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# Spatial Dynamics of Political Violence in Nigeria: Regional Patterns, Governance Failures, and Conflict Trends

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## Abstract

*This article examines the spatial dynamics of political violence in Nigeria between January 1997 and April 2025. Drawing from the Conflict Theory and Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, the study adopts a longitudinal, multi-scalar perspective that highlights region-specific patterns of conflict. The paper identifies recurring conflict clusters shaped by institutional fragility and regional marginalization using empirical data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), World Bank Governance Indicators, and Freedom House Civil Liberties Reports. Findings show that the North East remains an epicentre of insurgency, the North West is increasingly dominated by rural banditry, and separatist agitations escalate in the South East. The study demonstrates that political violence is strongly correlated with governance deficits, political exclusion, and spatial neglect. It concludes with a call for region-sensitive peacebuilding, improved subnational governance, and community-based early warning systems.*

**Keywords:** Political violence, Nigeria, Spatial analysis, Conflict geography, Governance indicators, Civil liberties, State fragility

## Introduction

Since Nigeria transitioned to civilian rule in 1999, episodes of political violence have continued to pose serious obstacles to democratic stability, national cohesion, and inclusive development. These episodes of unrest—ranging from insurgency and banditry to separatist militancy and electoral violence—are not random or sporadic. Rather, they emerge from deeply rooted spatial inequalities, political exclusion, and governance failure that reflect the uneven distribution of power, infrastructure, and state presence across Nigeria's diverse regions (Suberu, 1993; Obi, 2010; Zenn, 2014). Political violence, as this article contends, is neither neutral nor uniform; it is shaped by how space is organized, inhabited, and contested.

Numerous scholars have explored the structural underpinnings of Nigeria's conflicts. Colonial legacies, neo-patrimonial governance, identity politics, and elite manipulation have been invoked to explain the persistence of violence (Agbibo, 2013; Obi, 2010; Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). In the Niger Delta, extractive oil economies have generated ecological degradation and political alienation, fueling resource-based militancy (Obi, 2010). In the North East, Boko Haram's rise has been linked to socioeconomic marginalization, institutional decay, and youth disaffection (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Zenn, 2014). However, while these analyses shed light on structural and ideological causes, they often underplay the geographic and scalar dimensions of violence—how conflict maps onto Nigeria's spatial configuration and reflects subnational governance asymmetries.

This article addresses that omission by applying spatial and multi-scalar analysis to patterns of political violence in Nigeria from January 1997 to April 2025. Drawing

on Henri Lefebvre's model of the spatial triad (conceived, perceived, and lived space) and Conflict Theory's emphasis on exclusionary structures, it examines how violence is produced, sustained, and experienced across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Through this lens, the study views political violence as both a social process and a spatial expression of deeper institutional failures, rooted in the fragmentation of state sovereignty and the geography of neglect (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991; Herbst, 2000).

The study is anchored in a mixed-methods framework, combining spatial analysis with institutional data and field-based insights. It utilizes geo-referenced datasets from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), and qualitative reporting from HumAngle. These are complemented by institutional indicators from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI, 1997 – 2023) and regional democracy cores from Freedom House (1998 – 2024), particularly on civil liberties, the rule of law, and political rights. Analytical tools include kernel density mapping to visualize conflict clusters, longitudinal event analysis, and actor-event disaggregation to unpack violence types across regions. Time-series and typological charts are also used to illustrate trends and regional differences in violence intensity and character.

Preliminary findings confirm sharp geographic variation. The North East zone continues to experience insurgency-led mass violence dominated by Boko Haram and ISWAP, including attacks on civilians, schools, and security forces (Zenn, 2014). A roadside bombing in Borno State in February 2025 that killed 26 civilians illustrates the enduring potency of insurgency in the region (AP News, 2025). In the North West, rural banditry and mass abductions have escalated, fueled by arms proliferation and weak security architecture. The Middle Belt remains prone to ethnoreligious violence and farmer-herder clashes, especially in Benue and Plateau States, where 150 deaths were recorded in April 2025 alone (Financial Times, 2025). In the South East, separatist agitations by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have turned violent, with attacks on electoral offices and public infrastructure, including the May 2025 Okigwe-Owerri highway ambush that killed 30 civilians (AP News, 2025). Meanwhile, the South-South zone remains fragile, with oil bunkering, militia resurgence, and unresolved post-amnesty grievances (Obi, 2010).

Importantly, the study finds a recurrent pattern: political violence intensifies during election cycles. Each general election – 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 – has seen violent contestation over access to power, often marked by ballot snatching, targeted assassinations, and institutional sabotage. During the 2023 general elections, numerous INEC offices and candidates were attacked, further eroding public trust in Nigeria's democratic institutions (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

Early Warning Systems (EWS), introduced to pre-empt such outbreaks, have achieved limited impact. Though conceptually robust, the National Early Warning Centre (NEWC) suffers from poor coordination, limited funding, and bureaucratic delays. Civil society alternatives such as PIND's Peace Map and WANEP's Early Warning and Early Response Network offer more localized insights but lack integration into national security frameworks. Even international tools like ViEWS provide valuable macro-level forecasts but fall short of capturing Nigeria's micro-

regional dynamics (Hegre et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, the present study asks: How does the spatial distribution of political violence in Nigeria reflect entrenched patterns of state fragility, structural inequality, and regional exclusion? In answering this question, it offers three core contributions. First, it demonstrates that violence in Nigeria is territorially rooted and scalar in its manifestation, reflecting national governance failures and localized grievances. Second, it introduces a relational spatial framework that explains how political violence is produced, not only by immediate triggers but also by chronic underdevelopment and institutional neglect. Third, it advocates for community-embedded early warning systems and region-specific interventions that are beyond centralized security responses.

The implications of this study extend to both academic and policy audiences. For scholars of African political geography and statehood, it reinforces the need to move from state-centric models to scalar and spatial readings of sovereignty and security. For policymakers, it offers a framework for designing more context-sensitive peacebuilding efforts, rooted in a deeper understanding of Nigeria's territorial disparities. Ultimately, the study argues that pathways to sustainable peace should address the symptoms of violence and the spatial conditions that allow it to persist.

While macro-level tools like ViEWS offer broad forecasts, they overlook Nigeria's localized conflict dynamics (Hegre et al., 2021). This study explores how the spatial patterning of political violence reveals deeper issues of state fragility, inequality, and regional marginalization. It makes three key contributions. First, it shows that violence is both territorially embedded and scalar, shaped by national governance gaps and localized discontent. Second, it proposes a relational spatial lens, linking conflict to immediate crises and systemic underdevelopment and neglect. Third, it calls for community-based early warning systems and interventions tailored to regional contexts, moving beyond one-size-fits-all security models. For scholars, the study underscores the value of spatial and scalar approaches to understanding African sovereignty and insecurity. For policymakers, it provides a framework for locally attuned peacebuilding strategies. Sustainable peace, the study concludes, requires tackling the visible violence and the underlying spatial injustices that sustain it.

## **Literature Review: Conflict Theory and the Spatial Dimensions of Political Violence in Nigeria**

### *Foundations of Conflict Theory in Political Violence Studies*

Conflict Theory, rooted in the work of Marx and Weber, provides a critical lens for examining how structural inequalities and institutional exclusion fuel political violence (Weber, 1947; Coser, 1998; Dahrendorf, 2019). Unlike functionalist models that stress social order, Conflict Theory views violence as a symptom of deeper power struggles and systemic marginalization, particularly relevant in postcolonial African states where elite dominance and fragile institutions persist (Ake, 2000; Mamdani, 2018; Bates, 2015).

In the Nigerian context, the theory helps explain how political elites monopolize state power and resources, sidelining large portions of the population from

governance (Ekeh, 1975; Van de Walle, 2001; Bayart, 2009). This exclusion breeds frustration, especially among youth and rural populations, who may see violence as a form of political voice (Bayart, 2009; Reno, 1998). Rather than viewing conflict as isolated, Conflict Theory positions it as the outcome of unresolved tensions over equity, justice, and representation in a deeply unequal society.

### *Extensions into the Spatial Dimensions of Conflict*

While classic Conflict Theory focused on class struggle and institutional inequity, contemporary theorists have expanded its scope to include spatial and geographical dimensions. Thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja challenged the notion of space as a neutral backdrop, arguing that it is actively produced, contested, and politicized (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991; Soja, 1989). Space, in this sense, is both the site and outcome of conflict, where social hierarchies are embedded in geography and where physical territories reflect deeper struggles over sovereignty, identity, and access.

In Nigeria, this spatial turn is particularly insightful. Regions such as the North East, the Niger Delta, and the Middle Belt have long suffered from infrastructural neglect, weak institutional presence, and uneven development (Suberu, 1993; Obi, 2010; Francis, 2017). These territorial asymmetries generate conditions of governance vacuums, enabling non-state actors—from Boko Haram to IPOB—to assert alternative forms of authority. Raleigh and Hegre (2009) noted that spatial inequality is one of the most consistent predictors of subnational violence, especially in settings where the state's capacity is territorially fragmented. In this sense, geography becomes a proxy for political power—those living outside the reach of effective State presence are more likely to experience and perpetuate violence.

Applying Conflict Theory to Nigeria's spatial realities reveals how state failure is geographically uneven. Many communities in the North East and North West remain vulnerable to insurgent and bandit attacks, not simply because of ideological extremism, but because the state has failed to establish infrastructural, administrative, and symbolic authority in those spaces. The same is true in parts of the South East, where state withdrawal and regional alienation have enabled the resurgence of separatist narratives and anti-state violence.

### *Relevance of the Conflict Theory to Contemporary Nigeria*

The explanatory power remains deeply relevant in analyzing Nigeria's present-day security crisis. Structural disparities—economic deprivation, youth unemployment, ethnoreligious tension, and political exclusion—remain key drivers of conflict (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Onuoha, 2014; Zenn, 2014). These disparities are economic, political, and profoundly spatial. Regions historically excluded from power—like the North East, North Central, and the South South—are also those where violence is most entrenched. In the Niger Delta, Obi (2010) illustrated how environmental degradation, driven by extractive oil politics, has catalyzed resource-driven insurgency. In the Northeast, insurgent recruitment is fueled by unemployment, alienation, and governance gaps. Onuoha (2014) argued that state failure to deliver services and justice has pushed many communities toward self-help or violent protests. Youth, in particular, are drawn into violent groups not simply out of criminal intent, but as a response to long-term exclusion and

sociopolitical dispossession. Recent empirical events have reinforced these patterns. In September 2024, a brutal attack in Tarmuwa LGA, Yobe State, left over 130 civilians dead, the latest in a series of raids attributed to Boko Haram and ISWAP. Amnesty International (2024) attributes ongoing atrocities to the persistent absence of state authority in rural communities and the breakdown of humanitarian access. Reports from the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) confirmed repeated attacks on health personnel and aid convoys in Adamawa and Borno States, leaving thousands without vital services. These patterns align with Conflict Theory's view that violence is shaped by structural neglect and spatial inequality.

In the Middle Belt, communal and resource-based conflicts have escalated. Between January and April 2025, over 150 fatalities were recorded in Benue and Plateau States, linked to land disputes, herder-farmer clashes, and climate-driven displacement (Financial Times, 2025). These developments reflect how spatial marginalization and ecological stress converge to drive violence, core tenets of Conflict Theory.

#### *Linking Theory to Method and Data*

By integrating Conflict Theory with spatial analysis, this study offers an explanatory framework and practical approach. Using geo-referenced data from ACLED, NST, and HumAngle alongside institutional indicators from Freedom House (1998-2024) and the World Bank's WGI (1997-2023), conflict is understood as deeply embedded in Nigeria's geography. Patterns of exclusion and underdevelopment are traced across regions and visualized through time series and typology charts. This approach sharpens the analysis of state fragility and local governance. The overlap of low WGI scores (rule of law, corruption control) with intense conflict in the North West and North East highlights governance failures mapped onto space. Likewise, rising separatist violence in the South East aligns with declines in political rights on Freedom House indicators. These results underscore Conflict Theory's power to interpret and predict the spatial dynamics of violence in Nigeria.

#### *Applying Conflict Theory to Spatial Political Violence in Nigeria*

Conflict Theory offers a compelling lens in understanding Nigeria's geographically concentrated violent politics. Rather than focusing on immediate ethnic or religious tensions, it highlights deeper institutional and economic inequalities entrenched across regions. Although Nigeria's federal system aims to decentralize power, persistent asymmetries in authority, opportunity, and investment disproportionately affect zones like the North East, North West, and parts of the North Central, fueling exclusion and violent resistance.

Despite constitutional federalism, power and resources remain highly centralized, perpetuating grievances in marginalized areas where political and economic exclusion persist (Suberu, 1993). This spatial inequality aligns with Conflict Theory's central claim: systematic exclusion from power and resources breeds discontent that often manifests in organized violence. World Bank Governance Data (WDI, 1997-2023) reveal consistently weaker government effectiveness and

accountability in Northern and rural regions, reinforcing the institutional fragility that underpins ongoing conflict.

### *The Role of Geography in Shaping Violence*

Understanding the spatial distribution of violence in Nigeria requires close attention to geography, especially in areas where the state's presence is weak, irregular, or altogether absent. Large stretches of terrain in the North, particularly in Borno, Yobe, and Katsina States, have become recurring sites of armed violence. Their physical remoteness, poor infrastructure, and porous borders have created openings for armed actors—including Boko Haram and regional bandit networks—to occupy and govern these spaces (Raleigh & Kniveton, 2012). These governance voids are further compounded by underinvestment in critical social services such as education, healthcare, and security. The North East has faced persistent neglect rooted in colonial administrative practices and reinforced by decades of centralized economic policies favouring the South (Francis, 2017; Suberu, 1993).

These structural and spatial disparities have led to the entrenchment of what might be described as 'zones of abandonment'—territories effectively written out of national development priorities. In such areas, the link between geography and violence becomes acute. As exclusion deepens, violence takes root, both as a mechanism of survival and as a form of protest. Similar dynamics are evident in Nigeria's Middle Belt, where land disputes between pastoralists and farming communities are deeply spatial in nature. These violent clashes, often perceived as ethnic or religious, are grounded in access to territory, land tenure insecurity, and shrinking environmental resources. Here again, Conflict Theory's emphasis on how power and scarcity play out in space proves analytically valuable.

### *Conflict Theory and Parallel Sovereignities*

The expansion of violent non-state actors in Nigeria reflects a profound erosion of state authority in certain zones, which Conflict Theory interprets as the rise of alternative sovereignities. Where state institutions are perceived as absent or illegitimate, non-state actors step in to perform essential governance functions. Across parts of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States, Boko Haram and ISWAP have moved beyond guerrilla tactics to establish rudimentary systems of governance, offering taxation, dispute resolution, and even religious education (Zenn, 2014). Their ability to administer these functions—even through coercive means—demonstrates the material and symbolic withdrawal of the Nigerian state from these regions.

Similarly, in the North West, bandit networks operate with relative impunity, often controlling entire rural corridors, orchestrating mass kidnappings, and collecting protection payments from residents. These criminal enterprises mimic aspects of local governance, including order enforcement and resource control. As Bayart (2009) and Reno (1998) observed, such informal sovereignities thrive in states where formal institutions have collapsed into elite patronage systems. In this context, violence becomes both a strategy for resource extraction and a means of asserting legitimacy. Recent Freedom House scores (1998-2024) indicate significant declines in civil liberties and political rights across Nigeria's northern regions, further highlighting the connection between state fragility, democratic erosion, and the rise of parallel orders.

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### *Empirical Patterns from ACLED and HumAngle Data*

Recent empirical evidence substantiates these theoretical claims. Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED, 2024) and HumAngle show a concentration of violent incidents in regions marked by weak infrastructure, limited state presence, and a legacy of marginalization (Raleigh et al., 2023). These areas also correlate with the lowest governance effectiveness scores in WDI data and the poorest civil liberty ratings in Freedom House reports, patterns visualized in the typology and correlation charts presented in the findings section. In the oil-rich Niger Delta, decades of ecological devastation, exclusion from resource wealth, and state neglect have created the conditions for violent militancy and organized criminality (Obi, 2010; Francis, 2017). Armed groups continue to attack pipeline infrastructure, demand resource control, and operate in riverine spaces beyond state oversight. In the Middle Belt, escalating tensions between sedentary farming communities and pastoralist groups have resulted in deadly communal clashes, worsened by climate-induced resource scarcity and weak land tenure systems (Okpara et al., 2015). These conflicts are not incidental—they are geographically embedded expressions of governance failure and environmental mismanagement.

The empirical geography of violence thus reinforces the insights of Conflict Theory: where governance is absent, uneven, or unjust, violence becomes a territorial response to systemic exclusion. Political violence in Nigeria is not simply a symptom of ethnic or sectarian difference—it is deeply rooted in how space, power, and resources are distributed, claimed, and contested.

### *Recent Escalations (2024-2025) and Spatial Implications*

Between 2024 and 2025, Nigeria witnessed a notable intensification of region-specific violence, offering fresh empirical evidence in support of Conflict Theory's structural diagnosis. In the Southeast, separatist agitation has become more pronounced, particularly through the actions of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Eastern Security Network (ESN). A tragic ambush along the Okigwe-Owerri highway in Imo State in May 2025, which resulted in the deaths of over 30 civilians, demonstrates the spatial symbolism of infrastructure in violent conflict. As arteries of mobility and governance reach, highways often become targets in battles over sovereignty and state legitimacy (AP News, 2025). Meanwhile, insecurity in the North West persisted throughout 2024, with States like Zamfara and Katsina experiencing sustained waves of armed banditry and mass kidnappings. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented how these violent actors exploit Nigeria's porous borders and the state's limited presence to establish forms of informal governance. These non-state actors often control movement, levy taxes, and impose order, deepening the challenge for state institutions attempting to reassert territorial authority. In the North East, the situation remains fragile. Despite years of counterinsurgency operations, Boko Haram and ISWAP maintain a foothold in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States. Their persistence reflects the cumulative effects of weak institutional capacity, governance vacuums, and entrenched socioeconomic marginalization. The continued targeting of humanitarian convoys and civilian populations underscores a broader spatial dynamic, where violence thrives in areas defined by neglect and institutional retreat. This pattern aligns closely with Conflict Theory's assertion that structural inequality and state withdrawal create vacuums ripe for violent contestation.

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### *Political Economy and Spatial Inequality*

Applying Conflict Theory through a spatial lens reveals that political violence in Nigeria is deeply entangled with the country's political economy and the uneven geography of state investment. The current fiscal arrangement—heavily reliant on oil revenues controlled at the federal level—has contributed to a system where economic and developmental benefits are concentrated in some southern urban centres. Regions such as the oil-producing Niger Delta and large portions of northern Nigeria remain structurally disadvantaged in both economic allocation and political inclusion (Watts, 2008). This has fueled longstanding grievances among communities that perceive themselves as being persistently marginalized. These spatial disparities are evident in public infrastructure and service delivery. Regions lacking access to roads, education, health services, and electricity suffer from social hardship and experience higher vulnerability to violent mobilization. World Bank Governance Indicators (WDI, 1997-2023) confirm that regions with low institutional capacity score poorly on public service delivery, reinforcing the link between exclusion and instability.

Likewise, Freedom House data (1998-2024) highlights lower scores for political rights and civil liberties in conflict-prone zones, especially in northern and oil-producing areas. When these inequalities intersect with ethnoreligious identity, they heighten collective perceptions of injustice. In such contexts, identity-based mobilization becomes both a channel for political expression and a justification for violence (Horowitz, 2000; Fearon & Laitin, 2000). Conflict, then, becomes a function of economic need and a performance of contested belonging.

### *Institutional Fragility and Spatial Contestation*

The geography of violence in Nigeria is further complicated by institutional fragility, manifested in weak legal systems, politicized security forces, and governance frameworks that often serve elite interests over communal justice (Lewis, 2009; Agbibo, 2013). In many of Nigeria's most violence-prone areas, formal institutions lack the credibility or capacity to mediate disputes or deliver meaningful security. This institutional vacuum is not evenly spread: it is particularly acute in historically marginalized regions where governance structures have failed to evolve beyond centralized extraction. As a result, many communities—particularly in the North East, North West, and South East—have little confidence in state institutions and resort to informal or violent means of seeking redress (Onuoha, 2014). In these environments, legitimacy is often transferred from state authorities to militant groups, vigilantes, or criminal networks that offer parallel systems of governance. Bayart et al. (1999) and Reno (1998) noted that in contexts of weakened state sovereignty, these informal regimes survive and thrive, challenging the state's monopoly on power. The Freedom House Index reflects this erosion of formal authority, showing sustained deterioration in the rule of law and political participation indicators across Nigeria's most unstable regions.

Taken together, these dynamics underscore how spatial disparities and institutional collapse converge to generate territorially concentrated violence. Control over space becomes a proxy for legitimacy, where the state recedes, violent actors advance—not simply to disrupt, but to govern. Conflict Theory, in this light, provides a robust



explanatory model for interpreting how exclusion, contestation, and inequality materialize geographically.

*Empirical Studies on Political Violence in Nigeria (January 1, 1997 – April 30, 2025)*

Across the last three decades, political violence has remained a defining characteristic of Nigeria's state formation process, posing critical obstacles to its democratic consolidation and national integration. The country has endured a complex tapestry of violent phenomena, including armed insurgencies, inter-communal clashes, election-related unrest, and separatist campaigns. Since the commencement of civilian rule in 1999, scholarly engagement with these crises has grown significantly. Research has traced evolving actors, causes, and configurations of violence across Nigeria's regions and institutions.

This scholarship has underscored key continuities: violence is not random, but deeply structured. It often maps onto historical lines of political exclusion, economic neglect, and identity-based discrimination. Analyses grounded in Conflict Theory have revealed how structural injustice—particularly when spatialized—serves as both a driver and an outcome of chronic insecurity. These studies have also advanced methodological innovations, including the use of geo-referenced data and spatial modelling, which allow for more precise interrogation of where and why violence persists. WDI and Freedom House datasets, for example, provide institutional and rights-based metrics that, when overlaid with ACLED and NST conflict data, reveal strong correlations between poor governance and spatial violence clusters—visualized in this study through longitudinal trend lines and zonal conflict typologies. This article builds on that empirical and theoretical base. Treating violence as a process embedded in territorial and institutional arrangements—not merely a sequence of isolated events—contributes to a deeper understanding of Nigeria's multi-scalar crisis of statehood. Political violence is a symptom of broader governance failure and a mechanism through which contested authority is asserted across space. The next section explains how these insights are operationalized through a multi-method research design.

*Complexity and Multidimensionality of Political Violence*

Research on political violence in Nigeria increasingly underscores its complex, layered nature. Public discourse often attributes Nigeria's conflicts to religion, ethnicity, or criminality, but scholars reveal deeper causes. Colonial legacies, social hierarchies, resource struggles, and governance failures shape the country's violent landscape (Agbibo, 2013; Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010). This aligns with Galtung's (1969) concept of structural violence, where institutional inequalities fuel conflict. The Niger Delta illustrates this clearly, with prolonged unrest linked to environmental harm, oil exploitation, and exclusion from resource control (Obi, 2010; Watts, 2008; Idemudia, 2009). Local resistance spans peaceful protests to militant actions, reflecting deep grievances. Meanwhile, the North East's violence stems from youth disenfranchisement, radicalization, weak state services, and economic hardship (Zenn, 2014; Thurston, 2017; Onuoha, 2014). These complexities show that narrow counterterrorism efforts are inadequate; effective responses should address the intertwined structural, ideological, and spatial factors driving conflict.

Empirical tools have evolved to meet this complexity. High-resolution data from ACLED, Nigeria Security Tracker, and Nigeria Watch allow researchers to pinpoint temporal and geographic contours of conflict. Quantitative tools are enriched by qualitative research and ethnographic fieldwork, which reveal local experiences of violence. Together, these methods provide a fuller picture of Nigeria's conflict, connecting broad institutional failures and inequalities to the daily realities of affected communities.

### *Evolution and Dynamism Over Three Decades*

Since the late 1990s, violent politics in Nigeria have evolved alongside changes in governance, economy, and society. The transition from military rule to democracy after 1997 brought new political challenges and security threats. Early unrest centered in the Niger Delta, where communities resisted exclusion from oil wealth and environmental harm. In the 2000s, groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged, combining militancy with calls for justice (Obi, 2010; Watts, 2008). Although the 2009 Amnesty Programme temporarily de-escalated violence, its inability to address root causes left underlying tensions unresolved, with intermittent clashes continuing in the region (Francis, 2017; Ojo, 2016).

Simultaneously, a new front opened in the Northeast with the rise of Boko Haram in 2009. What began as a fringe religious movement evolved into a full-blown insurgency, targeting civilians and state institutions alike. The group's durability reflects ideological resolve and the chronic neglect and weak governance that define the region (Zenn, 2014; Thurston, 2017). In recent years, the North West has emerged as a centre of insecurity. Armed banditry, mass abductions, and cattle theft have become rampant, revealing how criminality and political violence often overlap. The South East, too, has experienced growing agitation for secession. IPOB and the ESN have spearheaded this resurgence, presenting a serious challenge to national cohesion (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). Armed groups proliferate, criminal networks grow stronger, and the state's monopoly on the use of force continues to erode. Government responses have often been militarized and inconsistent, providing only temporary relief without durable peace (Onuoha, 2014; Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). Nigeria's evolving political violence demands flexible, evidence-driven strategies that reflect differences and changing actors.

### *Regional Disparities and Spatial Concentrations*

Decades of conflict in Nigeria show violence is unevenly spread across its six geopolitical zones. Persistent hotspots appear in the North East, North West, North Central, South South, and South East, each shaped by distinct drivers (Raleigh et al., 2023; Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010). The variations are rooted in various trajectories and institutional contexts, shaped by colonial governance structures, post-independence development policies, and uneven resource allocations (Suberu, 1993; Francis, 2017). The North East's enduring insurgency is deeply linked to long-term neglect and a breakdown in formal education, healthcare, and governance systems. In contrast, the violence in the South South revolves around struggles over resource control, oil-related pollution, and perceived economic marginalization. In the Middle Belt and North Central, ethnoreligious violence is often linked to land disputes and migratory patterns influenced by climate change. Spatial disparities

are also captured in institutional datasets. Freedom House (1998-2024) consistently scores conflict-affected regions lower in civil liberties and political rights, while the World Bank Governance Indicators (WDI, 19997-2023) reveal deep gaps in public service delivery, transparency, and rule of law across these zones. These disparities are further visualized in the zonal typology chart presented later in the analysis section (see Figure 2).

Political geographers argue that space is not a neutral container for conflict but an active participant in its production. Territory, infrastructure, and geography shape the opportunities for violence and the form it takes. By using a spatial lens, analysts can more precisely connect the persistence of violence to systemic exclusion and uneven development, making spatial inequality an object of inquiry and a site of intervention.

#### *Actors and Networks in Political Violence*

Contemporary political violence in Nigeria involves a diverse and often fragmented set of actors, challenging binary conceptions of state-versus-insurgent conflict. Armed groups in Nigeria include vigilantes, ethnic militias, criminal networks, radical sects, and transnational fighters. The Eastern Security Network (ESN), linked to IPOB, claims to protect communities, but its actions—such as roadblocks and attacks on security personnel—raise questions about authority and legality. In the North West, bandit groups have grown more organized, controlling territories, negotiating with elites, and sometimes gaining local support through selective protection or redistribution. These groups blur the lines between rebellion and organized crime, complicating classification and response.

This variety of actors reveals the limits of force-based security approaches, which often ignore the socioeconomic roots that empower such groups. Understanding their legitimacy requires analyzing how they provide security or services where the state is absent. This aligns with WDI and Freedom House data showing that areas with weak institutions are where non-state actors are most entrenched and active.

#### *Impact on Civilians and Societal Consequences*

Civilians remain the primary victims of political violence in Nigeria, bearing the brunt of fatalities, displacement, and societal disruption. Data from ACLED and HumAngle indicate that civilians accounted for over 40 per cent of conflict-related deaths between 2010 and 2023. This confirms Kalyvas' (2006) concept of 'intimate violence' where non-combatants become deliberate targets in efforts to exert territorial control or punish perceived collaboration.

The human toll extends beyond mortality. Political violence shatters livelihoods, displaces populations, and erodes social trust. Communities fractured by violence often find it difficult to rebuild cohesion, especially in the absence of justice or accountability. Women and children face heightened vulnerabilities, including sexual violence, forced recruitment, and the loss of access to education and healthcare (Onuoha, 2014; Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010). These outcomes further destabilize families and communities, compounding cycles of poverty and disempowerment. In regions where governance is already weak, violence accelerates institutional decay. Freedom House Scores in such regions reflect declining civil liberties and reduced public trust in state institutions, while WDI

indicators show consistent underperformance in the rule of law and public accountability. These findings underscore that the consequences of violence extend far beyond the battlefield, seeping into every aspect of social life and democratic governance.

#### *Recent Empirical Developments: 2024-2025*

The period from January 2024 to April 2025 marked a critical inflection point in Nigeria's political violence trajectory. Despite a range of institutional reforms and security sector interventions, violence persisted and, in several regions, intensified, manifesting through insurgency, rural banditry, communal clashes, electoral disorder, and mass civic unrest. This period shows continuity and change in Nigeria's conflict patterns, actors, and spatial dynamics. On June 29, 2024, coordinated suicide bombings in Gwoza, Borno State—targeting a wedding, a funeral, and a hospital—killed at least 32 civilians and injured many more. These attacks reaffirmed the ongoing threat of Boko Haram and ISWAP despite counterterrorism claims. Following this, the UN OCHA's suspended humanitarian operations, worsening conditions for thousands of displaced people reliant on aid (ACLED, 2024).

Children remain especially vulnerable; over 2,500 grave violations—including abductions, sexual abuse, and forced recruitment—were documented from 2022 to 2023, mostly in the North East. Repeated attacks on schools, health centres, and aid convoys have deep, lasting impacts on development, supporting Kaldor (2013) and Onuoha's (2014) views that protracted insecurity disproportionately harms marginalized groups like children and women. In 2024, rural violence intensified in Central Nigeria's North West and North Central zones. Notably, a May 12 raid in Plateau State killed over 40 civilians and destroyed 120 homes, marking a shift in Nigeria's conflict epicentre. Similar attacks in Kaduna, Zamfara, and Benue States stem from unresolved land disputes, ethnic tensions, and weak local security. Environmental stress worsens these conflicts. In April 2025, renewed clashes between farmers and pastoralists in Plateau State, linked to drought and water scarcity, caused more than 40 deaths. This aligns with Okpara et al. (2015) and Hendrix & Salehyan (2012), who connect ecological pressures to rising livelihood conflicts. Meanwhile, secessionist violence surged in the Southeast. On May 30, 202, an alleged IPOB attack on a military checkpoint near Aba-Owerri killed soldiers and civilians, underscoring how historical narratives fuel mobilization.

Civic unrest grew sharply in August 2024 with movements like #EndBadGovernanceNow and #OccupyNaija, sparked by inflation, subsidy removals, and insecurity. ACLED (2024) recorded a 55% rise in protests from July, with over 70 on August 1 alone; about one-third turned violent amid heavy security crackdowns. This trend reflects shrinking civic space and increased militarization of governance, echoing concerns by Adebaniwa and Obadare (2010).

Additionally, attacks on local officials surged: Nigeria recorded 135 assaults on government personnel in 2023, the highest in Africa. Mainly electoral violence, these attacks reveal eroding grassroots legitimacy and a deteriorating environment for civil servants. This weakening of local governance widens institutional gaps, especially in peri-urban and rural areas where state presence is fragile. World Bank

data consistently show poor government effectiveness and accountability in these zones (1997-2023), highlighting ongoing governance deficits.

### *The Contributions of Large-Scale Conflict Datasets*

Analysis and monitoring of political violence in Nigeria benefit from the rise in high-resolution conflict data. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) is a key resource. By April 2025, ACLED had documented over 82,000 conflict-related events in Nigeria, ranging from direct combat and bombings to civilian attacks, riots, and protests. The dataset's depth, geospatial precision, and temporal continuity since January 1997 allow researchers and policymakers to track evolving trends, identify emerging hotspots, and support early warning systems (Raleigh et al., 2023; Raleigh & Hegre, 2009).

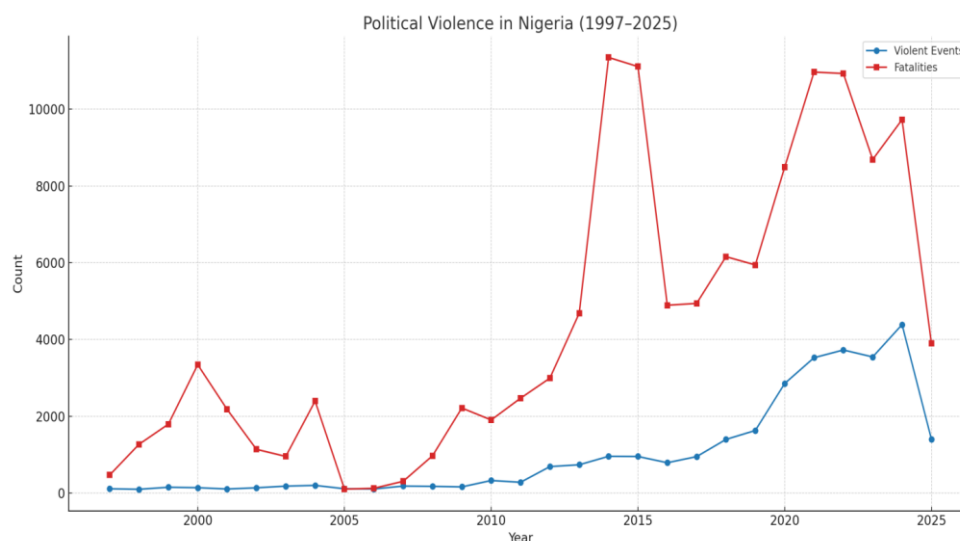
Complementing ACLED are several other tools. The Nigeria Security Tracker (NST), curated by the Council on Foreign Relations, offers weekly updates on incidents by type, actor, and region. Nigeria Watch and HumAngle's Peace Monitor provide localized reporting that captures underreported or emerging forms of violence, offering vital context and granularity. For instance, NST data links conflict surges to electoral periods, while HumAngle adds insight into the social effects of localized violence, often missed in national datasets. Increasingly, these platforms are being integrated with GIS tools and visual analytics to enhance the utility of their data. These innovations have improved conflict forecasting and supported risk mapping for humanitarian actors. However, challenges remain. These include delays in real-time reporting, access difficulties in remote conflict zones, and persistent coordination gaps between state agencies and civil society-led peacebuilding networks. Freedom House Reports from 1998-2024, when overlaid with conflict data, reveal a convergence between zones of low civil liberties and high violence intensity—a pattern illustrated through a governance-to-conflict correlation graph in the findings section (see Figure 3).

### *Temporal Patterns and Electoral Violence*

One of the most recurring features of Nigeria's conflict profile is the dramatic uptick in violence during election seasons. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, every general election cycle has been marred by widespread violence, often premeditated and strategically deployed to influence outcomes. This electoral violence reflects the 'militarization of politics,' where state capture is pursued not only through voting but also through coercion, manipulation, and sabotage. The 2023 General elections fit squarely within this pattern. ACLED recorded more than 1,000 incidents of election-related violence ranging from ballot box snatching and intimidation to arson attacks on Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) facilities. Thugs affiliated with major political parties engaged in targeted assaults, particularly in regions perceived as opposition strongholds. These trends highlight Nigeria's hybrid political system: formal democratic mechanisms coexist with informal and violent contestation over power. This temporal concentration of violence around elections is demonstrated in the longitudinal chart of violent events and fatalities presented in Figure 1, which tracks annual trends in violent political events and reported fatalities using data from ACLED and the Nigeria Security Tracker. It reveals that violence intensity fluctuates significantly during election years—1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023—with pronounced spikes in

2015 and 2023. The fatality trends mirror the frequency of events, indicating that election cycles often coincide with highly lethal violence. These temporal patterns reinforce the argument that Nigeria's violent politics is not random but tied to institutional weakness and contested power transitions.

**Figure 1: Political Violence Trends in Nigeria (1997–2025)**



The implications are far-reaching. Electoral violence not only undermines public confidence in democratic institutions but also exacerbates regional grievances. Voter apathy increases, security services become politicized, and national cohesion is further strained. These impacts are reflected in Nigeria's declining Freedom House ratings during election years, particularly concerning political rights and civil liberties. Moreover, World Bank Governance Indicators show a dip in perceptions of electoral integrity and state effectiveness following each general election cycle. While structural theories explain the persistence of violence, these temporal patterns underscore the role of electoral competition in shaping Nigeria's security landscape. As political violence increasingly occurs at multiple scales—local, regional, and national—spatial and temporal analysis becomes indispensable. The next section applies a political economy lens to these dynamics, examining regional typologies, actor networks, and state responses across the 1997-2025 period.

## **Methodology: Data, Tools, and Analytical Framework**

This study adopts a mixed-method design that combines quantitative spatial mapping, statistical correlation, and qualitative regional interpretation to examine the spatial political economy of violence in Nigeria between 1997 and 2025. The research approach enables a multi-layered analysis of where political violence occurs, how it evolves, and why it persists, focusing on how spatial patterns intersect with institutional breakdown, political exclusion, and fractured sovereignties. The methodology is structured across four core components: (i) conflict and governance data sources; (ii) spatial and temporal analysis techniques; (iii) analytical and theoretical frameworks; and (iv) ethical and interpretive considerations.

### *Data Sources*

To ensure analytical depth and validity, the study triangulated data from these sources: (i) ACLED, 1997 – 2025 (ACLED provides geo-referenced records of over 82,000 conflict events in Nigeria, including battles, riots, protests, civilian targeting, and remote violence. Each entry is disaggregated by actor type (e.g., Boko Haram, IPOB, Nigerian Military), geographical coordinates, and reported fatalities. ACLED's consistent spatial coverage and longitudinal scope make it the backbone of the study's quantitative conflict mapping; (ii) Nigeria Security Tracker – NST (managed by the Council on Foreign Relations, NST offers real-time updates on fatalities and incidents, with a focus on validating figures in underreported or conflict-affected regions. It complements ACLED by capturing incidents excluded from formal media and government reports; (iii) World Development Indicators (WDI) and World Governance Indicators (WGI) – these datasets offer longitudinal measures of institutional performance—including Government effectiveness, rule of law, political stability, voice and accountability, and control of corruption. WGI metrics (1997-2023) allow for correlation between governance quality and annual patterns of conflict, while WDI data contextualize socioeconomic disparities across regions; and (iv) Freedom House Scores, 1997-2024 (these annual country-level indicators assess political rights and civil liberties, providing institutional and normative metrics to evaluate the democratic quality of Nigeria's conflict-affected regions. Freedom House scores are utilized to contextualize spatial zones of democratic deficit and governance exclusion. All datasets were cleaned, standardized, and processed using Microsoft Excel, SPSS v27, and QGIS 3.28 for statistical modelling and spatial visualization. Temporal coding aligned conflict events with election cycles, governance shocks, and major policy transitions.

### *Spatial and Temporal Analysis Techniques*

The study applies a suite of spatial and temporal analysis tools to interpret the scale, scope, and regional variation of political violence: (i) Geopolitical Disaggregation (conflict events are mapped according to Nigeria's six geopolitical zones enabling zone-specific analysis of frequency, typology, and actor composition; Time-Series Breakdown from 1997 to 2025 (annual event and fatality counts are visualized to identify inflection points—such as the 2009 onset of Boko Haram insurgency, the 2011-2015 electoral cycles, and IPOB resurgence post-2017; (ii) Conflict Heatmaps (using QGIS, kernel density estimation was used to generate conflict heatmaps that visualize violence hotspots. These maps illustrate spatial clustering, regional diffusion, and temporal persistence of conflict zones—especially in Borno, Zamfara, Benue, and Imo States; (iii) Typology Charts (Bar and pie charts categorize events by conflict type—insurgency, banditry, communal clashes, electoral violence, and state repression—offering a comparative view of how conflict morphs across regions and time. These are presented in Figure 2 to highlight regional variations in conflict drivers; and (iv) WDI/WGI Correlation Tests: Pearson's correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was utilized to evaluate relationships between governance indicators (e.g., Rule of Law, Government Effectiveness) and annual conflict intensity. These tests were concluded nationally and, where disaggregated data permitted, by region. Findings reveal statistically significant negative correlations between governance quality and event frequency in the North East and South, confirming spatial violence's institutional dimensions. This is

illustrated in Figure 3, which plots governance scores against regional conflict intensity.

### *Analytical and Theoretical Framework*

The analytical model draws from two core theoretical pillars: classical Conflict Theory and Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad. Conflict Theory, rooted in the work of Marx, Weber, and Dahrendorf, conceptualizes political violence as an expression of deep structural inequality, elite capture, and institutional exclusion. Violence emerges as a contested means of access to political power and economic resources, especially in contexts where state authority is fragmented or delegitimized. Lefebvre's Spatial Triad (1991) interprets space as multidimensional: perceived space refers to the physical arenas of conflict—forests, creeks, highways, IDP camps—where power is materially contested. Conceived space reflects the state's imagined control over space through zoning, militarization, or exclusionary development plans. Lived space captures the embodied experience of conflict by communities, displacement, fear, distrust, and militarized everyday life. Together, these frameworks support a relational, multi-scalar analysis of violence, situating it within both institutional and geographic systems of exclusion. Violence is treated not simply as a political failure but as a spatial outcome of contested sovereignty and uneven state penetration.

### *Ethical and Analytical Considerations*

All data used in this study are drawn from publicly available, peer-reviewed secondary sources. No primary interviews were conducted for this article, though qualitative insights from previous fieldwork (2022-2024) inform interpretive framing. The study adheres to established ethical guidelines on data sourcing, citation, and representation.

Analytical procedures prioritized triangulation (cross-verifying incident reports across ACLED, NST, and Nigeria Watch); Geographic sensitivity (avoiding overgeneralization by contextualizing violence in its specific spatial and sociopolitical setting); and transparency and reproducibility (data processing steps—including cleaning, disaggregation, and visualization—are documented and available upon request. Maps, charts, and statistical models were validated using overlapping datasets, ensuring that visual outputs accurately reflect the lived reality of violence as experienced across Nigeria's diverse zones.

### *Summary of Methodological Approach*

This study presents an integrative methodology that blends spatial analysis, institutional metrics, and theoretical interpretation to examine the geography of political violence in Nigeria from 1997 to 2025. By combining large-N datasets with relational spatial theory, the approach illuminates how structural inequality, democratic deficits, and institutional failure become inscribed onto Nigeria's territorial landscape. Conflict is not randomly distributed; it is spatially anchored, historically sedimented, and politically produced. The methodological framework also advances broader debates on postcolonial state fragility, spatial justice, and the politics of exclusion in African conflict studies.

Visual representations generated through this methodology—including time-series trends, typology breakdowns, and governance-conflict correlations—are included



in the findings section to support key analytical claims. By making visible the multi-scalar and spatial logic of violence, this approach provides empirical evidence and conceptual tools for understanding the patterned and persistent nature of political violence in Nigeria.

## Analysis and Findings

### *The Spatial Political Economy of Violence in Nigeria: Zones, Actors, and Geographies of Contestation*

Nigeria's political violence cannot be fully grasped without dissecting the spatial political economy that underpins its evolving geography of insecurity. A spatial political economy lens interrogates how geography, governance structures, and systemic marginalization converge to concentrate and reproduce violence. Drawing on Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith's (1991) theory of spatial production and the foundational principles of Conflict Theory, this section examines each of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones-mapping how spatial patterns, actor typologies, and regional political economies interact to produce distinct configurations of violence. These divergent conflict patterns are anchored in broader longitudinal trends captured in Figure 1, which tracks violent events and fatalities across time and helps frame the escalation points in each zone.

#### *North East Zone: Epicentre of Insurgency*

The North East States of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe remain Nigeria's most volatile areas, driven by protracted insurgencies waged by Boko Haram and ISWAP. These actors pursue territorial control through taxation, attacks on civilians and military targets, and symbolic disruption of state institutions. The region's marginalization is not only geographic but also institutional, ranking among the lowest in WDI indicators on government effectiveness, the rule of law, and service delivery from 1997 to 2023. Freedom House data (1998-2024) points to a persistent deficit in civil liberties and political rights. As of April 2025, ACLED reported over 24,000 violent events in the zone, with Borno State alone accounting for more than 70% of conflict fatalities. Humanitarian access remains severely limited, with OCHA regularly reporting attacks on aid convoys. The insurgency here reflects what Lefebvre termed a contest over *perceived space*—the material landscape of control, displacement, and militarization.

#### *North West Zone: Banditry, Cattle Raiding, and Fragmented Sovereignty*

Violence in the North West—Zamfara, Katsina, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kaduna, and Jigawa States—has escalated since 2017, driven by rural banditry and weapons proliferation. Armed groups operate as de facto authorities in ungoverned spaces, enforcing taxes, extracting ransoms, and administering justice. These actions mimic state functions and highlight the emergence of *alternative sovereignties*. The spatial geography of this violence overlaps with ecological decline and structural neglect. Deforestation, desertification, and shrinking pasturelands exacerbate competition over resources. Kaduna State's pattern of violence illustrates how ethnoreligious conflict, criminality, and political thuggery intersect. ACLED maps show dense clustering of incidents along key roads and forest belts, confirming the spatial consolidation of violent power.

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*Middle Belt: Communal Violence and Agrarian Contestations*

The Middle Belt – Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Kogi, and Taraba – is Nigeria’s most complex conflict landscape, and is defined by agrarian disputes, ethnic fragmentation, and intermittent communal violence. Here, contestation over land and grazing rights – exacerbated by climate-induced migration and weak land tenure systems – has led to militarized confrontations.

April 2025’s attacks in Zike, Plateau State, which left over 40 civilians dead, represent the latest episode in an ongoing cycle of retaliation. The emergence of armed youth groups, traditional militias, and vigilantes reflects governance failure at the subnational level. Spatial analysis shows that most violence occurs in buffer zones between farming and herding communities, confirming the territoriality of ecological stress.

*South East Zone: Separatist Agitation and State Retaliation*

The South East – Imo, Abia, Enugu, Anambra, and Ebonyi States – has witnessed an uptick in separatist violence linked to IPOB and the ESN. Since the re-arrest of IPOB leader Mazi Nnamdi Kanu in 2017, the group has declared sit-at-home orders and attacked electoral offices, politicians, and security agents. This form of violence is both symbolic and territorial. The claim over ‘Biafran space’ is enacted through coercion and enforced immobility, particularly on historically significant dates. State response has involved militarized counterinsurgency, resulting in civilian casualties and mass arrests. Freedom House indices show a marked decline in civil liberties and political rights in the zone since 2020, exacerbating local grievances.

*South South Zone: Resource Extraction, Environmental Violence, and Post-Amnesty Tensions*

The South-South – Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, Edo, and Cross River – is the quintessential example of a resource-conflict zone. Despite accounting for over 90% of Nigeria’s oil exports, the region exhibits some of the worst development indicators. WDI data (1997-2023) reveal sharp disparities in infrastructure, education, and healthcare compared to national averages. Since the partial collapse of the 2009 Amnesty Programme, groups like the Niger Delta Avengers have resumed pipeline attacks and kidnappings (Obi, 2010; Idemudia, 2009). Violent events are concentrated in oil-bearing creeks and inaccessible waterways, where federal presence is weakest. The region exemplifies how economic dispossession and spatial exclusion fuel a protracted insurgency against the Nigerian State.

*South West Zone: Urban Riots, Political Thuggery, and Infrastructural Contestation*

While relatively less violent in frequency, the South West zone – Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Osun, and Oyo States – has experienced episodic political and protest-driven violence. Lagos, Nigeria’s economic hub, is a hotbed for civic mobilization, from the 2020 #EndSARS protests to the 2024 #OccupyNaija movement.

The violence reflects urban contestation over infrastructure, state accountability, and civic space. Actor mapping reveals the involvement of youth-led groups, civil society networks, and state security forces, as well as elite-sponsored political thugs during elections. The South West’s conflict geography demonstrates how urban density, institutional repression, and civic grievances intersect to produce violence.

Figure 2 – Conflict Typology by Geopolitical Zone, 1997–2025

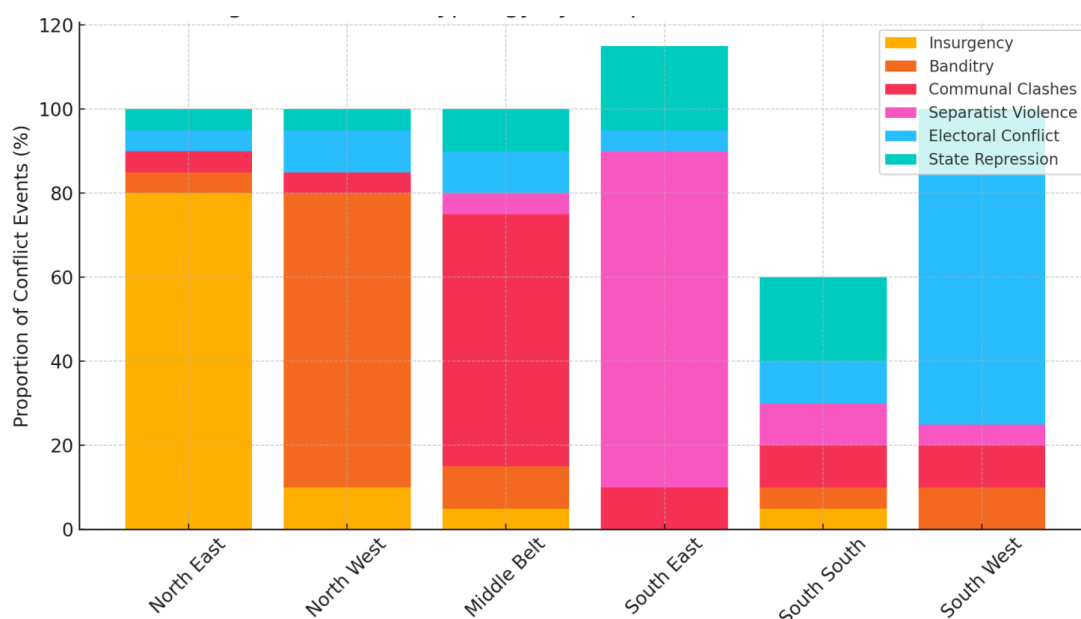


Figure 2 categorizes conflict incidents across Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones by typology (insurgency, banditry, communal clashes, separatist violence, electoral conflict, and state repression). The chart reveals clear regional specialization – insurgency in the North East, banditry in the North West, communal violence in the Middle Belt, and separatism in the South East—reinforcing the argument that violence in Nigeria is spatially differentiated and politically embedded.

## Discussion and Theoretical Interpretation

### *Rethinking Conflict through Spatial Political Economy*

The spatial distribution of political violence across Nigeria reveals not random or isolated disturbances, but highly patterned outcomes of spatial inequality, institutional failure, and regionally embedded grievances. By applying the dual frameworks of Conflict Theory and Lefebvre’s spatial triad, this analysis shows that violence emerges through interlocking dynamics of exclusion, territorial marginalization, and contestation over state legitimacy.

### *Reinforcing Conflict Theory: Structural Drivers and Political Economy of Exclusion*

Conflict Theory posits that violence stems from systemic inequalities in access to political, economic, and institutional resources. Nigeria’s conflict zones affirm this proposition. In the North East zone, sustained insurgency reflects ideological radicalization and decades of neglect, youth disempowerment, and infrastructural failure (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Mamdani, 2018). This region also consistently ranks lowest on WDI and Freedom House indicators, highlighting its compounded institutional fragility.

Communities in oil-producing areas have seen vast wealth extracted with little reinvestment. Violent resistance, therefore, becomes a spatial response to economic injustice and environmental dispossession (Obi, 2010; Idemudia, 2009).

**Figure 3 – Governance Scores vs. Conflict Intensity by Region**

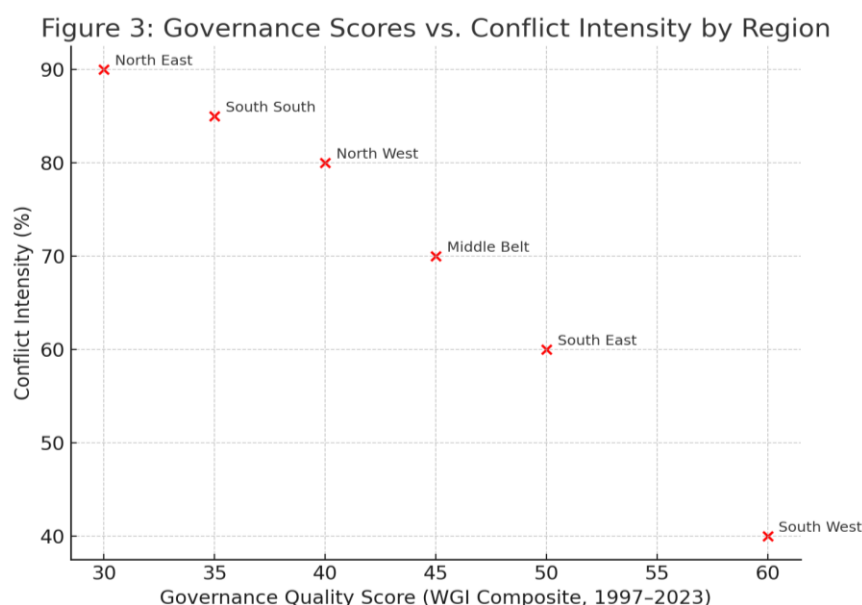


Figure 3 presents a Pearson correlation chart between World Bank Governance Indicators (1997–2023) and conflict intensity across Nigeria’s zones. The results show that regions with the lowest institutional performance—especially the North East and South South—report the highest frequency of violent events, affirming the role of governance failure in spatially reproducing violence. Similarly, the South-South’s resurgence of militancy is rooted in longstanding ecological degradation and economic disenfranchisement.

In the North West and Middle Belt, conflict economies have filled governance vacuums. Armed actors—ranging from ethnic militias to criminal syndicates—perform quasi-governmental roles in security, taxation, and dispute resolution. These alternative sovereignties reflect a shift from state-based authority to localized, coercive rule, grounded in spatial abandonment.

#### *Applying Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith’s 1991 Spatial Triad: Perceived, Conceived, and Lived Violence*

The spatial triad—comprising perceived, conceived, and lived space—offers a compelling interpretive framework for understanding how violence in Nigeria is produced, experienced, and sustained. Each dimension helps decode the material and symbolic processes through which conflict becomes embedded in place. Perceived space refers to the tangible environments where violence unfolds: the forests of Zamfara where bandits operate, the creeks of the Niger Delta marked by sabotage and oil theft, and the densely populated urban markets of Lagos where political unrest often erupts. These areas, despite their geographical differences, have infrastructure decay and state abandonment—conditions confirmed by WDI statistics showing consistently poor governance performance, especially in areas most impacted by war. Conceived space is shaped by how authorities envision and organize territory. The Nigerian State’s allocation of security resources reflects a spatial imagination in which some regions—such as the FCT and economic centres in the South—are considered protectable, while others, especially the rural North

East or Niger Delta interiors, are treated as peripheral. These discrepancies in security provision and administrative presence reveal a cartography of institutional bias and uneven state penetration.

Lived space refers to how people and communities perceive and experience violence within their particular contexts. In the Southeast, for example, the routine imposition of sit-at-home orders by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has deeply reshaped daily life. These directives often lead to deserted streets, closed businesses, and a climate of unease, where ordinary movements are disrupted and fear becomes a constant presence. Insurgent groups and state actors play a role in shaping how space is used and understood. Looking across Nigeria's regions, it becomes clear that violent expressions are not arbitrary—they are shaped by ongoing contests over power, legitimacy, and who gets to define the use and meaning of space.

### *Zones of Fragmented Sovereignty and Contested Statehood*

A central finding of this study is the pronounced erosion and fragmentation of state authority across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. In many regions, the functions traditionally associated with sovereign governance—such as the collection of levies, administration of justice, regulation of trade, and control of mobility—are increasingly undertaken by non-state actors. In the North East, insurgent groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP have intermittently assumed de facto control over local populations, capitalizing on the vacuum left by weakened state institutions and the disaffection of marginalized communities. Similarly, in the North West, armed bandit groups have established systems of negotiated order, often engaging state officials in ceasefire agreements, extracting tributes from villagers, and imposing informal rules that mimic governance. The South East presents a parallel dynamic with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), whose imposition of stay-at-home directives and enforcement mechanisms has established an alternative locus of control in defiance of the formal state.

These patterns underscore the concept of *graduated sovereignty*, wherein state power is unevenly exercised and challenged by competing authorities within the same territorial boundaries. What emerges is not merely a picture of lawlessness or insurgency but a complex tapestry of overlapping and often competing forms of governance. Confronting this reality requires more than the deployment of force; it calls for comprehensive institutional transformation rooted in justice, accountability, and inclusive governance that addresses structural deficits and local grievances.

### *Gendered and Civilian Experiences of Violence*

While much of the analysis has focused on geopolitical zones and conflict actors, the civilian and gendered dimensions of political violence warrant explicit attention. Women and children remain especially vulnerable, subject to displacement, abduction, sexual violence, and forced conscription into armed groups. According to ACLED and HumAngle datasets, civilians account for over 40% of conflict-related fatalities in Nigeria between 2010 and 2023. This aligns with Kalyvas' (2006) assertion that civil wars and political violence are often 'intimate,' targeting civilians to assert territorial dominance or signal authority. In contexts such as

Borno, Zamfara, and Imo States, this violence is not collateral—it is intentional, strategic, and embedded in spatial contestations over governance and legitimacy.

Freedom House indices also reflect a deterioration in civil liberties across high-conflict zones, where both state and non-state actors restrict mobility, expression, and civic participation. Sustainable peacebuilding strategies should prioritize the safety, dignity, and empowerment of civilians, particularly those whose everyday lives are shaped by the trauma and uncertainty of conflict.

#### *The Role of Electoral Violence in Perpetuating Structural Insecurity*

Elections in Nigeria have evolved into recurring triggers for violence rather than expressions of democratic maturity. The 2023 general elections in the country were marred by a troubling surge in political violence, with over a thousand reported incidents ranging from attacks on offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to targeted assassinations and violent clashes between rival party factions. These episodes underscore the persistent tendency among political actors to bypass formal dispute-resolution mechanisms, instead resorting to coercion and intimidation to secure strategic advantage or undermine opponents.

Regionally, the manifestations of this violence were diverse but uniformly alarming. In the Southeast, arson attacks on electoral facilities disrupted the electoral process and instilled fear among voters and officials. The South West experienced recurrent street-level skirmishes involving political thugs, while in the Middle Belt and North West, a wave of politically motivated killings intensified as the elections approached. These region-specific expressions of violence are not isolated anomalies; rather, they reflect a broader entrenchment of electoral violence within the fabric of Nigeria's political system.

Empirical data from global governance indices such as the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) point to significant drops in measures of voice and accountability during electoral periods. Complementary findings from Freedom House highlight increased constraints on civil liberties in these same windows. Taken together, these trends reveal that electoral violence in Nigeria is not merely an outcome of partisan rivalry; it is symptomatic of deeper institutional fragilities. At its core, this violence is fueled by chronic deficits in political inclusion, a weakened rule of law, and the entrenchment of violent patronage networks as tools for consolidating power.

#### *Toward a Spatially Responsive Conflict Mitigation Strategy*

This study highlights the pressing need for conflict mitigation strategies that move beyond conventional security-centric frameworks and instead adopt spatially responsive approaches tailored to the diverse realities across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. A standardized, nationwide policy is unlikely to address the deeply embedded and region-specific factors driving violence, which differ markedly in terms of local actors, historical grievances, and the strength or absence of institutional structures. To be effective, early warning systems should operate at a granular level, drawing on locally sourced intelligence, community-based reporting, and geospatial analysis to identify risks before they escalate. Existing models, such as the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)'s early

warning architecture and the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND)'s Peace Map, offer valuable platforms for anticipatory action. However, their full potential can only be realized through stronger integration with formal government response mechanisms and local governance structures. Furthermore, development strategies should be recalibrated to address the socioeconomic deficits that fuel political instability. Regions like the North East, Middle Belt, and South South consistently underperform on key indicators—particularly infrastructure, education, and the delivery of basic public services—as shown in recent assessments from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI). In such contexts, where state presence is often minimal and public trust severely eroded, sustainable peacebuilding requires more than militarized interventions. Reestablishing legitimacy demands a long-term institutional commitment to justice, inclusive governance, and the equitable distribution of development benefits.

### *Contributions to Theory and Policy*

This study offers both theoretical and practical insights. Theoretically, it bridges Conflict Theory with Lefebvre's spatial triad to reveal how political violence in Nigeria is deeply territorialized. Structural exclusion and governance deficits are not abstract—they are inscribed onto specific geographies, producing contested spaces where state authority is fragmented. Spatial tools, including typology charts and correlation graphs, reinforce this by illustrating how patterns of violence align with zones of marginalization. On the policy front, the study advocates moving beyond centralized peacebuilding models toward place-based strategies that reflect Nigeria's regional complexities. A durable peace will depend on coordinated action among state institutions, ECOWAS, civil society, global partners, law enforcement personnel, and community members—but more crucially, on confronting the spatial injustices that underpin instability. Without addressing these territorial inequalities, peace efforts will remain fragile. The spatial data presented in this study provides a foundation for crafting targeted, evidence-driven interventions to close these gaps.

## **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

### *Rethinking Political Violence in Nigeria: Toward Spatial Justice, Inclusive Governance, and Resilient Peace*

Viewed through the prism of spatial political economy, violent politics in Nigeria reveal themselves not as a random or episodic disturbance, but as a deeply structured and historically patterned phenomenon. The distinct manifestations of conflict in each of the six geopolitical zones—ranging from insurgency in the North East, banditry in the North West, protracted land disputes in the Middle Belt, to separatist agitations in the South East—are not anomalies. Rather, they are reflections of Nigeria's long-standing regional inequalities, elite-dominated federalism, and systemic neglect of peripheral zones.

This study demonstrates that Nigeria's prevailing militarized responses—troop deployments, emergency declarations, or negotiated amnesties—have consistently

fallen short. They fail to account for the spatial production of violence and the deeper political and institutional drivers sustaining it.

Visual analyses in Figures 1-3 confirm that these failures are not random but geographically patterned and institutionally grounded. Utilizing Conflict Theory and Lefebvre's spatial triad, this study has shown that violence is not simply a breakdown of order, but a reflection of territorial marginalization, youth alienation, ecological vulnerability, and fragmented sovereignty. Reversing these trends requires more than policy reform—it calls for a paradigm shift rooted in spatial justice, participatory governance, and inclusive development.

The following recommendations are therefore proposed as urgent strategies for transforming Nigeria's conflict geography into zones of stability and opportunity:

1. ***Recalibrate National Security Through Spatial Equity:*** A future-facing Nigerian security strategy should move from a reactionary, one-size-fits-all model to a spatially differentiated, prevention-based system.
  - a. ***Spatial Security Mapping:*** Leverage ACLED, HumAngle, Nigeria Security Tracker, and geospatial trends (such as those visualized in Figures 1-3 of this study) to develop real-time dashboards that identify micro-hotspots of violence, patterns of state withdrawal, and the presence of alternative governance actors.
  - b. ***Community-Rooted Policing:*** Institutionalize state-level policing structures that are locally grounded and community-accountable, yet professionally regulated to prevent abuse and elite capture.
  - c. ***Security Equity Index:*** Introduce an annual security access index—based on WDI indicators such as the rule of law and government effectiveness—that quantifies disparities in the deployment of police, military, and civil defence forces across LGAs. Underserved areas should receive prioritized attention through structured rebalancing mechanisms.
2. ***Institutionalize Spatial Justice in Developing Planning:*** Political violence thrives where development is absent, inequitable, or extractive. The Nigerian state should adopt a spatial justice framework that addresses institutionalized neglect and infrastructural marginality.
  - a. ***Zone-Specific Development Funds:*** Operationalize dedicated funding platforms such as a North Central Resilience Initiative to direct strategic investments to regions historically bypassed by development.
  - b. ***Geospatial Infrastructure Mapping:*** A comprehensive national audit is needed to identify local government areas (LGAs) with the most severe deficits in roads, schools, electricity, and healthcare. These findings should guide targeted public investment based on composite infrastructure rankings.
  - c. ***Economic Compensation Reform:*** Introduce legally binding benefit schemes for communities in extractive zones, particularly in the South-South. Rather than ad hoc political payouts, such reforms should guarantee rights to environmental royalties and employment opportunities, fostering equity and accountability in resource governance.
3. ***Reconstruct the Social Contract in Zones of Fragmented Sovereignty:*** Where state authority has eroded, recovery should be rooted in legitimacy rather than coercion.



- a. ***Civic Dialogues:*** Engage traditional, religious, youth, and women's groups in setting local development agendas, especially in the North East and South East.
  - b. ***Community Truth Fora:*** Create inclusive platforms for transitional justice and post-conflict healing that address local grievances and support reintegration.
  - c. ***Mobile Governance Units:*** Deliver rotating state services—such as ID registration, legal aid, and healthcare—to marginalized LGAs to re-establish state presence and public trust.
4. ***Rethink Electoral Governance to Break the Cycle of Political Violence:*** Electoral violence in Nigeria is not incidental—it is a chronic and spatially structured feature of its political system.
  - a. ***INEC Conflict Risk Mapping:*** Mandate pre-election risk assessments by INEC for every election cycle, identifying and preparing high-risk LGAs in collaboration with civil society and security agencies.
  - b. ***Enforce Electoral Accountability:*** Enact and operationalize the Electoral Offences Commission Bill to enable fast-track prosecution of political actors who fund or organize electoral violence.
  - c. ***Inclusive Political Participation:*** Establish a Youth Political Entry Fund to support emerging leaders, particularly those from marginalized and poor regions, and reduce dependency on elite patrons, who often fuel violent contestation.
5. ***Mainstream Civilian Protection and Gender-Sensitive Peacebuilding:*** Conflict in Nigeria disproportionately impacts civilians—particularly women and children—yet their protection remains peripheral to security strategy.
  - a. ***Civilian Casualty Monitoring Mechanism (CCMM):*** Launch an independent Commission to be co-managed by the National Human Rights Commission and civil society, to monitor and publicize attacks on civilians and recommend prosecutorial action.
  - b. ***Gender-Inclusive Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR):*** Integrate psychosocial support, skills training, and economic empowerment for female ex-combatants and survivors of sexual violence into all DDR processes.
  - c. ***Early Warning Integration:*** Strengthen WANEP Nigeria, CLEEN Foundation, and similar community alert systems by embedding their data into official security agency workflows, especially in high-risk border LGAs.
6. ***Forge a New Pact for Regional and International Cooperation:*** Nigeria's conflicts are increasingly transnational. Regional and global partners should act in concert to reduce cross-border triggers and bolster resilience.
  - a. ***ECOWAS Spatial Peace Initiative:*** Establish a regional framework to monitor arms trafficking, insurgent movements, and pastoralist migration through joint patrols, data sharing, and cross-border early warning.
  - b. ***AU Peacebuilding Fund for LGAs:*** Encourage the African Union Commission to create a subnational peacebuilding grant mechanism accessible to local governments with proven needs, vulnerabilities, and capacity.

- c. ***Donor Alignment on Peace Metrics:*** Advocate for all international development assistance to embed conflict sensitivity benchmarks—such as civic participation, human rights performance, and equity-based outcomes—in programme evaluation criteria.
- d. ***Build Knowledge Systems that Centre Local Realities:*** Sustainable peace requires data, context, and local ownership.
  - a. ***National Conflict Observatory:*** Establish a semi-autonomous observatory under the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) to track and publish conflict data, disaggregated by region, gender, and typology.
  - b. ***Peace and Civic Education Curriculum:*** Institutionalize peacebuilding, traditional conflict resolution, and civic accountability as core subjects from primary to tertiary levels, particularly in high-risk States.
  - c. ***Support Indigenous Peacebuilding:*** Provide funding and recognition for traditional, religious, and grassroots initiatives that maintain or promote peace at the community level. These systems have proven credibility but remain underutilized in national policy.

## Closing Reflection

This study reaffirms that Nigeria's political violence is not merely about insurgents, bandits, or separatists. It is the outcome of a deeply uneven geography of power, development, and belonging. By applying the lens of spatial political economy, conflict is viewed as being shaped by or shaping territories marked by exclusion, neglect, and contested authority. Peacebuilding, therefore, should be both political and territorial. It should begin from the ground up, centering the lived realities of communities and correcting the historical injustices that define Nigeria's cartography of conflict. Only by returning governance to those most affected—through inclusive planning, equitable service delivery, and spatially informed justice—can Nigeria transform its violent margins into spaces of enduring peace and democratic renewal.

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