



## Structural Drivers and Democratic Consequences of Political Violence in Nigeria: A Systematic Literature Review

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**Abstract.** Political violence remains a central threat to democratic stability in Nigeria since the return to civil rule in 1999. It manifests through voter intimidation, armed thuggery, ballot snatching, targeted assassinations, sectarian mobilization, and institutional manipulation. This systematic literature review synthesizes empirical evidence and theoretical contributions across political science, governance, and security studies to identify the structural drivers and democratic consequences of political violence in Nigeria. Data were derived from peer-reviewed journals, policy documents, books, and institutional reports published between 1999 and 2024, selected based on methodological rigor and thematic relevance. Findings reveal that political violence in Nigeria is driven by entrenched poverty, mass youth unemployment, corruption, prebendal political culture, weak state institutions, identity politics, and an entrenched “sit-tight” elite behavior. Political violence undermines democratic consolidation by reducing voter turnout, distorting electoral outcomes, weakening governance institutions, and enabling the emergence of incompetent leadership. The study concludes that political violence in Nigeria is a systemic governance challenge, not an episodic event, and proposes multidimensional reforms involving institutional strengthening, electoral governance reforms, peacebuilding, youth empowerment, and civic reorientation.

### 1. Introduction

Political violence has become an entrenched feature of Nigeria’s political landscape, reflecting deep structural, institutional, and socio-economic weaknesses. Since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, elections have repeatedly been characterized by intimidation, coercion, destruction of property, ballot snatching, assassinations, and sectarian clashes. The persistence of these violent episodes raises fundamental questions about state capacity, the strength of institutions, the nature of political competition, and the quality of democratic governance in Nigeria. Given Nigeria’s demographic significance, ethnic heterogeneity, and economic centrality, understanding the nature and roots of political violence within the country is vital for both national stability and broader regional security.

Numerous international organizations including Human Rights Watch, International IDEA, and UNDP continue to classify Nigeria as a high-risk state for electoral violence due to widespread arms proliferation, weak security institutions, intense inter-elite rivalry, and mounting public distrust. Domestic patterns mirror these concerns: structural poverty, mass unemployment, political godfatherism, and the politicization of ethnicity and religion have entrenched political insecurity. While a growing body of literature has addressed the manifestations of political violence, few attempts have synthesized these drivers through a systematic and holistic review of scholarly and policy sources. This study therefore fills an

important scholarly gap by consolidating decades of research into the structural and democratic implications of political violence in Nigeria.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite successive electoral reforms and democratic transitions, political violence in Nigeria has remained persistent and increasingly sophisticated. Elections, which should provide peaceful avenues for leadership selection, often become violent arenas characterized by coercion, manipulation, and elite-driven conflict. Weak institutions, widespread corruption, and systemic impunity contribute to recurring violence across election cycles. Youth vulnerability plays a critical role in this dynamic. Nigeria's demography dominated by young people combined with high unemployment, inequality, and economic exclusion, creates fertile ground for political manipulation. Many youths become dependent on political patrons for survival, making them easily mobilized for violent acts.

Furthermore, the weaponization of ethnic and religious identities intensifies tensions across communities. Identity-based mobilization has repeatedly transformed political disagreements into sectarian or communal conflicts. Beyond elections, political violence is evident in intra-party conflicts, political assassinations, resource-driven clashes, and the proliferation of armed militias. Such violence erodes trust in institutions, undermines governance, heightens insecurity, and weakens democratic legitimacy.

### 1.2 Research Questions

- What structural and institutional factors drive political violence in Nigeria?
- How does political violence affect democratic governance and stability?
- Which theories best explain the persistence of political violence in Nigeria?
- What governance strategies can reduce or prevent political violence?

## 2. Methodology

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesize and integrate findings from scholarly and policy research on political violence in Nigeria. The method was selected for its rigour, transparency, and ability to consolidate dispersed knowledge across multiple

disciplines. The review adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) standards. A structured search strategy was implemented across major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), and institutional repositories from bodies such as the UNDP, Human Rights Watch, INEC, ECOWAS, and International IDEA.

Search terms included combinations of keywords such as "political violence," "electoral violence," "youth unemployment," "poverty and elections," "inequality," "identity politics," "governance failure," and "Nigeria." Boolean operators enhanced the precision of results. The timeframe was restricted to 1999–2024 to reflect Nigeria's Fourth Republic, a period of renewed democratic engagement. Inclusion criteria required that studies focus on political or electoral violence in Nigeria and demonstrate methodological rigor or policy relevance. Exclusion criteria ruled out studies conducted before 1999, non-Nigeria-focused works, purely journalistic sources, and studies lacking academic grounding.

From an initial pool of 1,262 records, 926 remained after removing duplicates. Screening based on titles and abstracts produced 414 articles for full-text review, and 196 met the inclusion criteria for final analysis. A structured extraction matrix was used to document each study's authorship, purpose, methodology, theoretical orientation, major findings, and policy recommendations. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach generated six dominant themes: socio-economic drivers, institutional failures, identity politics, political thuggery and militia networks, weaknesses in electoral governance, and proliferation of small arms. To enhance reliability, findings were triangulated across scholarly and institutional sources. Limitations such as publication bias and uneven methodological quality were acknowledged but did not significantly undermine the study's overall robustness.

## 3. Conceptual Clarifications

Political violence refers to the deliberate use or threat of force for political ends, aimed at influencing electoral outcomes, intimidating opponents, undermining institutions, or destabilizing communities. Electoral violence is a subset occurring before, during, or after elections, involving acts such as ballot

snatching, voter intimidation, arson, physical assaults, and targeted killings. Democracy refers to systems of governance based on popular participation, rule of law, transparency, accountability, and free and fair elections. Democratic consolidation involves institutionalizing democratic norms to the point where democracy becomes the only acceptable political system. Governance refers to the processes, institutions, and mechanisms through which power is exercised and public resources are managed.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

Understanding political violence in Nigeria requires a comprehensive theoretical lens because no single framework fully captures the complex interplay of structural deprivation, elite behavior, identity mobilization, and institutional fragility. Conflict Theory provides a foundational explanation by highlighting the inherent struggles for power and resources within society. In Nigeria, where political positions offer access to state wealth and patronage, elections become high-stakes contests. This encourages political elites to resort to violence to secure and maintain power.

Relative Deprivation and Strain Theory further illuminate the psychological and socio-economic frustrations that predispose individuals particularly unemployed youths to political violence. Millions of young Nigerians experience unmet expectations and economic hardship, creating fertile ground for manipulation by political elites who recruit them for violent activities in exchange for money or future promises. Elite Theory deepens this analysis by showing how political power in Nigeria is concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites who use institutional weaknesses, patronage structures, and the strategic deployment of violence to maintain dominance. This explains recurring patterns of godfatherism, manipulation of party primaries, and control of security agencies.

State Fragility Theory adds a vital dimension by highlighting the role of weak institutions, low legitimacy, ineffective law enforcement, and poor governance capacity. The fragility of Nigeria's political and administrative systems enables political actors to exploit institutional weaknesses and engage in violence with impunity. Integrating these theories reveals that political violence in Nigeria is driven by structural inequality and power struggles, reinforced by socio-economic frustrations

among youths, sustained by elite manipulation, and enabled by fragile state institutions.

#### 5. Literature Review

The literature consistently shows that political violence in Nigeria is rooted in a combination of socio-economic, political, institutional, and cultural factors. Socio-economic marginalization plays a major role as chronic poverty, inequality, and mass unemployment create resentment and vulnerability among youths. Political actors exploit these conditions by recruiting young people as thugs, ballot snatchers, and enforcers during elections. Urban centers with large unemployed populations and widespread informal settlements provide abundant recruitment grounds, making political violence an economic survival strategy for many youths.

Institutional weaknesses exacerbate these problems. Electoral bodies frequently encounter logistical lapses, inconsistent application of rules, late arrival of materials, and technological failures. Security agencies are often criticized for partisanship, corruption, and incompetence, diminishing public trust and emboldening political actors to employ violence. Furthermore, the judiciary's slow and sometimes compromised processes prevent meaningful prosecution of violent offenders, reinforcing impunity.

Identity politics intensifies political violence by transforming political contests into ethnic or religious struggles. Nigeria's diversity provides fertile ground for the weaponization of identity, as political elites mobilize ethno-religious sentiments to solidify support bases or delegitimize opponents. Historical grievances often resurface during elections, fuelling mistrust and retaliation across communities. The 2011 post-election violence in Northern Nigeria exemplifies how identity mobilization can escalate political conflict into widespread violence.

Political thuggery and the proliferation of militia networks represent another major theme in the literature. Politicians maintain and fund cult groups, youth gangs, and vigilante organizations to gain electoral advantage. Over time, these groups evolve into semi-autonomous armed actors engaged in broader criminal activities such as kidnapping, extortion, and the illegal arms trade. Their existence reflects the deterioration of state control over coercive force.

Electoral governance failures frequently trigger violence. Poor voter registration, malfunctioning BVAS machines, ballot shortages, vote buying, and opaque collation processes are common sources of conflict. These failures undermine public trust in elections, heighten tensions, and incentivize violence among political actors who perceive electoral processes as unpredictable or unfair.

Finally, widespread availability of small arms intensifies the lethality of political violence. Nigeria's porous borders and weak surveillance systems enable the inflow of illicit weapons, transforming localized disputes into deadly confrontations. This proliferation reflects deeper weaknesses in national security architecture and fosters a climate of fear, suspicion, and militarized political competition.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this review reveal that political violence in Nigeria results from the complex intersection of structural socio-economic deprivation, governance failure, elite manipulation, and identity politics. A key insight is that socio-economic deprivation alone does not cause political violence, but becomes weaponized by political elites in contexts of weak institutional oversight. Millions of unemployed youths become vulnerable to exploitation because they lack economic alternatives and because political actors strategically recruit them with promises of money, protection, or future benefits. Thus, Nigeria's political violence is not spontaneous; it is intentionally orchestrated within a system where violence yields political dividends.

Weak institutions further entrench violent political practices. Electoral bodies lacking autonomy, police forces plagued by corruption, and a judiciary unable to enforce accountability collectively create an environment where political violence is rational and rarely punished. The consistent failure of state institutions to prosecute violent offenders reinforces a culture of impunity that encourages political actors to deploy violence as a strategic tool. This aligns with elite theory, which suggests that Nigeria's ruling class deliberately undermines institutions to maintain dominance.

Identity mobilization further complicates the landscape of political violence. Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition allows political actors to manipulate group identities to inflame passions, justify aggression, and frame elections as existential struggles. Such

mobilization exacerbates mistrust and fuels retaliatory cycles, especially in regions with long-standing grievances. Identity politics transforms political competition from issue-based debates into emotive, polarized conflicts with high potential for violence.

Political thuggery represents a crucial mechanism through which elites operationalize violence. Cult groups, gangs, and militias act as enforcers of political interests, often armed with sophisticated weaponry due to Nigeria's porous borders. Over time, these groups develop autonomy and expand into criminal networks, deepening insecurity across the country. The entrenchment of these armed groups reflects a significant erosion of state monopoly over the use of force—a hallmark of state fragility.

The overall pattern that emerges is that political violence in Nigeria is cyclical and self-perpetuating. Politicians deploy violence to gain power, and once in office, they use state resources to finance more violence. Institutions remain too weak or compromised to interrupt this cycle. This entrenched system of political violence produces far-reaching democratic consequences, including diminished voter participation, persistent mistrust in electoral institutions, ineffective governance, and the entrenchment of corrupt leaders who lack electoral legitimacy.

## 7. Conclusion

This systematic literature review concludes that political violence in Nigeria is a deeply structural phenomenon sustained by socio-economic vulnerabilities, elite-driven manipulation, institutional fragility, and identity mobilization. The persistence of political violence reflects systemic governance failure rather than isolated disruptions. Political elites weaponize youth unemployment, ethno-religious divisions, and weak institutions to maintain political dominance. This entrenched system has severe implications for Nigeria's democratic consolidation, undermining electoral integrity, eroding public trust, discouraging voter participation, and enabling the emergence of illegitimate and incompetent leaders.

Political violence endangers Nigeria's long-term stability and development by intensifying ethnic divisions, weakening institutions, and perpetuating a cycle of poor governance. Breaking this cycle requires sustained political will, institutional reforms, strengthened security governance, and socio-economic

interventions targeted at the root causes of youth vulnerability. Strengthening INEC, establishing an Electoral Offences Commission, professionalizing the police, curbing illicit arms flows, and enhancing civic education are essential strategies for reducing violence. Equally important is addressing the socio-economic deprivation that makes youths susceptible to manipulation.

Ultimately, Nigeria must transform its political culture, build resilient democratic institutions, and promote inclusive governance to eliminate the incentives for political violence. Without these changes, political violence will continue to erode democratic norms, destabilize communities, and hinder national development. The future of Nigeria's democracy depends on the nation's ability to dismantle the systemic structures that sustain violent political competition.

## 8. Recommendations

Addressing political violence in Nigeria requires a comprehensive, multidimensional approach that targets the structural, institutional, and socio-economic conditions that sustain violent political behavior. The evidence from this systematic review shows that violence persists because of elite manipulation, institutional weakness, youth vulnerability, the proliferation of small arms, identity politics, and deep socio-economic inequalities. To effectively curb political violence, Nigeria must strengthen its electoral governance and institutional frameworks. This begins with the establishment of an independent Electoral Offences Commission with full prosecutorial powers to investigate and prosecute individuals and groups responsible for electoral violence. Such a commission would help dismantle the entrenched culture of impunity that allows violent actors including political sponsors and security operatives to escape consequences. The autonomy and operational capacity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should also be enhanced through secured funding, improved logistics, and better technological infrastructure. Strengthening internal party democracy by enforcing transparent primaries and reducing the influence of political godfathers is equally essential, as intra-party conflicts often escalate into violent confrontations.

Security sector reform is another critical component of violence reduction. Security agencies must be professionalized,

depoliticized, and adequately trained in election security management, crowd control, and conflict de-escalation. Police and other security personnel deployed for election duties should operate under strict codes of conduct, monitored by independent oversight mechanisms to ensure neutrality. Officers found colluding with political actors or engaging in intimidation must face disciplinary sanctions. Improved inter-agency collaboration among the police, military, DSS, and civil defense corps is also necessary to ensure coordinated and effective responses during elections.

Reducing youth vulnerability is fundamental to addressing the root causes of political violence. Government should expand youth employment and empowerment programmes, including vocational skills training, entrepreneurship development, innovation hubs, and public works schemes aimed at providing alternative livelihoods for marginalized youths. Targeted social investment programmes can help reduce the economic desperation that drives young people into the hands of political patrons. Rehabilitation and reintegration programmes should also be designed for youths who have previously participated in political thuggery, providing psychological support, education, and pathways to legitimate employment.

Tackling the proliferation of small arms is equally important. Nigeria must strengthen border surveillance, improve security technology at entry points, and enhance the capacity of customs and immigration officers to prevent illegal arms inflow. A nationwide arm decommissioning exercise, combined with community-based disarmament programmes, would help retrieve illegally owned weapons and disrupt local arms trafficking networks. Regional cooperation with neighbouring countries through ECOWAS and the African Union is vital for combating transnational arms smuggling.

Deepening civic education is another key strategy for curbing political violence. Civic education programmes targeting youth, women, rural dwellers, and vulnerable groups should be expanded to promote peaceful political participation, democratic values, conflict resolution, and resistance to political manipulation. Schools, media institutions, civil society organizations, and religious bodies should be actively engaged in national campaigns aimed at reducing misinformation, hate speech, and divisive political rhetoric that often fuel violent conflicts.

Governance and anti-corruption reforms are equally important. Strengthening institutions such as the EFCC and ICPC, ensuring their independence, and empowering them to investigate illicit political financing will help reduce the incentives for violent political competition. Enhancing fiscal transparency, decentralizing power, and promoting equitable resource allocation can also reduce the high stakes associated with political office, thereby lowering the likelihood of violence.

Mitigating identity politics requires deliberate efforts to foster national integration. Government and civil society should invest in inter-ethnic dialogue, inter-faith collaborations, and peacebuilding initiatives that promote social cohesion and reduce the potency of divisive political narratives. Political parties should adopt inclusive structures that reflect Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity to minimize perceptions of marginalization.

Technology can further enhance elections and reduce violence. Strengthening the use of BVAS, electronic transmission of results, and real-time publication of polling unit outcomes will improve transparency and reduce suspicion among political actors. Investing in cybersecurity and deploying digital early warning systems, including GIS mapping and community reporting platforms, will help detect and mitigate emerging threats.

Finally, community policing and local peace mechanisms should be reinforced. Traditional rulers, youth organizations, women's groups, and community associations should play greater roles in mediating conflicts and providing early warning information. Local peace committees, when properly funded and empowered, can de-escalate tensions before they develop into violence.

Collectively, these recommendations present a robust and holistic strategy to reduce political violence in Nigeria. By strengthening institutions, promoting economic inclusion, controlling arms proliferation, reforming the security sector, enhancing civic education, and addressing identity-based divisions, Nigeria can significantly enhance democratic stability and create a more peaceful and inclusive political environment.

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