

Growing Insecurity in Rivers State: Impacts of Legislative Re-Run Elections

Briefing: May 2016

Elections have been a cyclical driver of conflict risk and violence in Rivers state since 1999. The state was reported to have had the highest number of violent incidents during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. In the lead-up and aftermath of the 2016 legislative election rerun on 19 March, Rivers was once again marred by widespread political and cult violence with fatalities in the lead-up surpassing any period since 2009. This ongoing cycle of insecurity is not only impacting the citizens of the state, but also business.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, Rivers has the second largest GDP after Lagos, but it is also one of the most violent states per capita in the Niger Delta. With increasing insecurity in the state surrounding election cycles in 2015 and 2016, there are growing concerns that local businesses are being impacted, investors may invest elsewhere, and the state may even see international companies start to rethink their office presence in the hub of Port Harcourt.

Background

Several incidents of irregularities and violence were reported during the 2015 Presidential, National Assembly, State House of Assembly and Governorship elections in Rivers. The Independent National Election Commission (INEC) headquarters in the state were reportedly burnt down during the 11 April 2015

gubernatorial/State House of Assembly elections. Heavy gun shots and fatalities were reported across the state amidst a massive deployment of public security forces.

There were allegations of widespread voter manipulation, intimidation, violence, and hijacking of voting materials. The outcome of the elections was characterised by protests and petitions. Eventually, 22 out of the 32 State House of Assembly seats and 12 of the 13 Federal House of Representatives, as well as three Senators elected on the platform of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), were nullified by the elections petitions tribunal. The Court of Appeal later affirmed the nullification on the grounds that the elections did not substantially comply with the provisions of the Electoral Act. The nullification of the initial elections necessitated the 19 March 2016 legislative re-run elections, which were also fraught with allegations of violence including killings, intimidation of political opponents, and vote rigging.

Rise in political violence since 2015

Rivers state has had increased levels of violence and insecurity since January 2015, as outlined in the *Figure 1* graph. This corresponds with the period of fierce political jostling between Governor Nyesom Wike and Rotimi Amaechi. Overall levels of insecurity rose from January 2015, as manifested in the form of killings, robberies,

Rivers State, Nigeria



This briefing outlines the growing insecurity in Rivers State, Nigeria in the lead up to the latest round of the legislative elections in March 2016. With the previous legislative election results nullified, this briefing identifies the conflict patterns, trends and hotspots in during the March re-run which saw increased violence and fatalities.

Scope and Limitations: We recognize that the data collected in this project is not an exhaustive tally of all incidents of violence. However, to the extent that data are representative of the patterns and trends, findings are indicated in the report.



Rising Political and Cult Violence

cult clashes and political assassinations.

Since the run-up to the March/April 2015 general elections, fierce rhetoric has often characterized exchanges between party supporters on radio, television and social media channels, including calls to take up arms against the military, to attack INEC officials on Election Day, to form a parallel government, as well as statements denigrating the judiciary and other important institutions. This inflammatory rhetoric may have contributed to incidents of violence breaking out between the candidate's supporters, pushing the state into deeper levels of insecurity.

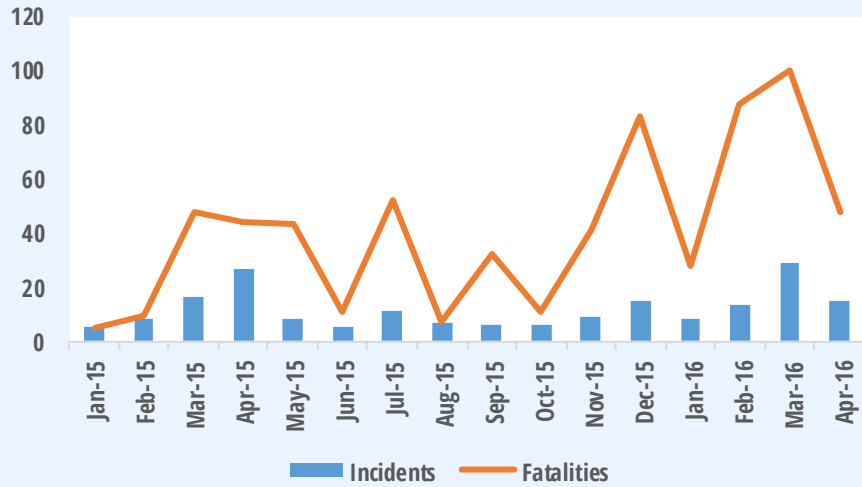
Linking cult violence to political insecurity

A common feature of violence in Rivers is the correlation between activities by cult groups, militants and political thugs. In the lead-up to the March 2016 legislative re-run elections, cult-related violence become widespread in almost all the Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the state. Cult violence appears to intensify during election periods, as many cult groups reportedly depend on the goodwill and patronage of politicians, who either employ them as informal security or use them to intimidate or potentially kill their opponents in order to influence the outcomes of elections.

Political underpinnings of cultism are suggested by the location of many of hotbeds of cult violence, including in the political activity centres like the state capital and headquarters of LGAs.

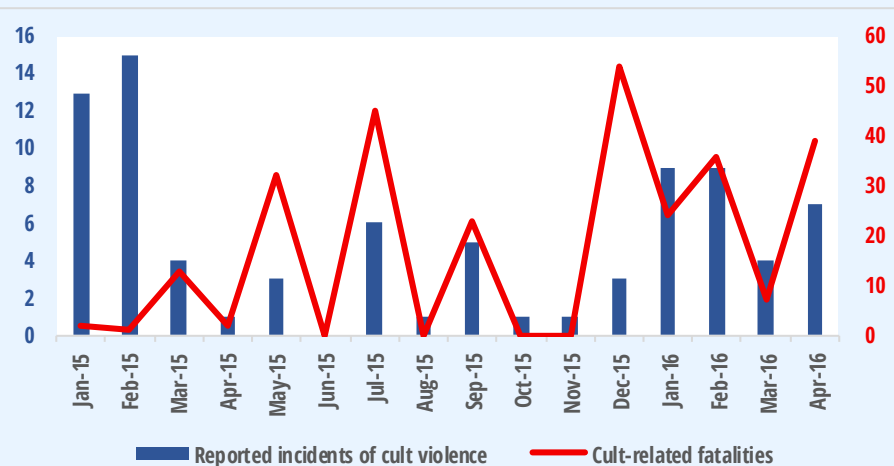
Many of the cult groups are either community-based or built around certain individuals, including ex-militant leaders and politicians, who serve as rallying points for members. The connection between cultism, militancy and political violence is complex. Cultists are often enlisted by militants to help protect their business interests. On the other hand, cult groups are recruited by politicians to perpetrate election violence.

Reported Conflict Incidents and Fatalities in Rivers State



Trend shows a significant rise in violence in the lead up to the 19th March 2016 legislative election re-run. This is consistent with spikes in conflict incidents and fatalities during the March 2015 presidential election, gubernatorial elections in April 2015, judicial rulings regarding sacked council chairpersons in July 2015, and the judicial ruling nullifying the legislative election results in December 2015. *Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org; ACLED www.acleddata.com*

Cult Violence in Rivers State



Trends in reported cult-related incidents suggest violence increases in the lead-up to and aftermath of key political events in Rivers. The cult-related fatalities have risen rapidly since November 2015, and remained high throughout the March 2016 re-run election period. *Data sources: Incidents—All sources P4P Map www.p4p-nigerdelta.org; Fatalities—Nigeria Watch, ACLED.*

During the three months (Dec-Feb) prior to the March 16 legislative elections, cult-related violence resulted in over 100 fatalities across the state. In December 2015, over a dozen communities were reportedly attacked by cultists resulting in over 17 fatalities in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni. Reported clashes between the rival Icelanders and Degbam cult groups caused

three fatalities in Ikwerre. In January 2016, over 20 people were reportedly killed in series of cult violence-related incidents in Ahoada East, Ahoada, West, Obio/Akpor and Ikwerre LGAs. Separately, three fatalities were reported when security agents raided the home of an ex-militant leader. In a related incident, two days prior to the elections, police discovered a cache of arms

in the residence of the same ex-militant leader who is now part of the caretaker leadership of Asari Toru LGA. Separately, the house of another ex-militant leader accused of gun-running was reported demolished by soldiers in Gokana. This was followed by clashes between soldiers and supporters of the ex-militant in Khana.

The election insecurity and cult-related violence is concentrated in key state hubs such as Port Harcourt, and has impacts not only on residents, but also businesses. As the second largest state economy in Nigeria, the concentration of local and international business interests have the potential to be significantly impacted by the deepening insecurity. With heightened risks to their investments and operations, the state may begin to see negative effects on both new business and existing.

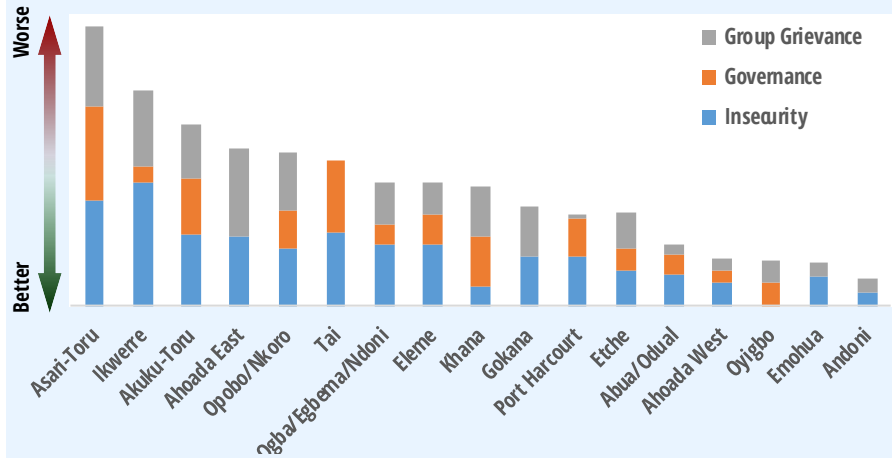
Legislative Re-Run Elections in March 2016

In the build-up to the re-run elections there was palpable fear and tensions across the state as a result of increasing incidents of gang violence and politically motivated killings.

On 11 of February 2016, a former State House of Assembly member was shot dead in Obio/Akpor. On 22 of February 2016, the state liaison office of one of the senatorial candidates was reportedly razed by suspected political thugs in Khana. Separately, a party ward chairman in Ogba/ Egbema/Ndoni was murdered along with his wife and 18-year old son, and a political party supporter in Asari Toru LGA was burnt to death two weeks prior to the election. While some observers attributed these killings to cult-related violence, others have suggested that these killings are related to violent politicking in the run-up to the elections.

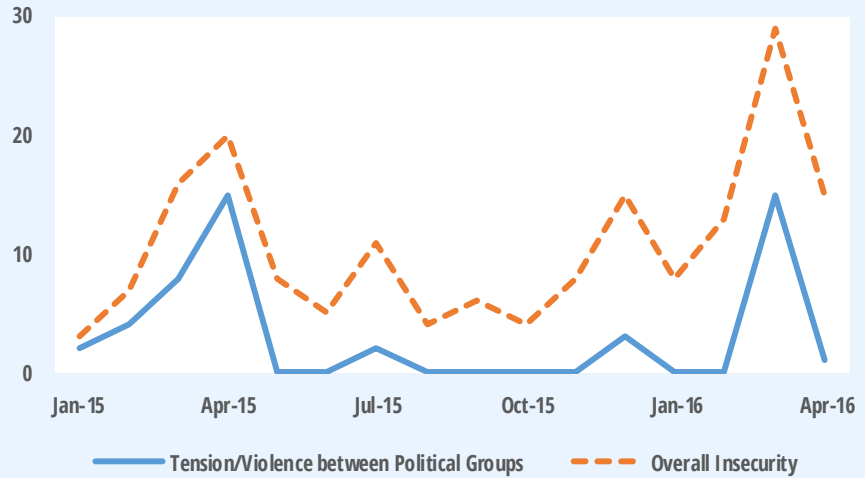
The tensions created by the rising incidents violence were further fuelled by the inflammatory rhetoric from major election

Drivers of Conflict in Rivers LGAs: Incidents per capita Jan-Mar 2016



Trend shows that Asari-Toru LGA is the most violent LGA following by Ikwerre and Akuku-Toru, in the first quarter of 2016 during the lead up to the March re-run elections. Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org; ACLED www.acleddata.com

Impact of Political Tensions on Overall Insecurity in Rivers



Graph shows the correlation between spikes in incidents of broader insecurity in the state, such as shootings/killings and criminality, and incidents related to tension or violence between political groups. The highest levels of conflict in the state occurred during months of key political events. Data source: NigeriaWatch

contenders. A week out from the elections, the immediate past governor of the state who is the current Minister of Transportation, Rotimi Amaechi, relocated to the state to lead the APC campaign. Amaechi along with the incumbent governor and the PDP leader in the state Nyesom Wike, were reportedly engaged in verbal warfare where both pledged to resist any

attempt to rig the elections against any of their party candidates.

In an effort to ensure violence-free elections, the Federal Government, through the Inspector General of Police and the Chief of Army Staff, deployed over 6,000 policemen, 14 units of Mobile Policemen (MOPOL), and military personnel to strategic

Legislative Elections and Implications of Peace and Security

locations and hotspots of violence across the state. Despite these deployments, many violent incidents, including killings, were reported a few days before the elections. On the eve of the elections, an Army officer and a soldier were reportedly shot dead by gunmen. Overall, the re-run elections were characterised by electoral irregularities and widespread violence, including intimidation and killings of security agents, party opponents and even INEC officials. These factors drove the decision by INEC to initially cancel voting in eight LGAs, and the later suspension of the collation and announcement of results in other LGAs.

Comparing the April 2015 Elections with March 2016 Re-run

The foundation of the current rising level of insecurity in Rivers State appears to have been laid during the 2015 electioneering process. The electoral campaigns that preceded the 2015 general elections were characterised by violence largely because of the contentious struggle for power and the politics of government succession.

The reported sharp political divide between the APC and the PDP, as well as the assumed political rivalry between the incumbent governor, Nyesom Wike and his predecessor and current Minister of Transportation, Rotimi Amaechi, have become a source of conflict in the state in recent times. Hence, many observers see the political animosity and violence that characterised the March 2016 re-run elections as an extension of the political rivalry and struggle for political dominance during the 2015 governorship and House of Assembly elections in the state.

The violence and alleged electoral irregularities that characterised the April 2015 gubernatorial and state House of Assembly elections in Rivers were repeated during the March 2016 legislative re-run elections in the state. The first quarter of

2016 has proved significantly more violent than the same period preceding the 2015 April legislative elections.

Including both the run-up and immediate aftermath of the inconclusive March re-run elections, between January and April 2016 Rivers had 264 conflict related fatalities according to ACLED data. This is compared to the reported 144 fatalities reported by ACLED for the equivalent legislative election period in 2015 (February to May 2015). With the legislative election outcome still unresolved, this suggests a high risk of continued violence in the state. This includes the potential for continued cult clashes, which rose in April 2016.

Continued Implications for Peace and Security

With INEC issuing a statement declaring the re-run elections in Rivers State as inconclusive it creates more opportunities for increased jostling between both Governor Wike, his rival Rotimi Amaechi and their party supporters. In the 23 state and 16 federal constituencies that participated in the March 2016 re-run elections, 11 and four respectively have been declared by INEC, leaving a total of 12 state and 12 federal constituencies up for grabs in a subsequent election on a yet-to-be-announced date. Unless a new approach is taken by the candidates and their respective supporters to concretely take steps to reduce rhetoric and ensure peace and calm, any subsequent election re-run is likely to provoke similar or worse tensions and insecurity.

The widespread insecurity which has characterized Rivers in recent months is having impacts not only on the safety of its citizens, but also its economic outlook. With an increasingly volatile operating environment, there have been reports of local businesses closing early to avoid being the target of robberies, or withdrawing

Political Events Fueling Insecurity in Rivers State

March 2015

- ⇒ General elections held see PDP's incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan loose to the APC's General Muhammadu Buhari

April 2015

- ⇒ Gubernatorial and House Assembly Elections are held for Rivers state
- ⇒ PDP wins House Assembly majority and their candidate Chief Wike is elected Governor, ousting the APC administration who seek to contest the results

May 2015

- ⇒ Local elections held by outgoing APC Governor Amaechi; which are boycotted by PDP
- ⇒ APC wins 22 of 23 chairmanship seats in local elections

July 2015

- ⇒ Federal court nullifies May local elections
- ⇒ New PDP Governor Wike sacks the 22 newly elected local APC chairman
- ⇒ National industrial court rules for the sacked chairman to be reinstated

December 2015

- ⇒ Court of Appeal upholds nullification of April 2015 gubernatorial elections, after state tribunal nullified them in October

March 2016

- ⇒ Re-run of legislative elections held
- ⇒ INEC suspends announcement of election results due to violence, and obstruction of the electoral process

altogether, and deterring new investors.. The negative implications of this scenario on the Rivers economy has the potential to increase unemployment and impact basic livelihoods. In a recent statement by the Rivers State Investors' and Entrepreneurs Forum, they publically urged the government to address the insecurity which they said was driving away investment to other states.

Economic Implications of Insecurity

The LGA of Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni is one example, which has experienced increased levels of violence in the lead up to the March 2016 elections, particularly in relation to cult-related deaths and attacks. In a media report from 18 January 2016, Nairadays.com reported that the LGA had experienced shut downs of operations by companies and the relocation of oil workers to Port Harcourt City.

The state capital is also coming under increasing pressure in the wake of the insecurity. With a proliferation of arms, residents are faced with frequent robbery attacks, kidnappings and killings. Port Harcourt also plays host to the regional offices of many national and multinational companies. If the risk to businesses continue, the potential for withdrawal from the state has the potential for much more permanent job losses for the state and revenue streams. This could lead to a vicious cycle whereby with less access to opportunities for work and stable income, the potential for group grievance and criminality may increase.

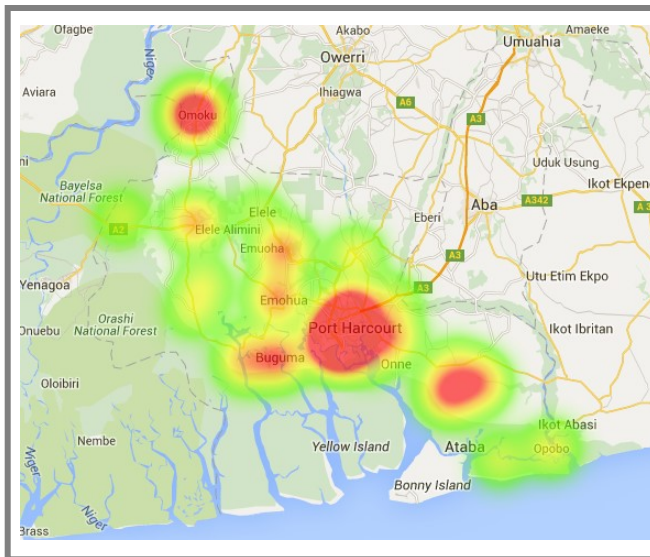
While the state government may seek to counter insecurity with increased budget expenditure on security, this in itself takes away valuable resources from other sectors which promote prosperity such as investment in economic growth, infrastructure and education. It is imperative that the vicious cycle be broken and replaced with a virtuous cycle of economic development and security. To do this will take a concerted effort to address the deeper drivers of insecurity, including a de-escalation of the current political climate. In this way, trade and commerce will thrive, the people of Rivers will be able to sustain their livelihoods, and the state will be able to once again realize its potential as an engine of economic growth for the country as a whole.

Conclusion

The pressures on Rivers from process of elections and associated political events over 2015 and now 2016 represent a challenge to stability and governance in the state.

As the second largest state economy in the country, yet the most violent state per capita in the Niger Delta, Rivers state needs stable leadership and governance to ensure its future peace and prosperity. The growing violence and fatalities, driven by political manoeuvring, cult clashes, and criminality, have the potential to be dangerously destabilizing over the longer term.

Without continued economic investments and business growth, opportunities for employment and improved livelihoods will dwindle. This has the potential to significantly worsen insecurity not only within the state, but also with the Niger Delta region and beyond. The following recommendations are proposed to address the insecurity at hand and promote strong leadership from government, political parties, media and civil society alike.



Violent hotspots in lead-up to elections Jan-Mar 2016

Heat Map: Concentration of conflict incidents in the lead up to the Rivers re-run elections held in March 2016, shows hotspots were focused where key business and political hubs are located, most notably Port Harcourt.

Source: PAP Map; all data sources