs and political thugs in the Niger Delta, particularly in Rivers and Delta states, with the backing of political powerbrokers, will focus more of their violence on the voters than the votes, which will cause more death and injury than in previous cycles. Meanwhile, in the South-East, attacks on election facilities, electoral officials, election observers, and journalists may continue but with more people beginning to accuse northern hegemony, PDP, or APC of being behind the voter suppression efforts. IPOB and other separatist militias may then take advantage of the confusion and attack northern residents in the South East and the Niger Delta because of their ethnicity and religion and to stop them from voting for a northern candidate, especially in states such as Imo, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Delta, and Rivers, where separatist militias linked to IPOB have previously attacked government infrastructure including INEC offices and police stations. Ethnic and sectarian tensions could then grow and if the election is very close, it may create a xenophobic backlash if people suspect irregularities or fraud.

Best Case Scenario (*lower levels of violence than in 2011 – see chart on page 1*)

This cycle, the dynamics are so different than in previous elections, with the electronic voting, the third party, and the Petroleum Industry Act, that

traditional fault lines may no longer apply. With increased sensitization, and an active and engaged civil society, violence could be sharply reduced in the Niger Delta. The electoral body may maintain their reputation by remaining neutral and transparent, which could boost confidence among the electorate. Under these circumstances, the elections would then be peaceful, and the outcomes overwhelmingly accepted, based on the precedent set by former President Goodluck Jonathan in 2015. This would reduce the ability of spoilers to trigger violence. Further, a new inter-faith, inter-regional consensus could emerge, giving a mandate to the new President to lead.

Conclusion

New developments in the political landscape make the level of violence in the 2023 elections more unpredictable than the last two elections. The 2023 election has the potential to promote unity or intensify division and instability, depending on the dynamics and process over the next few weeks.

The elections could be a trigger for violence as attacks by IPOB, cult gangs, political thugs, or communal militias could harass and intimidate many registered voters, journalists, and election observers. Conspiracy theories, hate speech, fake news, and misinformation through social media could intensify in the run-up to the elections and undermine the capacity of INEC to conduct free and fair elections, compromise the credibility of the elections, and deepen social polarization and disorder. All of this could lead to an escalation of communal clashes and xenophobic violence if people feel disenfranchised by the process.

On the other hand, unprecedented interest by youth across the country, and the emergence of new parties and coalitions, as well as splits within old parties may create opportunities to bridge divisions that have long been considered to be intractable.

⁸<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/575140-2023-polls-youth-population-tops-age->

<distribution-chart-as-inec-presents-list-of-93-4-registered-voters.html>