

Why Was Violence Lower in Nigeria's 2023 Election: Implications for Peacebuilding?

An Unusual Election

The 2023 election was unlike any since Nigeria's Fourth Republic began in 1999. Among the many anomalies and contradictions included high registration and low turnout, a popular third-party candidate, and an electorate less polarized by region, ethnicity, and religion than at any time in the last 24 years. The biggest puzzle, though, was why violence was so low, despite so many evident, proximate conflict drivers. The answer may be in a changing structural context that leaders and practitioners should note and build upon for a more peaceful future.

It was clear for a month before the February 2023 election that this one was likely to be less violent than the elections in 2015 and 2019 based on a quantitative comparison of patterns and trends in political violence over the last 15 years. However, this was hard to explain given a context of significant socio-economic stress, very high electoral stakes, and many challenges in the process and credibility of the election itself. Because of these dynamics, many observers predicted that there would be a big spike in election violence. There was not.

Many Proximate Conflict Drivers

Economic conditions were bad with high inflation, high interest rates, and rising multi-dimensional poverty (about 63% of the population being multi-dimensionally poor as of 2022¹ up from 57.3% in 2017²). As an oil producer, high gas prices should have generated revenue for the government and foreign currency for the treasury, but declining production denied Nigeria that potential boon. To make matters worse, just as the election was ramping into high gear, a currency swap led to massive cash shortages during a very disorderly currency redesign process.³ As a result, people went into the election period under a great deal of economic stress, grievance, and restiveness.

At the same time, there was massive interest in the election as reflected by record-breaking voter registration numbers. With the addition of 9.5 million eligible voters, in total the registered voter number reached 93.4 million. Youth made up two-thirds of the newly registered voters.⁴ The 2023 presidential election specifically excited the young Nigerian electorate because of

¹ Ogbonnaya, Ufiem Maurice. "Taking on the Big Elephant in the Room: Nigeria after the 2023 General Elections." Kujenga Amani, April 14, 2023. <https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2023/04/14/taking-on-the-big-elephant-in-the-room-nigeria-after-the-2023-general-elections/>.

² "Multidimensional Poverty Headcount Ratio at National Poverty Lines (% of Population)." World Bank. Accessed July 25, 2023. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.MDIM?locations=NG>.

³ Muhumuza, Rodney. "Nigeria's cash crisis worsens as currency swap with China stalls." AP News, April 14, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/nigeria-cash-crisis-currency-swap-36674c8e949af512813b888e78611063>.

⁴ "First Preliminary Statement: Elections held on schedule, but lack of transparency and violence mar credibility." European Union Election Observation Mission Nigeria 2023. April 17, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eom-nigeria-2023/first-preliminary-statement-elections-held-schedule-lack-transparency-and_en?s=410279.

its open contest with no incumbent in the race and the emergence of third-party candidates.⁵

But then the election happened and left many disappointed by shortcomings in the logistics, process, and degree of transparency. Preliminary reports from international observer missions were ambivalent in their assessment. They stated that in theory, the adoption of the new Electoral Act of 2022, which allowed for the use of electronic technology, should have helped strengthen the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), with increased public access to election results and extended electoral timelines.⁶ However, in practice, a lack of public awareness of the law and regulations created confusion, and procedures for implementation of the law were not explicit.⁷ The European Union Electoral Observer Mission (EOM) reported that even before the election, the collection of permanent voter cards (PVC), which is required to vote, was impacted by inadequate institutional planning on INEC's part such as poor logistics, and incorrectly designated collection

offices.⁸ Attacks on INEC locations disrupted preparations and intimidated voters.⁹ When the voting began, insufficient planning and security provisions coupled with cash and fuel shortages restricted voters' freedom of movement.¹⁰

A lack of planning also resulted in delays during the voting process in several polling stations.¹¹ Delayed training of technical personnel and inadequate mock testing exercises resulted in inefficient response to complications that arose during the voting process. There were also information gaps related to the public access to the highly anticipated results on INEC's Results Viewing Portal (IReV). Proxy collection and PVC buying were also reported. With all these challenges, delays, intimidation, and technical glitches, at the end of the process only 2 out of 10 eligible voters actually had their votes counted.¹² Adding to the sentiment of disenfranchisement, this marked the first time since the reintroduction of multi-party politics in Nigeria in 1999 that a candidate had secured the presidency with less than 50 percent of the total

⁵"Preliminary Statement of the Joint NDI/IRI International Observer Mission to Nigeria's 2023 Presidential and Legislative Elections." International Republican Institute. April 18, 2023. <https://www.iri.org/resources/preliminary-statement-of-the-joint-ndi-iri-international-observer-mission-to-nigerias-2023-presidential-and-legislative-elections/>.

⁶ "Preliminary Statement of the Joint NDI/IRI International Observer Mission to Nigeria's 2023 Presidential and Legislative Elections." International Republican Institute. April 18, 2023. <https://www.iri.org/resources/preliminary-statement-of-the-joint-ndi-iri-international-observer-mission-to-nigerias-2023-presidential-and-legislative-elections/>.

⁷ First Preliminary Statement: Elections held on schedule, but lack of transparency and violence mar credibility." European Union Election Observation Mission Nigeria 2023. April 17, 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eom-nigeria-2023/first-preliminary-statement-elections-held-schedule-lack-transparency-and_en?s=410279.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ "PRELIMINARY DECLARATION OF THE ECOWAS OBSERVATION MISSION ON THE PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS OF 23 FEBRUARY 2023 IN THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF NIGERIA." Economic Community of West African States. February 24, 2023. <https://ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NIGERIA-ELECTION-PRELIMINARY-DECLARATION.pdf>.

¹²Ogundipe, Samuel. "The lowest voters turnout in Nigeria's election history: What happened?" The Guardian, February 26, 2023.

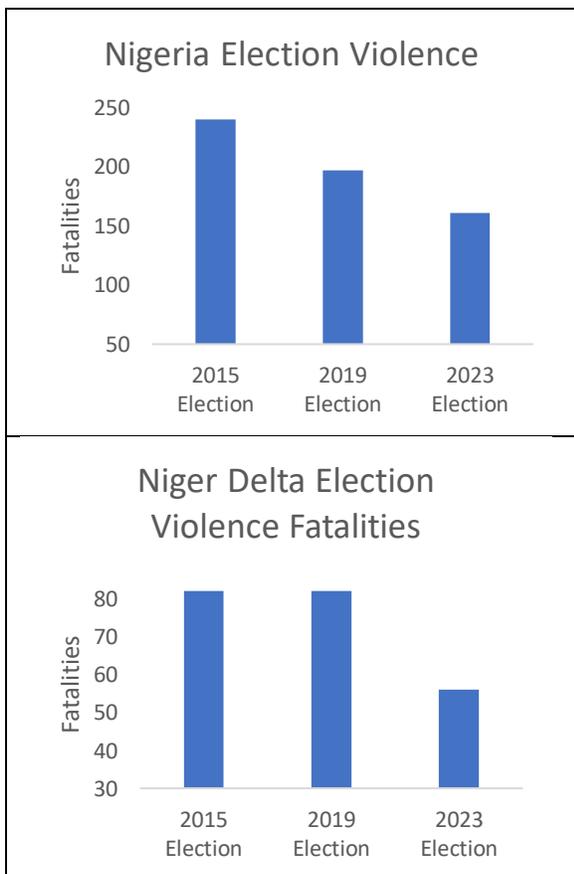
<https://guardian.ng/opinion/the-lowest-voters-turnout-in-nigerias-election-history-what-happened/>; "Logistics challenges, BVAS failure affected smooth conduct of Nigeria's polls, says ECOWAS." TheCable, February 25, 2023. <https://www.thecable.ng/logistics-challenges-bvas-failure-affected-smooth-conduct-of-nigerias-polls-says-ecowas>.

votes. Accordingly, trust by many stakeholders in INEC’s independence and professionalism significantly reduced on the election compared the pre-election period.¹³

And yet, despite all these challenges, violence was nevertheless reduced. As was emphasized by the ECOWAS EOM, at least as regards the electorate, Nigeria demonstrated remarkable resilience and determination, suggesting a maturation and consolidation of democracy.¹⁴

A Reduction in Election Violence

Nationally, according to the PIND [Peace Map](#), fatalities associated with election violence dropped from 240 in 2015, to 197 in 2019, to 161 in 2023. In the Niger Delta reported fatalities associated with election violence dropped from 82 in 2015 and 2019 to 56 in 2023.



A Persistent Link Between Election Violence and Ethnic/Communal Violence in Nigeria

Historically in Nigeria, election violence maps neatly to areas of communal violence. In many parts of the country there are latent or chronic group-based tensions associated with farmer/herder violence, boundary disputes over fishing/farming rights, ethnic disputes, xenophobic/sectarian violence, or indigene/settler violence. In these areas grievances tend to be inflamed during political campaigns and at-risk youth are often instrumentalized as thugs by powerbrokers seeking to advance their own agendas. In this way, election violence is not separate or distinct from other conflicts or other types of violence and a mapping of election violence can serve as a diagnostic of the overall health of society. Therefore, if election violence has reduced, it may signal something hopeful about opportunities for peacebuilding more broadly.

Over the last decade, communal and ethnic violence has been elevated (about 1,500 fatalities/year nationally and 160 fatalities/year in the Niger Delta) – not counting gang/cult violence, insurgency, or banditry. Nationally it peaked in 2014 (2,471) and 2018 (2,244). In the Niger Delta it peaked in 2017 with 446 reported fatalities¹⁵ on the PIND Peace Map.

During that period (2013-2023) communal conflict has tended to be most prevalent in Delta, Cross River and Akwa Ibom states. In Delta, over 300 were reportedly killed in herder/farmer conflict, as well as in communal conflict relating to land disputes and leadership tussles. In Cross River and Akwa Ibom states, communal violence was mainly driven by tensions over land and

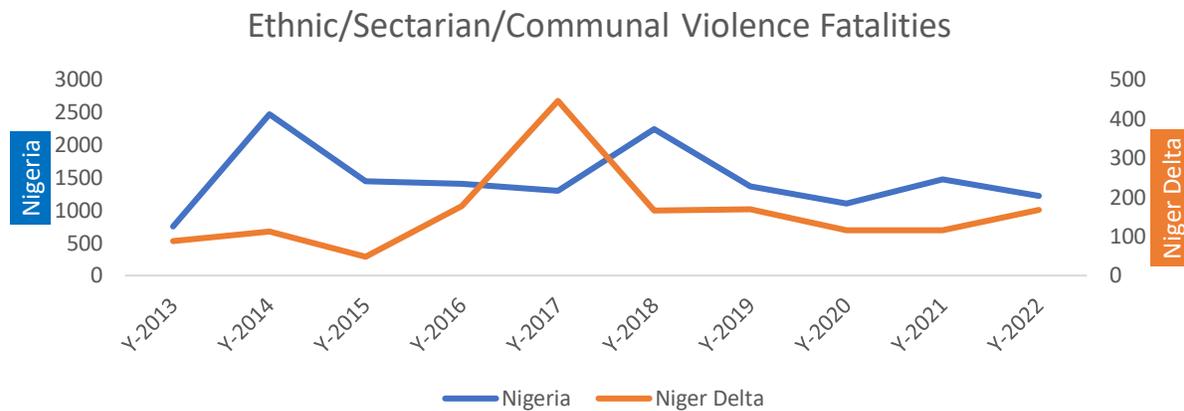
¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Foundation for Partnership Initiatives. Peace Map. <https://p4p-nigerdelta.org/map/>

boundary disputes.¹⁶ In the last year there has been an increase in tension and violence between indigenes and northern settlers,

including farmer/herder tensions in Ondo and Edo states.



Source: Early Warning Data Uploaded to the PIND Peace Map (including Nigeria Watch, ACLEDData.com, P4P, and CIEPD CWC)

Structural Factors Changing in Nigeria for the Better

In this context of longstanding ethnic and communal grievances, proximate factors clearly suggested a high risk of election violence in the run-up to February 2023. But structural factors have been changing incrementally in Nigeria over the last decade, which may have finally begun to create a situation of higher social resilience. For example, there have been improvements in the agricultural sector, which has led to more food security. As a share of GDP, agriculture expanded from 23 percent in 2015 to 26 percent in 2021.¹⁷ There have also been efforts to improve access to healthcare through initiatives such as the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS). A

recent survey by the African Development Bank indicated that the middle class makes up about 23 percent of the population in Nigeria, with approximately 92 percent of these having obtained post-secondary education including from institutions of higher learning which attracted more than 2.1 million students in 2021 compared with 1.7 million in 2017.¹⁸

The role of civil society in Nigerian politics has also grown, leading to an expansion of the civil society space. One notable example is the emergence of women's groups like the Feminist Coalition which was established in July 2020 with the aim of advocating for women's equality. These groups utilize their platforms to raise funds and allocate resources for vital social services,

¹⁶ Foundation for Partnership Initiatives. Peace Map. <https://p4p-nigerdelta.org/map/>.

¹⁷ Ogunleye, Oluwatosin Adeshokan and Ayo. "Nigeria in 2023: Bridging the productivity gap and building economic resilience." Brookings, February 21, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/nigeria-in-2023-bridging-the-productivity-gap-and-building-economic-resilience/>.

¹⁸Ogunkoya, Olusegun. "Is the middle class Nigeria's centre of economic gravity?" BusinessDay, February 22, 2023. <https://businessday.ng/columnist/article/is-the-middle-class-nigerias-centre-of-economic-gravity/>.; "2.1 million students studying in Nigerian universities— NUC." Tribune Online, February 23, 2023. <https://tribuneonline.ng/2-1-million-students-studying-in-nigerian-universities%E2%80%95-nuc/>.

including food, shelter, healthcare, and causes such as #EndSARS throughout the country.¹⁹ This development has demonstrated Nigeria's potential for an accountable and transparent civil society that is responsive to the needs of its citizens. These emerging politically influential groups - youth, civil society, and an educated middle class - have scrambled the political landscape as they seek pragmatic solutions to public concerns and do not have time for old ethnic and sectarian fissures or us/them political polarization.

A Reduction in Election Violence Could Portend a Reduction in Ethnic/Communal Violence

In 2023, despite all the identified proximate factors described above, election violence dropped compared to the two previous cycles. This reduction in election violence could portend a reduction in communal and ethnic violence over the next decade compared to the last. However, this will not happen automatically. In fact, there is an urgent need for donors, influencers, and leaders, to proactively support youth now to sustain and amplify this progress. Otherwise, especially if youth feel disenfranchised by the electoral process, they may quickly become discouraged, and once again susceptible to radicalization and instrumentalization by dishonest and partisan actors seeking to foment violence.

There is much work to be done to reduce violence, with a focus on linking youth, Civil Society, traditional rulers, and public institutions. Traditional rulers and religious leaders have

played an important role to mitigate conflict, from simple contractual disputes to violent inter-communal conflicts.²⁰ Especially in situations where there may be little confidence in the judiciary, traditional institutions can be of immense benefit in complementing legal efforts at resolving disputes before they degenerate into violent conflicts.²¹ Civil society organizations have strengthened the capacity of young people to enhance the active participation of Nigerian youth towards the election process and prevention of electoral violence through trainings, campaigns, grassroots advocacy, multi-stakeholder dialogues, community mobilization, and sensitization workshops.²²

These efforts must be supported, facilitated, and encouraged, now, while the window of opportunity is still open. Otherwise, after an election that was seen by many as a disappointment, youth may be susceptible to being recruited, polarized, and radicalized by sectarian and illicit groups. If government and civil society take on an adversarial posture rather than a collaborative one, a generation that could help shape the future of Nigeria will become excluded and marginalized.

One way that Civil Society and youth can be supported is through new Early Warning/Early Response technologies, including the use of customized prompts in Large Language Models (LLMs) to track specific conflict issues and response efforts at the local level, or PIND Foundation's new Peace Agent registration feature on the Peace Map so that Civil Society and youth can receive automated alerts when

¹⁹ "Lessons from the #EndSARS Movement in Nigeria." ReliefWeb, February 23, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/lessons-endsars-movement-nigeria>.

²⁰ "Traditional leaders and quest for peace, security in the Middle Belt." Daily Trust, February 23, 2023. <https://dailytrust.com/traditional-leaders-and-quest-for-peace-security-in-the-middle-belt/>.

²¹ Ibid

²² Ogbonnaya, Ufiem Maurice. "Nigerian Youths' Participation in the 2023 Elections: Defying the Odds and Forging Ahead." Kujenga Amani, February 24, 2023. <https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2023/02/24/nigerian-youths-participation-in-the-2023-elections-defying-the-odds-and-forging-ahead/>.

conflict is escalating in their respective states. Linking early warning to early response through tools like Social Network Analysis and GIS can guide capacity building efforts and targeted interventions for advocacy and mediation, and help organizations scale their peacebuilding efforts. In this way, peacebuilders can shift a decade-long trend in elevated levels of communal violence to a lower number of fatalities in the next ten years.