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EXAMINING RISING POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
The contemporary rise in political violence poses a profound threat to national security, democratic governance, social cohesion, and state stability in Nigeria. Escalating incidents of ideologically driven violence, socio-economic marginalisation, and digitally mediated misinformation have increasingly undermined public trust in political institutions and weakened the capacity of the state to maintain order. Anchored in relevant conflict and political violence theories, this study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on secondary data sources and selected case illustrations to examine the drivers, patterns, and consequences of rising political violence. The study analyses how political violence erodes governance structures, overstretches law enforcement institutions, and creates systemic vulnerabilities that may be exploited by both domestic and external actors, thereby heightening national security risks and the potential for conflict escalation. The paper further proposes mitigation strategies centred on strengthening democratic institutions, promoting social inclusion, and countering extremist and divisive narratives. It concludes that effectively addressing political violence is imperative for safeguarding national security and fostering resilient and cohesive communities in Nigeria.
Keywords: Political Violence, National Security, Instability, Polarization, Extremism, Governance, Public Safety, Conflict.

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, has increasingly grappled with rising political violence, a phenomenon that poses a significant threat to national security and democratic stability. Political violence in Nigeria is deeply rooted in historical, socio-political, and structural factors, including ethnic and religious cleavages, struggles over resource control, intense political competition, and pervasive socio-economic inequality (Osama, 2023). It manifests in various forms such as electoral violence, politically motivated assassinations, and violent confrontations among supporters of rival political factions, and has become particularly pronounced during electoral cycles.

Existing scholarship underscores the far-reaching consequences of political violence. Isyaku and Obi (2017) argue that political violence disrupts social order, destroys critical infrastructure, and undermines national peace, thereby impeding socio-economic development. This perspective is compelling, as it highlights the multifaceted nature of political violence and its linkages to electoral malpractice, ethnic tensions, and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The persistence of political violence weakens governance structures, erodes public confidence in state institutions, and exacerbates existing security challenges in a country already confronted with insurgency, banditry, and recurrent communal conflicts.

Insecurity in Nigeria is thus deeply embedded within the country's broader socio-economic and political context. Ogege and Seiyefa (2021) emphasize that insecurity has assumed a nationwide dimension, affecting all geopolitical zones of the country. Similarly, Alemika (2011, as cited in Nebo & Ndukwe, 2022) contends that security constitutes the most fundamental human need, underscoring its centrality to societal stability. Obi (2015)

further identifies national security as perhaps the most critical challenge confronting Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, successive administrations have adopted diverse policy and security strategies to address insecurity, yet with limited and uneven success (Adofu & Alhassan, 2018). Gains recorded in one domain are often offset by the emergence of new and complex security threats in others. Moreover, the state's persistent inability to adequately meet the developmental needs of its citizens has facilitated the emergence of alternative groups and informal alliances, which in turn generate new forms of insecurity. Consequently, citizens' quest for security has raised fundamental questions regarding the capacity, effectiveness, and coherence of Nigeria's security architecture and governmental responses.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the causes and manifestations of political violence in Nigeria, analyzes its implications for national security, and explores viable strategies for mitigating its adverse effects.

Research Questions

The guiding questions for this study are as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between unemployment and political violence in Nigeria?
2. What are the factors driving political violence in Nigeria?
3. What is the impact of political violence on elections and democratic governance in Nigeria?
4. What strategies can be employed to address youth unemployment and reduce political violence in Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

The broad aim of this study is to examine the relationship between political violence and national security in Nigeria. including its causes, manifestations, implications, and potential mitigation strategies. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine whether there is a relationship between political violence and national security in Nigeria.
2. Identify the key factors responsible for political violence in Nigeria.
3. Assess the impact of political violence on national security in Nigeria.
4. Recommend effective strategies for mitigating political violence in Nigeria.

Scope of the Study

While this study ideally could have encompassed the entire country, practical constraints, such as security challenges, financial limitations, transportation difficulties, and academic commitments, necessitated a more focused approach. Consequently, the study covers representative states across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. The temporal scope of the research spans the period from 2015 to 2025.

The study examines the relationship between political violence and national insecurity in Nigeria, with particular attention to how various forms of insecurity, such as communal conflicts, theft, youth restiveness, cultism, and inadequate security infrastructure, affect socio-economic development, infrastructure, and overall national progress. The study relies on data collected from both qualitative and quantitative sources, including interviews and structured questionnaires, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon within the defined scope.

Causes of Political Violence in Nigeria

Political violence in Nigeria stems from a complex interplay of structural, political, and socio-economic factors. First, the winner-takes-all nature of Nigerian politics creates intense

competition for power, as political office is often seen as a pathway to wealth and influence. This high-stakes environment encourages politicians to employ violence as a tool to secure or retain power. Second, weak institutional frameworks, including an ineffective judiciary and compromised electoral bodies, fail to deter electoral malpractices or punish perpetrators of violence, emboldening political actors to resort to thuggery and intimidation (Okoh, 2024).

Socio-economic disparities also play a significant role. Nigeria's high poverty rate, coupled with widespread youth unemployment, provides fertile ground for political actors to recruit disenfranchised youths as foot soldiers for violent activities. These individuals are often lured with financial incentives or promises of patronage (Isyaku & Obi, 2017). Additionally, ethnic and religious divisions are frequently exploited by politicians to mobilize support, leading to violent clashes between groups with competing loyalties. Historical grievances and regional imbalances further exacerbate tensions, as communities vie for political relevance and resource allocation.

Manifestations of Political Violence in Nigeria

Political violence in Nigeria manifests in various forms, including pre-election, election-day, and post-election violence. Pre-election violence often involves the intimidation of opponents, destruction of campaign materials, and assassination attempts on political candidates. During elections, violence may include ballot box snatching, voter suppression, and clashes between rival supporters (Nebo & Ndukwe, 2022). Post-election violence typically arises from disputes over election results, as seen in the 2011 and 2019 general elections, where riots and killings followed contested outcomes.

Other manifestations include the use of political thugs to disrupt rallies, attacks on electoral officials, and targeted violence against specific ethnic or religious groups perceived to support rival candidates. In recent years, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has intensified the lethality of these conflicts, making political violence a significant threat to public safety.

Implications for National Security in Nigeria

The rise in political violence has profound implications for Nigeria's national security. First, it undermines democratic governance by eroding public confidence in the electoral process. When citizens perceive elections as violent and unfair, voter apathy increases, and the legitimacy of elected officials is questioned. This weakens the social contract between the state and its citizens, creating fertile ground for unrest.

Furthermore, political violence exacerbates existing security challenges. Nigeria is already battling Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, banditry in the northwest, and separatist agitations in the southeast. Political violence diverts security resources from these fronts, overstretching the military and police forces. In some cases, political actors have been linked to the arming of criminal groups, further blurring the lines between political violence and other forms of insecurity (Onwudiwe & Mendie, 2022). Political violence fuels communal tensions, as ethnic and religious affiliations are often weaponized during political conflicts. This deepens societal divisions and risks escalating into broader intergroup conflicts, threatening national unity. For instance, post-election violence in northern Nigeria has historically triggered ethno-religious clashes, resulting in significant loss of life and property.

The economic implications of political violence cannot be overlooked. Violence disrupts economic activities, deters foreign investment, and exacerbates poverty, creating a vicious cycle that fuels further unrest. The destruction of infrastructure during violent episodes also places additional burdens on Nigeria's strained economy.

Strategies to Mitigate Political Violence in Nigeria

Addressing the challenges of political violence in Nigeria necessitates a multifaceted strategy that targets both its underlying causes and the strengthening of institutional frameworks. Scholars have emphasized the centrality of electoral reforms in promoting free, fair, and transparent elections. Enhancing the independence and operational capacity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), coupled with the adoption of technologies such as electronic voting, can significantly reduce opportunities for electoral manipulation and associated violence. Additionally, the prompt prosecution of electoral offenders serves as an important deterrent against violations (Gichuhi, 2020).

Addressing socio-economic inequalities is also critical. Government interventions focused on job creation, youth empowerment, and poverty alleviation can diminish the pool of individuals susceptible to exploitation by political actors (Gichuhi, 2020). Complementary measures, such as education and civic engagement initiatives, can cultivate a culture of peaceful and informed political participation.

Security sector reforms are likewise essential to enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies to prevent and respond effectively to political violence (Osama, 2023). This includes specialized training in crowd control and conflict de-escalation, as well as regulating the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

Moreover, promoting national unity through inclusive governance can help mitigate the ethnic and religious tensions that often underpin political violence. Political leaders must prioritize dialogue, reconciliation, and equitable representation, ensuring that all regions and social groups are meaningfully integrated into the political process (Usman & Dangiwa, 2018).

Theoretical Framework: Conflict Theory

This study is anchored in Conflict Theory, which provides a robust framework for understanding the dynamics of political violence in Nigeria. Rooted in the works of Karl Marx and further developed by scholars such as Ralf Dahrendorf, Conflict Theory posits that society is fundamentally characterized by competition over scarce resources, resulting in social conflict between groups with divergent interests. In the Nigerian context, this theory illuminates how struggles over power, resources, and influence among political elites, ethnic communities, and religious factions manifest as political violence.

Conflict Theory emphasizes that structural inequalities and competition for power are primary drivers of violence. In Nigeria, political office is often perceived as a gateway to economic wealth and influence, creating intense competition among elites. This "do or die" struggle for political control frequently leads to electoral violence, thuggery, and voter intimidation. Political elites often mobilize supporters along ethnic or religious lines to consolidate dominance, exacerbating tensions and undermining democratic processes. For instance, the post-election violence in northern Nigeria in 2011 resulted in over 800 deaths and 65,000 displacements, largely fueled by elite-driven narratives of exclusion and marginalization.

Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious composition further contributes to conflict. Conflict Theory suggests that groups compete for dominance over scarce resources such as land, political representation, and economic opportunities. In the Middle Belt, clashes between predominantly Christian farming communities and Fulani Muslim herders reflect not only resource disputes but also longstanding historical grievances and identity-based exclusion. The 2025 attacks in Benue State, which claimed over 200 lives, have been described by local leaders as a "genocidal invasion," highlighting perceptions of ethnic and religious domination rather than merely economic competition.

Weak governance and institutional fragility intensify these conflicts. Conflict Theory underscores that when state institutions fail to mediate competing interests or ensure equitable resource distribution, groups may resort to violence to assert their claims. In Nigeria, the state's inability to address electoral malpractices, provide adequate security, or prosecute offenders has generated widespread distrust. The absence of arrests following violent incidents in the Middle Belt has reinforced perceptions of state complicity or indifference, encouraging retaliatory violence.

Socio-economic inequality and youth vulnerability also drive political violence. Poverty, unemployment, and marginalization create a pool of disenfranchised individuals susceptible to mobilization by political actors or extremist groups. The frustration-aggression hypothesis, a component of Conflict Theory, explains how deprivation generates aggression, which manifests in electoral violence and political unrest. Political actors exploit these conditions by recruiting unemployed youths as thugs to disrupt elections, further destabilizing the democratic process.

Implications for National Security in Nigeria

The escalation of political violence in Nigeria poses significant threats to national security, as outlined below:

a. Undermining Democratic Consolidation

Political violence erodes trust in democratic institutions, leading to a crisis of legitimacy. Conflict theory suggests that when groups perceive the state as favoring certain factions, they disengage from or challenge the system. The recurring electoral violence, as seen in the 2011 and 2015 elections, weakens Nigeria's democracy, fostering instability and reducing public confidence in governance.

b. Escalation of Ethno-Religious Conflicts

Violence in regions like the Middle Belt, driven by ethnic and religious divides, risks escalating into broader conflicts with national implications. The perception of violence as part of an "Islamization" agenda or ethnic domination fuels retaliatory attacks, creating a cycle of violence (Wolfendale,2016). The involvement of jihadist groups like Boko Haram or Ansaru in local conflicts further complicates the security landscape, transforming local disputes into national threats.

c. Proliferation of Arms and Militias

Political violence contributes to the proliferation of small arms, with Nigeria reportedly holding 60% of all arms in West Africa. The use of sophisticated weaponry in electoral and communal violence strengthens non-state actors, including militias and extremist groups, undermining state authority (Nebo & Ndukwe, 2022). This militarization, as conflict theory predicts, shifts power dynamics away from the state, weakening national security.

d. Economic and Social Disruption

Violence disrupts economic activities, discourages foreign investment, and exacerbates poverty, creating a feedback loop that fuels further conflict. The socio-economic implications of violence, such as displacement and loss of property, strain national resources and hinder development, as seen in the Niger Delta and Middle Belt regions.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine political violence and its implications for national security in Nigeria. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten purposively selected stakeholders, including government officials, security personnel, and community leaders. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized.

A structured questionnaire was administered to 400 respondents across six geopolitical zones, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation by

geography, gender, and socioeconomic status. The survey assessed perceptions, causes, and impacts of political violence. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Secondary data were obtained from official reports, academic journals, news archives, and policy briefs covering political violence in Nigeria from 2010 to 2025. The combination of purposive and stratified sampling ensures that the study captures both expert insights and broader public perspectives, enhancing the reliability of findings.

Table 4.1 Political violence impacts on national security

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Agreed	156	44.8
Strongly Agree	117	33.6
Disagree	25	7.2
Strongly Disagree	50	14.4
Total	348	100

Source: field survey 2024

In Table 4.1, it is observed that 44.8% of the respondents agreed that political violence impact on national security in Nigeria, while another 33.6% strongly agree. 7.2% disagreed while the remaining 14.4% strongly disagreed political violence impact on national security. This implies that political violence impact on national security. Political violence might be driven by other factors such as political rivalries, economic issues, or social tensions rather than armed groups

Table 4.2. Causes of Political Violence

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Poverty	99	28.4%
Unemployment	88	25.3%
Political marginalization	58	16.7%
Youth restiveness	19	5.5%
Weak security presence	84	24.1%
Total	348	100

Source: field survey 2025

Table 4.2 reveals that 24.1% of respondents identified youth unemployment as a major driver of political violence. Among the impacts of youth unemployment, increased dependency on social welfare was highlighted, while 25.3% of respondents associated unemployment with higher crime rates. Financial strain was reported by 28.4% of respondents as a significant effect, making it the most widely cited impact. Other effects included reduced career advancement (16.7%) and mental health issues (5.5%).

These findings indicate that financial strain is the primary consequence of youth unemployment. Unemployment-induced financial stress can profoundly affect various aspects of individuals' lives. It often leads to anxiety, stress, and uncertainty about the future, which can negatively impact mental health, potentially causing depression or low self-esteem. Lack of steady income may force individuals to rely on credit or loans, increasing

long-term debt and financial insecurity. Additionally, financial strain can place pressure on familial relationships, particularly where dependents rely on the unemployed individual's income, potentially leading to conflicts and difficulties in fulfilling family responsibilities.
As stated by one of the community leaders interviewed,

> High levels of poverty and lack of employment opportunities, especially among youth, create a fertile ground for political violence. Insecurity is a complex problem driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, and environmental factors (IDI, 2025).

Another interviewee pointed out that:

> There is often a correlation between unemployment rates and crime rates, as some unemployed individuals may resort to illegal activities out of desperation. Also, disputes over resources, political representation, or perceived marginalization often erupt into violent clashes. These conflicts have led to communal violence, displacement, and long-term instability. (IDI, 2025)

Table 4.3 Is **the Government Doing Enough to Address Insecurity**

Option	Response	Percentages
Yes	65	18.7%
No	179	51.4%
Not sure	104	29.9%
Total	348	100

Source: field survey 2025

Table 4.3 presents respondents' ratings of government responsiveness in addressing insecurity. 18.7% of respondents indicated that the government is effectively addressing insecurity, while 51.4% responded negatively. An additional 29.9% were uncertain about whether the government is doing enough to tackle insecurity in their communities. These findings suggest that a majority of respondents perceive the government's efforts to address insecurity as insufficient.

Conclusion

Rising political violence in Nigeria represents a serious threat to national security, undermining democratic governance, aggravating insecurity, and deepening societal divisions. The root causes, such as intense political competition, socio-economic inequalities, and institutional weaknesses, require targeted and comprehensive interventions. Strengthening electoral processes, promoting economic inclusion, enhancing the capacity of security agencies, and fostering national unity are critical measures to mitigate the effects of political violence and support the consolidation of a stable and secure state. Failure to implement such measures risks perpetuating cycles of violence, further destabilizing the nation and impeding its socio-economic development.

Recommendations

To mitigate political violence and its implications for national security, the following measures are proposed, guided by Conflict Theory's emphasis on addressing structural inequalities and power imbalances:

1. **Strengthen Democratic Institutions:** Key institutions, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), should be reinforced to enhance transparency and credibility in elections. Strengthening these institutions will reduce opportunities for elite-driven violence and foster public trust in democratic processes.

2. **Address Socio-Economic Inequalities:** The government should implement sustained and effective policies targeting poverty alleviation, unemployment reduction, and improved access to education. Such interventions can diminish the pool of individuals vulnerable to mobilization for political violence.
3. **Enhance Security Networks and Intelligence:** Security agencies should be strengthened to effectively monitor electoral and communal activities. Adequate deployment of impartial security personnel during elections and proactive intelligence gathering can prevent violence and rebuild public confidence in state institutions.

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