



UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY
Centre for Policy Research

Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria

The Greatest Trick the Devil Played was
Convincing Nigerians he Could Protect Them

Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown



Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown

Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown is Director of the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors and a Senior Fellow at The Brookings Institution

Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown would like to thank Dr Philip Ademola Olayoku for his excellent assistance during the fieldwork and in preparation of this report. The analysis presented in this paper is based on the research of the author and the views of those interviewed. They do not necessarily reflect those of United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, United Nations University, or its partners.

ISBN: 978-92-808-6531-7 © United Nations University, 2021.

All content (text, visualizations, graphics), except where otherwise specified or attributed, is published under a Creative Commons Attribution- Noncommercial Share Alike IGO license (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0). Using, re-posting and citing this content is allowed without prior permission.

Citation: Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The Greatest Trick the Devil Played was Convincing Nigeria He Could Protect Them: Vigilante Groups & Militias in Southern Nigeria* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

Cover photo: Unsplash/Namnsu Ukpanah
Back cover photo: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

Contents

Executive Summary	2
The Context of Militias In Nigeria	6
The SARS Protests and Police Deficiencies.....	9
Popular Acceptance of Militias and Vigilantism.....	12
The Landscape of Militias in Nigeria’s South	14
The Bakassi Boys	18
Origins and Evolution	19
Human Rights Violations and Power Abuse.....	19
Political Capital and Politicization	21
State Response	24
A Persisting Recourse, Temptation, and Challenge – Vigilantes 20 Years Later	26
The Oodua People’s Congress	28
Origins and Evolution	29
Human Rights Violations and Power Abuse.....	32
Political Capital and Politicization	32
State Response	34
A Persisting Recourse, Temptation, and Challenge – Vigilantes 20 Years Later	36
Conclusions and Recommendations	40
References	51

Executive Summary



Licensed/Oludarekenny

This report analyses the landscape of anti-crime militias and vigilante forces in Nigeria's south over the past 20 years. It focuses on two vigilante groups, tracing their evolution and the anti-crime, security, and political impacts, before providing policy recommendations.

This report centres primarily on two vigilante groups and their descendants – the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria’s South East and the Oodua People’s Congress (OPC) in Nigeria’s South West. These two groups have been key actors in the vigilante security landscape in the south over the past two decades. The report analyzes their formation, effectiveness, behaviour, evolution, and anti-crime, security, and political impacts over the past two decades through the current period. It also analyzes official and unofficial policy responses to these groups by state-level authorities and the federal Government. The span of time that these groups have been in existence permits an examination of their evolution in response to one another, adaptation to changes in local political arrangements, popular reactions, security challenges, and the highly varied and back-and-forth response of state authorities and the federal Government.

The report, however, also brings in analysis of other vigilante and militias groups and situates them all in the highly complex landscape of vigilante and anti-crime militia groups in the south. A wide range of anti-crime militias and vigilante groups operate there. Some are, or have been, opposed to federal and state government, others represent particular ethnic groups. Some are recognized and formalized at least to some extent by state-level authorities, others receive no recognition or payment from the state. One paramilitary group, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps, is recognized and funded by the federal Government. Other groups, such as the Vigilante Group of Nigeria seeks federal recognition. In short, their institutional and financial arrangements and political support and

formal recognition are highly varied. Some are tightly centralized, formalized, and hierarchical, and hold defined political agendas, while others, such as hunters’ groups, are far more informal.

Yet, some basic patterns frequently develop across many of these militia groups. The key findings of this study include:

- The initial ability of vigilante groups and anti-crime militias to effectively suppress violent crime tends to involve intense brutality, including extrajudicial killings, torture, illegal detention, and sometimes public executions, that probably create temporary deterrent effects.
- Local communities often initially embrace such groups and police units, the vigilantes often developing considerable political capital with local communities.
- State-level authorities seek to appropriate the militias and vigilantes for their purposes, even as the federal Government opposes the formation of such groups, sometimes violently.
- Neither the federal Government, nor state authorities, nor local communities exercise effective control over the militias and vigilante groups. What characterizes the vigilantes, is their profound lack of accountability, like much of the formal security apparatus in the country.

- Putting the militias on the state payroll alone does not moderate their behaviour, especially if state authorities do not demand accountability from them for illegal acts.
- Indeed, vigilante groups tend to get away with egregious crimes, including public executions, murders, illegal detention, torture, and pervasive extortion of communities. If any prosecution against such behaviour takes place, it tends to be sporadic and inadequate to deter their abusive and predatory behaviour.
- Even though Nigerian state politicians and local communities keep embracing anti-crime vigilante groups, the groups' effect on crime suppression is far less than meets the eye.
- Despite under-delivering public safety, engaging in increased abuse, and being subject to political manipulation over time, the vigilante and anti-crime militia groups tend not to go away. Their names may mutate and they may exist in different types of official or unofficial arrangements over time, but they, or their descendants, are still around 20 years later. This can be as much of a security challenge as a solution to intense insecurity.
- Local vigilante groups will become models for others, stimulating them either to incorporate anti-crime roles into their agendas, or contributing to their formation. The vigilante groups therefore create complex and lasting contagion effects.

This report first explains the context of vigilante and anti-crime militia group formation in Nigeria, including the struggles, challenges, and deficiencies of the Nigeria Federal Police. It discusses the evolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), its own role in criminality,

and the anti-SARS protests. It also provides a historic background of vigilantism in Nigeria and lays out the various sources from which vigilantism in Nigeria stems. The second section reviews the landscape of militia groups in southern Nigeria and outlines their different types, including in terms of formalization and official recognition. The third section details the formation, effectiveness, evolution, and anti-crime, security, and policy effects of the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria's South East. It also analyzes 20 years of federal and state policy responses toward them. The following section provides the same analysis for the OPC in the South West.

The conclusions detail key analytical and policy findings. The report ends with detailed recommendations that include:

- Adopt serious police reform.
- Devolve some formal policing power to states.
- Hold accountable the vigilante forces who commit serious crimes.
- Develop a national-level legal framework for auxiliary policing forces.
- Vet and weed out vigilante groups who are accorded federal or state-level institutional support.
- Provide human rights training to vigilantes and anti-crime militias.
- Provide justice, support, and compensation for victims of vigilante violence.
- Promote peacebuilding activity targeting toward crime and revenge prevention.
- Promote efforts to expose and limit political appropriation of militia groups by Nigerian politicians and their illegal use.
- Look out for windows of opportunity to move the above agenda forward.

METHODOLOGY

In addition to reviewing the relevant existing literature, this report is principally based on the author's fieldwork conducted in Abuja, Lagos, and Ogun State in November and December 2019 during which she conducted 47 interviews. Twelve additional interviews were conducted by phone and virtual platforms in the fall and winter of 2020 and in the spring of 2021. Interviewees included representatives of various militia groups, vigilantes, and auxiliary forces; current and former Nigerian government officials; current and former officers of Nigerian police

forces and formal paramilitary forces; Nigerian security and political experts and academics; Nigerian politicians; traditional leaders; business community representatives; Nigerian journalists; local community representatives and representatives of herders' and farmers' communities; Nigerian and international representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and international diplomats. To protect the safety of interlocutors and create an environment where they could speak honestly and openly, all interviews during the fieldwork are reported without the use of names.

The Context of Militias In Nigeria



Nigeria continues to suffer from chronic and intensifying insecurity. Many types of security challenges are rising across the country, from various forms of militancy and insurgency to farmer-herder conflicts to murderous cultism and highly violent criminality. Nigerian police and security forces are often brutal and unaccountable while failing to deliver a sense of public safety or to respond adequately to crime and insecurity.

Over the past two decades, and indeed during much of Nigeria's post- and pre-colonial history,

extralegal forces such as anti-crime militias, vigilante groups, community defenders and auxiliary paramilitary forces have arisen or been stood up to respond to the failures of the formal security institutions to improve public security. State-level politicians and governors often eagerly embrace such vigilante groups. By contrast, the federal Government has at times opposed them, sometimes with excessive force, but mostly ineffectively. The militias persist by developing various forms of co-existence with formal security actors.

Much has been written, including by this author, about militia forces in Nigeria's north, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force's battle with Boko Haram.¹ Vigilantes and anti-crime militias in Nigeria's south have received far less analytical and policy attention in recent years. Many anti-crime militias in Nigeria's south, however, precede their more well-known northern counterparts by decades and they are on the rise once again.

Such analysis is all the timelier as governors and politicians in Nigeria's south are rapidly proceeding with standing up new militias and auxiliary forces, sometimes in direct challenge to federal authorities but often with the support of local communities. Indeed, over the past two years, two key defining developments have characterized the security landscape of Nigeria's south: the governors' formation of militia structures, and the popular protests against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of Nigeria Federal Police.

The evolution of SARS and public attitudes toward it mimic the evolution of the anti-crime militias. Formed more than two decades ago, SARS was initially embraced by many Nigerian communities for effectively suppressing crime even though it acted with brutality and in violation of laws, resorting to extrajudicial killings.² Over time, however, this lack of effective accountability led to the SARS becoming a principal purveyor of predatory criminality and abusing the public it was tasked to protect.³ In the fall of 2020, its brutal excesses finally led to massive protests against SARS, but only a cosmetic reform response by Nigerian federal authorities.⁴

Meanwhile, in 2020 and 2021, southern governors in Nigeria have pushed forward with their agenda of forming semi-official structures for vigilante groups. In April 2021, the governors of Nigeria's South East states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo announced the creation of Ebube Agu (roughly translated as "magnificent tiger"), a security network composed of vigilante groups across the five states.

In part, the creation of Ebube Agu emulated the formation of a similar pro-government militia network – the Western Nigeria Security Network known as Amotekun – by the governors of Nigeria's South West states of Lagos, Ekiti, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo in January 2020. Like Ebube Agu, Amotekun is composed of pre-existing vigilante and militia groups, such as Oodua People's Congress (OPC), local hunters' groups, and others. However, while the state governments in the South West, which have long embraced OPC, want to have the group be a key feature of Amotekun, the federal Government has opposed formalizing it.⁵ Nominally in collaboration with the federal police, Amotekun is tasked to tackle banditry, armed robbery, "invasions" of land by herders from Nigeria's north, kidnappings, violent cults that have started at universities but spread outside of campuses,⁶ and terrorism. The governors also donated 133 vehicles and 600 motorcycles to the vigilante network.

However, the federal Government of Nigeria immediately declared the formation of Amotekun as illegal.⁷ The federal police also immediately stated that it would arrest any member of Amotekun carrying an illegal weapon.⁸ The federal police have a decades-old history both of violently repressing and at times collaborating with key actors within Amotekun, including OPC.⁹ Several days later, however, the federal Government backed off from its initial reaction and at least nominally agreed to work with the South West governors to develop an unspecified legal framework for Amotekun¹⁰, which since then has not made much progress.

Moreover, the creation of Ebube Agu also came in response to the formation of another vigilante militia group in the South East – the Eastern Security Network – that was created by a secessionist political group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Founded in 2017, IPOB seeks an independent state of Biafra. The Nigerian Government has designated IPOB a terrorist organization.

Thus, both the anti-government secessionists and the regional governors compete for popular support by resorting to the creation of auxiliary

policing militias to counter crime, banditry, cults, and other forms of violent insecurity. The governors promise to give their militia network legal standing by passing legislation in their states to authorize and fund the establishment of the vigilante militias. However, as Nigeria's federal Government tends to vehemently oppose the formation of such state auxiliary forces, any future legality of Ebube Agu might be rejected by federal courts even as federal police and military forces in the South East may well use them for their operations, including against IPOB. Not surprisingly, IPOB immediately rejected the formation of Ebube Agu, considering it a local spy outfit operating against IPOB and warning Igbo citizens against cooperating with Ebube Agu in any way.¹¹

However, another Igbo secessionist group, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), founded in 1999, embraced the creation of Ebube Agu, and its leader derided IPOB's Eastern Security Network as impotent and merely existing online.¹² It is, thus, not just state-level government authorities and secessionist groups who compete in the vigilante domains, but secessionist groups competing with each other over who appropriates or undermines what vigilante and militia group in the delivery – or at least posturing of delivery – of local security. Here the phrase “posturing” points to the fact that the local vigilante groups have become a major source of insecurity and severe human rights violations themselves.

The creation of and controversies surrounding Ebube Agu and Amotekun, and the individual vigilante groups that comprise them, illustrate several dynamics in Nigeria that this paper details. First, they underscore the growing sense of insecurity in Nigeria's south and widespread perceptions of the failure of the heavily centralized federal policing system in Nigeria to respond to the insecurity. Second, they illustrate how varied political actors in Nigeria compete in the cooptation or creation of vigilante groups and seek to appropriate them for their political purposes. And third, they show the continually contentious and contradictory responses by the federal Government and state-level authorities

toward the creation of such auxiliary police forces.

Indeed, as the description of the security politics in the southern Nigeria shows, state-level politicians are clamoring for more auxiliary policing forces. While nominally the principal security agents in their states, state governors actually do not control any formal policing forces and cannot set the agenda for Nigeria's formal, federal-level, security forces. Their demands for state-level police forces have been boycotted by Abuja for decades, which fears secessionism.¹³

Moreover, state authorities often see a state-level structure for auxiliary policing forces as a solution to Nigeria's immense unemployment problems. The anti-crime militias' initial success in temporarily suppressing and displacing crime frequently receives strong applause from local communities even when the vigilante groups perpetrate egregious crimes themselves in the name of fighting crime. As a formal security advisor to the governor of Lagos State argued when discussing anti-crime vigilante groups and political organizations and militias that adopt anti-crime functions, “Who will not go to the devil for protection if you can't get protection from elsewhere?”¹⁴

Yet “jungle justice,” as Nigerians term extrajudicial anti-crime activities,¹⁵ frequently becomes as much a source of insecurity as the crime it purports to combat. And the anti-crime militias themselves, like special police units, over time frequently become the prime criminal actors on the bloc, just as SARS did.

The bargain with the devil that the community strikes can backfire in several ways. In tolerating brutality and lack of accountability toward alleged criminal and rival ethnic groups, the community also fuels the sense of brazenness and impunity with which the vigilantes behave. Over time, the vigilantes may start abusing the broader community, not just the alleged perpetrators of crime. And yet, in addition to their perpetration of crime, the militias' capacity to deter crime by others mostly weakens over time even as the vigilante groups do not go away and linger for years.

The prominence of militias and vigilante groups in southern Nigeria is nothing new. It has been a central feature of policing as well as crime, abuse, and violent ethnic mobilization in the south of the country for decades. Some of the existing militias in the south, in fact, precede their more famous northern counterparts like the CJTF by years. The pervasive and deeply-rooted nature of militias in Nigeria's south and throughout the country stems from several sources, including the profound and unresolved deficiencies of Nigerian police forces and the widespread acceptance of vigilantism by Nigerian populations as well as politicians.¹⁶

THE SARS PROTESTS AND POLICE DEFICIENCIES

The October 2020 protests against Nigeria's special police, SARS, that began in Lagos and spread across large parts of Nigeria are a crucial part of the context and background of militia, vigilante, and auxiliary forces in Nigeria. SARS itself is deeply emblematic of the problems and deficiencies of police forces in Nigeria and is intertwined with the vigilante forces and Nigeria's self-described "jungle justice". The excesses, brutality, and actual perpetration of predatory crime by official police forces like SARS alienated Nigerian people from the police and the State. Along with the weaknesses of police forces in suppressing and effectively prosecuting brutal and predatory vigilante groups, the brutality and abuse by police create a context of wide acceptance of vigilante forces. Yet even as police forces themselves occasionally fight vigilante forces, they also use them.

Similarly, the evolution of SARS parallels in a striking way the evolution and behavioural patterns of militia and vigilante forces in Nigeria overall, including in southern Nigeria. SARS was created in 1992 as a government response to widespread armed robbery. Its initial resolute response to violent criminality, including success in dismantling several violent gangs, generated wide praise for the police force and an acceptance of its brutality and lack of effective accountability by both government officials and local populations.¹⁷

Over time, however, the persisting lack of effective oversight and accountability of SARS and a large context of wide impunity led to the SARS forces behaving not only brutally toward criminals, but also toward the local populations and becoming perpetrators of crime themselves. The police became not just deficient in delivering security but, in multifaceted ways, complicit in undermining security, including by being a key source of violent predatory criminality.¹⁸

Although the 2020 protests were the largest in Nigeria in years, they were not the first time Nigerians protested against the abuses of SARS – similar protests against SARS swept Lagos and the Rivers State in 2017. For years prior, Lagos residents complained of SARS officers extorting people by falsely accusing them of fraud or theft and forcibly frog-marching people whom they stopped at checkpoints to ATMs to demand they withdraw money for them. Those who refused would end up charged or badly beaten up.¹⁹ Like with other Nigerian police and military forces and vigilante groups, torture to extract concessions or force compliance with extortion became a SARS staple.²⁰ SARS also became implicated in extrajudicial killings.²¹ As detailed below, such patterns of misbehaviour and the evolution from praised elite units to bandits are also the story of vigilante groups in Nigeria.

As is the story of vigilante and militia groups elsewhere in Nigeria, SARS units became politicized and appropriated by local politicians. During the 2017 protests, for example, some politicians such as in the Rivers State, organized or supported pro-SARS counterprotests. There had long been allegations that SARS units in the state served as electoral muscle for politicians.²²

A third striking parallel between SARS and vigilante and militia groups in Nigeria is the State response to the slide of special police forces into banditry and crime and its politicization – namely, a systematic failure to effectively hold them accountable.²³ Believing it enjoyed absolute impunity, SARS personnel allegedly dared its victims to report abuses to higher-up officials, including the police Inspector General.²⁴ To the extent that the State has taken any action against violent police units, the response often

amounted only to renaming of the unit. That is indeed also what happened with SARS in response to the October protests: rather than dismantling the unit as protestors demanded and undertaking deep police reform, the Government proposed creating a new unit – the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team.

As this inadequate response did not pacify the protesting streets, violent response by the police against protestors, entailing water cannons and live ammunition, escalated. Significantly, however, a second element of the violent response against the protesting citizens was the emergence of pro-SARS militias, armed with machetes as well as firearms. Such groups popped up in various parts of the country, including Abuja, without police and other security forces countering them in any way. Thus, although the State denied a connection to these “spontaneous” pro-SARS militias, the widespread understanding in Nigeria was that Nigeria’s police forces sponsored them, perhaps organized them, and at minimum used them as justification to crack down on all protestors.²⁵

As the anti- and pro-SARS protests and counter-protestors drew in scores of unemployed young men in Lagos and across Nigeria, other forms of violence also emerged, including looting and ransacking of shopping malls, cattle theft, and ethnically-motivated attacks on northern (often Hausa-Fulani) traders, in Lagos and southern Nigeria. That dangerous escalation not only raised fears of broader Christian-Muslim violence, already fuelled by several years of intense farmers-herders clashes in Nigeria, but also activated militia and vigilante groups operating in southern Nigeria and often engaging in violent attacks or reprisals against northerners. Thus, the SARS protests intersected with the militia ecosystems in southern Nigeria in yet another way.

Moreover, already 20 years ago, SARS was deeply implicated in the highly violent police response against the equally violent OPC in the South West, responding to the torture and extrajudicial killings by the OPC with analogous torture and extrajudicial killings.²⁶

The SARS fiasco, its intermeshing with militias and vigilante groups, and the troubling State response is part and parcel of the poor state of police forces in Nigeria.²⁷ A series of governments in Nigeria have pledged to conduct meaningful police reform, but little has been accomplished. Upon assuming office, the current Government of Muhammadu Buhari unveiled the Nigerian Police Reform and Restructuring Plan 2015-2020, but little of it has been implemented. And during the SARS 2020 protests, the Nigerian Government essentially sabotaged any meaningful reform of even that unit within Nigerian police forces.²⁸

Amidst poor salaries, police forces often lack adequate training and management, intelligence and analytical capabilities, and a wide enough set of resources.²⁹ The lack of adequate salaries and other resources of rank-and-file police officers, local commanders, and police units overall contributes to their tendency to extort money from local citizens, the business community, and criminal gangs alike.³⁰

Nigerian police forces are also notoriously brutal, engaging in torture and extrajudicial killings, and are broadly unaccountable, operating with extensive impunity. In 2016, at the time of its last global report, the World Internal Security and Peace Index ranked the Nigeria Police Force as the worst in Africa.³¹ It should be noted, however, that the Nigerian Police Force responded to this report by arguing that “the report is entirely misleading, a clear misrepresentation of facts and figures and essentially unempirical” and that “Nigeria Police Force is the best in UN Peace Keeping Operations, Best in Africa, One of the Best in the World.”³²

Not surprisingly, the confidence of Nigerian citizens in their police forces is low. A 2020 US Institute of Peace (USIP)-commissioned survey of 10,000 Nigerians found that at most 3.2 per cent regarded the Nigeria Police Force the institution in which they had the “most confidence to address insecurity and violent conflict in Nigeria.”³³

Even though the Nigeria Police Force is the largest law enforcement agency in Africa, the force is also overstretched, with policing and

internal security and public safety matters also involving the Nigerian military in more than 30 of Nigeria's 36 states. The current nominal size of the Nigeria Police Force is almost 380,000, but whether all police officers, who sometimes hold other jobs as well, do, in fact, show up for their duties is a separate issue. For years, there have been calls to increase the police force, perhaps to 650,000, but the politics of authorizing such an increase, like all police reform, have been exceedingly difficult, often mired in federal Government-subfederal state police rivalries.

As of now, all police forces in Nigeria are federal, with state governors lacking any capacity to control official police forces and command their deployment, priorities, or responses, despite the fact that they are designated as "chief security agents" of their state. The size of police contingents and their tasks are often fully at the mercy of authorities in Abuja, with criminality, banditry, and violent insurgencies often neglected and festering for lengthy periods.

Moreover, even when police (like military) contingents are allocated and actually deployed to states, their determination to act for their ostensible purpose often includes complex secret bargaining with state governors. As chief security agents, state governors have so-called "security votes", i.e., non-transparent financial allocations for security operations in their state. Given the utter opaqueness of those budgets, state governors can use them as personal slush funds for patronage, corruption, or paying militias, even if illegally.³⁴ But the deployed military and police contingents are well aware of those funds and, being often starved of resources themselves, may refuse to carry out their tasks against insecurity, allowing it to increase and to perform other duties unless governors pay for their equipment, vehicles, or personnel (or personal pockets). The highly transactional relationship among military and police contingents and state governors is thus not unlike the extortion-patronage patterns between governors (and other politicians) and vigilante and militia groups.

For years, state governors have clamored for a constitutional reform to allow for state police

forces. Control over state police forces would allow them to promptly respond to insecurity in their area and maintain control of security operations. It also would be a source of employment opportunity in a country deeply troubled by unemployment, especially among the young.

Abuja has been deeply disinclined to support the formation of state police forces, fearing that they could become a source of secessionism.³⁵ Opponents of the devolution of police forces to the states also emphasize that state governors would use the state-level police forces as their personal militias against political rivals, and business opponents, and to extract votes and money for elections and yet another source of nepotism.³⁶ Such fears have a solid grounding: it is the pattern by which state politicians use militias and auxiliary forces. Moreover, some Nigerian security scholars also believe that the federal Government fears the possible alliance or even merger of state police forces in areas where a single dominant ethnic group spans several states, such as the Yoruba in Nigeria's South West.³⁷ Rivalries among the federal states themselves as to the size of the state police force each state would get and where funding would come from have further complicated and stalled any agenda of devolving some police authorities to states.

During the first part of the Buhari Administration, the federal Government's response to the intensified state demands for the creation of state police forces centred on taking on the idea of a so-called constabulary force that was to be created. The constabulary force type of structure had originally been proposed by several state governors. In their vision, the constabulary force would recruit volunteers from local communities to deliver public safety. Under the guidance of state governors and traditional rulers, the volunteers would receive a stipend.

The federal Government responded to these proposals by fielding a counterproposal of a federal constabulary force. In Abuja's version, the constabulary force was to be a branch of the federal police force of perhaps 40,000 personnel who would be deployed to the states from which

they were recruited. The local deployment design was to facilitate local knowledge and local intelligence gathering, potentially limit abuses against communities, and motivate the constabulary officers to better protect local communities. Those local origin features were to redress the indifference and lack of knowledge of current federal police officers temporarily rotated to a locality from distant regions of Nigeria. The local recruitment-deployment cycle was also to give governors at least a window dressing sense of owning a local policing force.

But the process was mired in tensions among police leadership and state governors as to which federal police leadership agency would be in charge of recruitment and would manage the force. The lack of clarity of the process also led to widely divergent interpretations and expectations of what a constabulary force would look like and what roles, authorities, and supervision it would have.³⁸ Creating the constabulary police force as a response to local desires for the devolution of policing capacities has, thus, become moribund.

But in the absence of any formal control of governors over policing in their states, the proclivity of elected state authorities to use local, often illegal, vigilante and militia groups for policing and parochial political gains only grows. Most Nigerian states have legitimized at least some of the militias and vigilante groups operating in their territory, labeling them as “Neighbourhood Watch” cadres or giving them some traffic patrolling duties. But only a few, such as Hisba in Nigeria’s Kano State in the north, have achieved a state legal status.³⁹ The Nigerian Criminal Procedure Act, Section 14(1), recognizes the legality of citizens, even vigilante groups, arresting suspected criminals provided the vigilantes are not armed and the suspects are immediately handed over to the Nigerian police.⁴⁰

POPULAR ACCEPTANCE OF MILITIAS AND VIGILANTISM

Militias and vigilante groups are frequently also welcomed by local populations and business

associations, not just embraced by politicians. Vigilante and militia groups, including those with local ethnic affinities, are often perceived to be closer to local people, more trustworthy of serving the interests of local communities, and more knowledgeable about local conditions. Sometimes, local communities also believe, though often erroneously as the analysis below shows, that local militias and vigilante groups are more accountable than formal police forces.⁴¹ In fact, both are profoundly unaccountable, though the levels of impunity and levers to counter their misbehaviour can vary over time and across space.

Given the context of spreading violent criminality, the mushrooming of many forms of violent conflict, and poor police forces, the widespread embrace of vigilante groups and pro-government militias is perhaps not surprising. In Nigeria’s south, kidnapping and violent robberies, including along highways, like banditry in the north, have intensified over the past five years, spreading far beyond the Nigerian Delta.⁴² Various parts of Nigeria, including the south, are grappling with resurrected ethnic violence and threats of secessionism; and a highly violent conflict between farmers and herders has spread across the country, including deep into Nigeria’s south, such as Lagos and Edo States. In various parts of the country, that conflict has taken on Christian-Muslim communal rivalry characteristics. Once again, the response of the federal Government has been largely inadequate, leading local communities to embrace, at least to some extent, the ethnic militias and anti-crime vigilante groups that purport to protect them.

Moreover, vigilantism and non-State policing have a long history in Nigeria. It dates back to the pre-colonial era when young men of a certain age group were expected, for a period of time, to become local enforcers and *de facto* informal police forces. Crime prevention was often linked with the spiritual and religious institutions of the society and local community structures.⁴³ In the South West, the Oro cult of the Ijebu community and Egungun masquerade cults of the Yoruba arrested and punished offenders. Still today, some Yoruba refer to the police as “olopa,”

meaning the man with the club.⁴⁴ This extensive pre-colonial tradition was not eradicated, but was often reinforced, during the colonial period, even as British authorities sought to create national police forces.⁴⁵ In South East Nigeria, for example, *ndiche*, community guards of village volunteers would bring suspected criminals to the community council *amala*, display them in shame and eventually hand them over to the police. The military Governments of Generals Abdulsalami Abubakar, Sani Abacha, and Ibrahim Babangida established anti-crime squads of soldiers, policemen, and vigilante groups notorious for their brutality toward suspected criminals.⁴⁶

Moreover, vigilantism and its embrace have permeated concepts such as community policing, sometimes with very different understandings of how community policing is understood in the West – namely, the responsiveness and accountability of formal police forces to local communities and their *lawful* cooperation with the local community. As has been the case around the world, the concept of community policing has been appropriated by various actors for all kinds of purposes and with highly different meanings. In southern Nigeria, various actors-- including some experts specializing in police reform, security issues and human rights, and NGO representatives believe that vigilante groups are an appropriate element of community policing, though perhaps with more training, supervision, and funding than they have received.⁴⁷ Overall, vigilante groups in southern Nigeria, even though they have perpetrated egregious human rights violations, are often greeted with popular endorsement and little of the opprobrium that would be the case in the West.

In sum, vigilantism and militia group formation in Nigeria's south and across the country stems from multiple sources:

- high rates of violent predatory crime and poor formal policing responses;
- violent ethnic and political conflict, including ethnic secessionist and autonomy movements, intra-ethnic

conflict, and farmers-herders conflict; and inadequate State responses to these forms of violence;

- Nigerian politicians who either embrace or instigate the formation of militia and vigilante groups for electoral purposes, for the creation of personal patronage cliques, as a source of resources generation, and for suppression of business and political rivals;
- Nigerian business communities who see militias as a source of protection;
- government responses broadly, including at the *federal level*, which conditions militias and vigilante groups to see the State as a source of jobs and income, while conversely the State sees them as a solution to unemployment, in addition to their role of tackling crime and violent political conflict, even by the *formal police* itself that may encourage so-called "jungle justice" by vigilantes as well as perpetrate it;
- state governors who are frustrated by the lack of control over police forces; and
- a long historical tradition of vigilantism going back to the pre-colonial era.

When these insecurities or narratives of insecurity grow, the prominence of vigilante groups are buoyed and their membership may expand, drawing on these various sources of their formation and legitimation. Increasingly across Nigeria, including in the south, they are incorporated into so-called security task forces combining the Nigerian military, police force, and militias and vigilantes. Yet persistently, both the task forces and policing in Nigeria broadly centre on *ad hoc* arrangements and repeated patterns of evolution and misbehaviour. Even when seen as a short-term fix to local security problems, the militias and vigilante groups become sources of insecurity, while formal police forces and government authorities fail to improve their own performance.

The Landscape of Militias in Nigeria's South



Immanuel Afolabi/flickr

The landscape of pro-government militia and vigilante groups in Nigeria's south includes many groups and is highly complex.⁴⁸ Indeed, very many communities have created some sort of vigilante group, whose longevity varies, with groups morphing into one another, losing potency, and being appropriated by politicians while prohibited by governing authorities

This paper focuses on the Bakassi Boys of Nigeria's South East and the OPC of the South West. They were selected as the centrepiece

of the analysis because they are the most prominent vigilante and informal security actors in Nigeria's south and because they have been in existence over two decades. The span of time permits an examination of their evolution in response to one another, changes in local political arrangements and popular reactions, and the highly varied and back-and-forth response of state authorities and the federal Government. The OPC is also the most prominent member of the recently constituted Amotekun vigilante security network in Nigeria's South West. Although the South East governors –

who, in April 2021, formed the vigilante network Ebube Agu – did not specify which militias would be part of it, saying merely “all” local vigilante groups would be a part of the network, the widespread presumption is that relabelled remnants and iterations of the Bakassi Boys and descendant groups, such as Anambra Vigilante Group, will be a key component.⁴⁹

Similar to the Bakassi Boys, and like them established in the late 1990s, the **Egbesu Boys** is an ethno-vigilante Ijaw group operating in the oil-producing Niger Delta in Nigeria’s South East. Prior to taking on the anti-crime functions in emulation of the Bakassi Boys, the Egbesu Boys engaged in sabotage of oil pipelines and campaigned to push the Nigerian military out of the Delta and for self-determination of the Ijaw and their control over resources. In the South West, other members of Amotekun include local hunters’ groups, Agbekoya, which traces its origins to a 1960s Yoruba peasant revolt, and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps.

Like in Nigeria’s north, the **hunters’ groups** in the south tend to be fierce fighters, even though their internal structure and political organizations and demands tend to be the least formalized and articulated. But surprisingly, the hunters’ groups operate not just in rural areas of the south. Their representatives and chiefs may well live in major cities and bring vigilante functions of the groups to the cities. In Mushin in Lagos, a local hunter’s group run by a chief, for example, takes on local community policing as well as conflict management and local public health management, and seeks to orchestrate the delivery of socioeconomic handouts.⁵⁰ Like in Nigeria’s north, the hunters’ groups seek to distinguish themselves from other militia and vigilante groups by claiming to possess superior, more potent supernatural powers – they claim to be able to identify criminals by merely looking at them or applying magic.⁵¹ Mushin is an area of Lagos that in the 1980s became a key crime hotspot of Lagos⁵² and since the late 1990s has been a key locale of anti-crime activities by various vigilante groups, including the OPC, because of its reputation for drug dealing.

On the other side of the formality-informality spectrum of official recognition and internal structure formalization among the vigilante and auxiliary forces in Nigeria’s south is the **Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps**, one paramilitary institution in Nigeria actually established by the federal Government in the 1960s, though it was only in 2003 during the Olusegun Obasanjo Presidency when the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps received legal backing through the passage of a new law authorizing the entity.

In response to the spreading and highly violent conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria,⁵³ in 2019, the Nigerian federal Government also created the **Agro Rangers**, a new branch of Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps, to act as a formal policing and mediation actor between herders and farmers across Nigeria, including in the south.⁵⁴ But the formation of the Agro Rangers took place only after both farmers and herders created their own militia groups, often highly localized and/or tapped into existing vigilante groups; or those pre-existing vigilante groups also inserted themselves into the farmers-herders’ conflict. In Ekiti State, for example, the state government embraced such informal vigilantes responding to security threats posed by Fulani herders, known in the state as *anti-malu*, and labelled them the **Ekiti Grazing Enforcement Marshals**.⁵⁵ In Ekiti State, the **Ekiti State Vigilante Group** has also operated since 2007, though the group has undergone splintering. Still, at least one of its factions has conducted joint operations with the police and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps.

Another recognized vigilante group operating in the state of Lagos is the **Lagos State Neighbourhood Corps**, the state’s repackaging of the prior **Neighbourhood Watch**, a label that governors frequently give informal vigilante groups to recognize and formalize them, and frequently to attempt to appropriate them. They exist under various guises and iterations across Nigeria, and in the south include, for example, the Ebonyi State Neighbourhood Watch. Composed of local community members, the Neighbourhood Watches are in theory not

armed, at least not armed by the state. They are supposed to work closely with the Nigeria Federal Police in the state, something that they frequently self-report, whether accurate or not. The supervisory authorities would then be a mixture of state government officials, Nigerian Federal Police, traditional rulers, and the business community. Sometimes, members of the Neighbourhood Watches receive some training from the police or Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps, but the quality and extent vary greatly across state and over time even within states. The funding for such groups fluctuates, often dependent on one-time distributions by Local Government Council authorities or small stipends from state governors. In Lagos, another state government-approved security paramilitary group is **Lagos State Transport Monitoring Agency (LASTMA)**. Other versions of such militias approved by state governments but not necessarily paid by the state abound, including, for example, **So-Safe Corps** in Ogun State.

In addition to these official auxiliary policing forces as well as the often highly informal vigilante actors, the **Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN)** also operates across Nigeria's south and intersects and interacts with the other militias and vigilantes. Established in 1983 and registered as an "NGO" in 1999, the VGN is a nationwide vigilante group and private security company, though its local and state branches are sometimes not well coordinated.⁵⁶ Its members tend to be retired soldiers and police officials.⁵⁷ They apply for VGN membership at a local office, producing two guarantors, and passing an interview.

For years, the VGN has sought federal-level recognition and legitimization, which would afford government contracts and arms. In 2017, the Nigerian Parliament passed a bill authorizing the group, but four years later, the President of Nigeria has not yet signed the legislation.

Claiming to number over 20,000 guards,⁵⁸ while at other times suggesting as many as one million members,⁵⁹ the VGN is frequently hired by middle-class Nigerians to guard their homes or businesses and to protect their properties.⁶⁰ The

VGN also solicits donations. In Nigeria's south, the VGN undertakes various vigilante anti-crime functions, such as searching people in markets and apprehending and interrogating presumed perpetrators of robbery and kidnapping. Local community members or local VGN guards make the crime allegations and the local VGN chapter then apprehends those charged, searching their phones, persons, or even homes, looking for "evidence" and witnesses to interrogate. Eventually, the suspects are presumably handed over to the police, though the extent to which this happens varies among local chapters and remains opaque overall.

In fact, all militia and vigilante groups that have blessing from state authorities, including Amotekun and Ebube Agu, are supposed to cooperate with the police and hand suspects over to it. But since the vigilante groups, like the federal police itself, are frequently unable to gather prosecutable evidence, and rely on torture for confessions, the handovers rarely occur, and even if they do, the courts will often dismiss the cases of those who have languished in pre-trial prison for years.⁶¹

In areas where, despite its unofficial status, the VGN operates alongside or jointly with the Nigeria Police Force, VGN members sometimes receive some training from the police, such as in physical defence, community policing, and intelligence gathering.⁶² However, neither interviewed VGN members nor interviewed security experts were aware of any human rights or legal training provided to the VGN, in contrast to the human rights training provided to the CJTF in the north.⁶³

Intense rivalries and antagonisms pervade the vigilante militias and auxiliary groups. The hunters' groups in the south will complain about the OPC and its incompetence, brutality, and effort to muscle in "on their territories."⁶⁴ The VGN will similarly complain about the OPC and object to having its chapters subsumed by the OPC, or conversely claim that the Bakassi Boys are now actually members of the VGN and the VGN should be the one to get credit for successful anti-crime operations.⁶⁵ The vigilante groups tend to be intensely jealous of any

formal recognition of their competitors in safety delivery and of any government contracts awarded to them, such as for guarding infrastructure or roads, clamoring for such contracts and arrangements for themselves. And even as they all decry the deficiencies and violence of the Nigeria Police Force and official auxiliary forces such as the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps and sometimes have violent encounters with them, the vigilantes all want formal contracts and arrangements with the formal institutions. Meanwhile, the decisions of the Nigerian Federal Police and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps as to whether to attack, counter, tolerate, or collaborate with the vigilante groups tend to be highly *ad hoc*, reflecting instructions from the federal Government, temporary balances of power between state and federal authorities and

between the informal militias and formal police forces, local patronage networks and, to a lesser extent, also local popular attitudes toward the vigilantes and people's militias – these factors all fluid across time and space.

In the absence of strong accountability mechanisms, a deficiency of all of these groups and official police forces, there is little chance that the creation of the umbrella structures of Ebube Agu and Amotekun will erase those rivalries or the arbitrariness of the groups' behaviour and their legal and political arrangements.

The government's inability to lastingly formalize and correct or disband the local vigilante groups is also what has profoundly characterized both the Bakassi Boys and the OPC over the past two and half decades.

The Bakassi Boys



UN Photo

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Bakassi Boys became known as the ultimate anti-crime vigilante force in southern Nigeria.⁶⁶

Despite their brutal actions, they became widely popular and a source of emulation for other militias in Nigeria, including ethno-nationalist ones. Even as their behaviour has

deteriorated into more and more unaccountable and predatory actions – the “anti-crime” actor becoming a top crime actor on the block – the state politicians have not been able to shed their embrace of the Bakassi Boys and their subsequent relabelled iterations.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The Bakassi Boys were formed in the city of Aba in the southern state of Abia. One of the largest trading hubs in West Africa, Aba was plagued by violent criminality, with gangs openly operating on the outskirts of major markets, collecting protection money, and robbing traders as they sought to deposit their earnings in banks, while the police were impotent and unmotivated to prevent the extortion. Robbery victims were frequently killed, their body parts sometimes harvested and sold on the black market; kidnapped adults and children were sold into slavery.⁶⁷ Busses travelling in southern Nigeria were regularly robbed, particularly at night.

In 1998, in response to one of the armed robbery assaults ending in a gruesome murder, hundreds of traders reached for any type of weapon, chased the robbers, and hacked them to death, then launching a weeks-long campaign to chase out the gangs from the market. Subsequently, the traders recruited some 500 young men to serve as vigilantes in Aba and neighbouring towns and began paying them stipends.

As the reputation of the newly-formed vigilantes for killing and running out criminals spread, additional vigilante groups, calling themselves Bakassi Boys, emerged in the neighbouring state of Anambra. Like in Abia, they were mostly composed of the Igbo ethnic group. And like in Abia, traders were instrumental in creating these vigilante “chapters.” The traders’ role, specifically of the Onitsha Markets Amalgamated Traders Association (OMATA), was especially prominent in the market city of Onitsha⁶⁸ where armed house invasions were frequent and criminal gangs acted with utter brazenness. The criminal violence had brought nightlife to a halt before the emergence of the Bakassi Boys, curfews had been imposed but the violent robberies persisted at alarming rates.

Rapidly and presumably for the same reason that was used to explain the effectiveness of the Bakassi Boys in Abia – namely, local knowledge and a capacity to inspire fear – crime subsided in Onitsha. People could walk on the street late

at night without being robbed, and women no longer had to run from their houses to churches to save themselves from rape and death during home invasions.⁶⁹ Impressed with the new public safety and order, a commission of Nigerian journalists voted Anambra the “most crime-free state in Nigeria.”

The fame and presumed success of the Bakassi Boys spread to the rest of South East states – Imo, Enugu and Ebonyi – as well as to Edo State where similar vigilante groups emerged.⁷⁰ In Imo, they grew to a strength comparable to those in Abia and Anambra.

State chapters were the principal organizational units of the Bakassi Boys; underneath them, subchapters formed principally around major cities either spontaneously or a result of the activities of local traders, or initiative and emulation by local toughs. Over time, at least some internal structure developed within the various Bakassi Boys vigilante groups, especially after state legislations officially recognized the groups. Each Bakassi Boys state chapter now had a designated chairman and other lines of command.⁷¹ But how much control the chair and other leaders actually exercised over the Bakassi Boys subgroupings within each state varied from place to place and over time. In fact, across or within the subchapters, hierarchy and organizational structures were often loose and rivalries within and between the cliques were rife. For example, in 2005, the leader of the Bakassi Boys in Abia, Kingsley Chimezie, was murdered along with 19 others by a rival faction of the Bakassi Boys.⁷² The state chapters were autonomous, but would cooperate occasionally with one another and sometimes meddle in each other’s affairs. At times, the state chairman of the Abia Bakassi Boys claimed to be the national chairman.⁷³

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND POWER ABUSE

The anti-crime progress did not slow down the zeal of the Bakassi Boys. In Anambra, the Bakassi Boys were estimated to have executed over

1,500 people between September 1999 and July 2000.⁷⁴ They would fan out from their Onitsha headquarters next to OMATA's headquarters, combing the area for "criminals" whom they would murder in public executions, hacking them to death with blunt machetes or dousing them with gasoline and setting a tire around their neck on fire – without even listing their crimes, let alone presenting any evidence⁷⁵. In one such public execution on 29 May 2001, the Democracy Day celebrating the transition from military dictatorship to civilian rule in 1999, the Bakassi Boys murdered more than 30 alleged criminals. When not enough "criminals" could be rounded up in Onitsha for these regular spectacles, they would be collected elsewhere and brought for executions to the city. Over time, the Bakassi Boys' executions became ritualized, such as with the Boys playing soccer with the heads of their victims before crowds⁷⁶.

In their birthplace of the city of Aba in the Abia State, executions were similarly public and popular, attracting large crowds to watch the machete dismembering of victims and their burning.⁷⁷ The Bakassi Boys in Imo State were similarly accused of extrajudicial killings, torture, and illegal detention.⁷⁸

Evidence of the guilt of apprehended suspects often ranged from circumstantial and witness-based to altogether non-existent – certainly not prosecutable in a court. And as is frequently the case with militias and vigilantes in Nigeria and around the world, the intelligence and evidence provided by witnesses often entailed allegations whose purpose was to exact revenge against one's enemies and seize their property. Most victims had been tortured by the Bakassi Boys for days to elicit confessions.⁷⁹

The public executions by the Bakassi Boys had their precedents in police behaviour during the dictatorships of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, when police would shoot convicted robbers in football stadiums in front of large, excited crowds.⁸⁰ And extrajudicial killing by police officers as well as torture and illegal detention by police were no less frequent then as they are now in Nigeria, with many local

residents seeing the Nigerian Federal Police as a foreign occupying force. Tens and sometimes even hundreds of bodies of people who died in police custody would be dumped in the streets during the dictatorship years.⁸¹

One aspect, however, set the Bakassi Boys apart from the police – their use of black magic or *juju*, which played a key role in determining a suspect's guilt. "Lab tests" of guilt included hanging truth-telling talismans or tortoises around the subjects' neck or using a special sword which would react only when in contact with a murderer.⁸² These methods too failed to provoke a public opprobrium – in fact, the opposite. In a country where still today many believe in *juju*, sorcery was seen as a credible and appropriate form of interrogation.

Juju also imbued the Bakassi Boys with a sense of invincibility, and further enhanced their deterrent capacity and reputation for toughness. They were willing arrest and execute those whom the police did not dare touch – namely, alleged witches and sorcerers. The public executions of witches who were forced to confess, disrobe, and then be stoned to death had a long tradition in Onitsha before the Bakassi Boys⁸³ and the willingness to kill witches had been a source of legitimation for earlier vigilante groups in southern Nigeria.⁸⁴ To the extent that presumably invincible Bakassi Boys got killed, such as in encounters with the police or injured in anti-crime activities, the public would dismiss those individuals as "fake Bakassi", sometimes violently turning on them, instead of questioning the veracity and impunity of the entire organization.⁸⁵

The Bakassi Boys' willingness to go after the powerful culminated in their taking on Edward Okeke, also known as Prophet Eddy or Jesus of Nawga, who presented himself as half man, half ghost. Eddy owned a church in which miracle cures were performed and he was accused of committing ritual murders similar to those committed by university cults, allegedly as many as 93, to obtain human parts for his cures.⁸⁶ The Bakassi Boys' detention, decapitation and burning of Prophet Eddy in November 2000 in

front of a crowd of some 20,000 – featuring not just torture such as beatings and whippings, but also ritualistic aspects, such as cutting off his long hair – cemented their reputation as being untouchable⁸⁷. Equally important, the Bakassi Boys did not yield to the pressure from the state governors and other Nigerian top politicians, including reputedly former General Babangida and then President Obasanjo, to release Prophet Eddy. To counter the top-down pressure, scores of people and local tradesmen took to the streets to demonstrate in favour of Eddy's execution, threatening to burn down government buildings if he were let go. In this case, the Bakassi Boys chose to preserve their political capital with the street, instead of their top political backers.

Juju also pervaded ritual initiations of recruits, during which the recruits had to abstain from sex and certain foods -- rituals considered as important as the two-months military training the recruits would be given.⁸⁸ And *juju* talismans were prominently on display every time the Bakassi Boys interacted with the public.

The utter absence of effective accountability, of course, meant that the types of criminality and violence in which the Bakassi Boys vigilantes engaged only grew over time. Moreover, the Bakassi Boys systematically sought to intimidate – frequently through kidnapping, torture, and even execution – anyone who dared to publicly speak against them, thus further reinforcing their aura of absolute impunity.⁸⁹

The Igbo Bakassi Boys also took some ethnic militia trappings, oppressing ethnic minorities such as the Kalabari and Ogoni and massacring their members without providing any presumed “anti-crime public safety” to these groups. When Muslim Hausa and southern Christian tensions flared in the north of Nigeria and the Hausa massacred hundreds of Igbo there, the Bakassi Boys within 24 hours rounded up Hausa migrants in the southern Igbo cities, immediately killing 400 of them.⁹⁰ Popular discourse, including by governors and politicians, emphasized the

Igbo ethnic characteristics of the vigilantes and labelled them the south's legitimate equivalent of enforcers of state-sanctioned sharia (Islamic law) like the newly constituted hisba (sharia religious police) units in the north of the country. Yet no one in the north had then, in the early 2000s, been stoned to death or otherwise executed under sharia.

Nonetheless, the ethnic agenda of the Bakassi Boys was much less intense, purposeful, and central than the ethnic agenda of the other groups, such as OPC, IPOB, Massob or various groups in the Niger Delta such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

Shockingly, the Nigerian Civil Liberties Organization estimated that the Bakassi Boys murdered over 3,000 people in Anambra alone in their first year and half of existence.⁹¹

POLITICAL CAPITAL AND POLITICIZATION

Despite the egregious human rights and civil liberties violations, the brutal treatment of alleged criminals was met with little disapproval in local communities. The executions were widely popular and citizens did not attempt to protect victims.⁹² Perhaps a part of the reason for the tolerance of and applause for the mistreatment of the alleged robbers was a popular narrative in Nigeria at the time that robbers were frequently children of wealthy politicians and businessmen, spoiled by their life of privilege for any productive activity.⁹³ Even so, maintaining such a notion required considerable suppression of visual and other evidence, given whom the Bakassi Boys would drag for execution. Regardless of the source, the public saw the Bakassi Boys as a “supranaturally sanctioned vigilante group” as Daniel Jordan Smith put it in his study, instead of another criminal gang. A 51-year-old trader interviewed by Smith captured the public attitude and latitude toward the Bakassi Boys:

“Before Bakassi, we did not sleep. Everyone lived in fear. People rushed home after work. The armed robbers had taken over. It was too much. But Bakassi has shown them fire for fire. The criminals know that they will be dealt with mercilessly. They did not fear the police because even if they were caught, with enough money they would be released the next day. The police are useless. Now there is instant justice. With Bakassi, we sleep through the night.”⁹⁴

Within a year, the Bakassi Boys inspired home video docudramas where they were portrayed as *juju*-protected heroes who could cut the heads of their detainees with magical swords and determine their guilt or innocence by the direction of the blood drip.

The public embrace of the anti-crime brutality by the Bakassi Boys imbued the vigilantes with political capital. Rapidly, local politicians developed a keen interest in the Bakassi Boys. As early as 1999 as he successfully ran for Governor of Abia on the ticket of the People’s Democratic Party, Orji Uzor Kalu, decided to financially sponsor the Bakassi Boys.⁹⁵ The alignment that soon emerged between the governor and the vigilante group immediately generated resentment in the Nigeria Federal Police.

Moreover, Kalu also portrayed the appropriation of the Bakassi Boys as a tool in fighting against the oppression of Abuja and for Igbo rights. He would rabidly rant against Obasanjo, labeling him the enemy of the Igbo, and put forth the Bakassi Boys as a counterforce to any military or police invasion from Abuja. The Bakassi Boys embraced Kalu back, including praise for his fervent Igbo nationalism.⁹⁶

Similarly, in Anambra, Governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju of the People’s Democratic Party (1999-2003), despite some initial reluctance, wholeheartedly embraced the Bakassi Boys, calling himself “the commander in chief of the Bakassi Boys” or a “Bakassi Governor.” Mbadinuju was blatant in his effort to cultivate a personal source of violent power: “I’ll prefer something I’ll control, whether you call it police or you call it anything. This is because when I make my own law, I will have somebody to enforce it.”⁹⁷

Well aware of the vigilantes’ popularity, the state politicians who embraced the Bakassi Boys did not condemn their extrajudicial killings, let alone attempt to restrain them, even though Governor Mbadinuju was a lawyer himself. He openly dismissed human rights and rule of law considerations, mocking those who raised such concerns with retorts such as: If the robbers “run into the River Niger or somehow they hurt themselves or inflict a personal injury on themselves who do you blame?...We shouldn’t worry ourselves how an armed robber dies. That is not our business.”⁹⁸ Having previously broken with the political establishment, Mbadinuju was desperate for new sources of political capital, appropriating that of the Bakassi Boys and their popularity for delivering effective public security. In supporting the Bakassi Boys, Mbadinuju not only rode the coattails of the anti-crime crusade, but also claimed to revive age-old African traditions of so called “jungle justice” and *juju* while at the same time being a staunch Christian.

As is the case with vigilante groups around the world, Mbadinuju and other politicians rapidly began using the Bakassi Boys to intimidate their business and political rivals. The murders of a number of opposition politicians were blamed on the Bakassi Boys and Mbadinuju, but not proven, including that of the chairman of the All People’s Party (APP), the main opposition party in Anambra, in February 2001.⁹⁹

Other politicians could be intimidated short of murder: In Imo State, the Bakassi Boys detained and tortured those close to a prominent opposition politician Rochas Okorocha.¹⁰⁰ In Anambra, the minority leader Ifeanyi Ibegbu

was arrested by the Bakassi Boys in August 2000, stripped naked and beaten and tortured in front of a crowd, including being threatened to have his penis cut off, then dragged off to Bakassi Boys' detention for several days. Told he would be executed by the Bakassi Boys, he was eventually rescued by the Anambra Police Commissioner who negotiated his release with the Bakassi Boys. However, he was again attacked, along with nine other deputies of the House of Assembly of Anambra in December 2000. Inside the Assembly, he was stripped naked and beaten, allegedly because he opposed Governor Mbadinuju's supplementary budget proposals.¹⁰¹ What is striking about this account is the easy resort by the Bakassi Boys, and the politicians who appropriated them, to severe coercion for relatively minor political issues as well as the other brazenness and public visibility of the violations, the very same year that Nigerian journalists voted Anambra the most crime-free Nigerian state. In fact, under Mbadinuju, Anambra continued to deteriorate as one of the country's "most gravely mismanaged states" as *The New York Times* labelled it, with unpaid teachers striking for over a year, all state civil servants and court workers unpaid for months, and top politicians accused of pocketing state budget allocations.¹⁰² While court officials and other civil servants went without salaries, vigilantes were put on state payrolls.

Anambra's John Nebolisa, the traditional ruler of Awkuzu, had a reputation for being the sponsor of some of the vicious criminal gangs who terrorized Anambra before the Bakassi Boys killed or chased them out. Nebolisa himself absconded to Lagos from where he instigated humbling negotiations with Mbadinuju. Mbadinuju allowed him to return to Anambra, but only after he had stripped him of his royal title and other assets, declaring that no investigations were in process against Nebolisa and ordering the Bakassi Boys to leave him alone.¹⁰³

However, the governors of Anambra and Abia did not have the sole access to the Bakassi Boys. Other politicians and financiers could also attempt to buy the Bakassi Boys' muscle with money, and the group came to face

competing political pressures.¹⁰⁴ At various times, the governors nonetheless attempted to monopolize their control over the vigilante group. As a countermeasure to one such attempt by Mbadinuju, the Anambra traders suspended their payments to the Bakassi Boys, which Mbadinuju could not offset, having to yield to sharing his muscle with the traders for their purposes.¹⁰⁵

Every so often a very powerful rival businessman did not yield to the Bakassi Boys and Mbadinuju's pressures, such as Emeka Offor. Offor had financed Mbadinuju's campaign in exchange for a written agreement that after the elections Offor would be the one to choose the future state cabinet-level Minister of Finance and Minister of Works. But Mbadinuju reneged on the deal, and Offor ordered several busloads of heavily armed anti-riot police to storm the state's House of Assembly. Clad in a bulletproof vest, Offor was personally present to ensure all the Members of Parliament were thrown out of the building.¹⁰⁶ Far more daringly, Offor also ordered the police to arrest the chairman of the Anambra Bakassi Boys and kept him in detention in his villa for two days until he assured Offor that he would not face retaliation from the Bakassi Boys or the Governor.¹⁰⁷

The police faced similar politicization pressures, with anyone with enough money and influence seeking to turn local units into personal vehicles of power, revenge, and seizing rivals' land or businesses. And if police wanted to prosecute powerful individuals for crime, they might well face violent retribution themselves.

It was only when the Bakassi Boys started perpetrating predatory criminality themselves – such as by burning houses of alleged criminals but, in fact, doing so when the victims refused to pay them a protection fee – did parts of local communities come to disapprove of them.¹⁰⁸ In the market town of Nnewi in Anambra, citizens started complaining that local government councilors were misusing the local Bakassi Boys branch to terrorize the local community at traffic checkpoints, in addition to using them against rival politicians and businessmen. Worse yet from the community's perspective, the

Bakassi Boys were even inserting themselves into domestic disputes and matrimonial matters, arrogating more and more power onto themselves beyond slaughtering alleged criminals.¹⁰⁹ Although distrustful of the inaccessible and frequently corrupt formal judicial system, the community at first welcomed the Bakassi Boys dispute resolution role, it rapidly became disenchanted with the Bakassi Boys rulings and wanted the vigilantes to stay out of civil and family disputes.¹¹⁰ In response to popular frustrations with the local Bakassi Boys' overreach, the Onitsha branch of the Bakassi was brought in to disarm the Nnewe Bakassi.

In Onitsha too, however, citizens' complaints started mounting of increasing generalized extortion by the local Bakassi Boys. More and more individual Bakassi Boys came to work as personal enforcers and musclemen of local businessmen, politicians, and whomever could afford them.

In the state of Aba where the Bakassi Boys were born, their appropriation by those with money set off violence and counterviolence. In one flashpoint incident, some Bakassi Boys evicted the tenant of a landlord, a trader, flogging their victim and setting his house on fire. The trader then mobilized other traders to storm the Bakassi Boys centre and torch down the building, including a collection of Bakassi *juju*. The Bakassi Boys took revenge by kidnapping fifteen traders, beheading them and dumping their mutilated corpses in the market. This time, however, their victims were their patrons – the business community. Thus, lengthy negotiations between the uppity Bakassi Boys and their presumed overlords and financiers followed, with the Bakassi Boys eventually apologizing.¹¹¹ But the gift of impunity the traders and the local community had given the Bakassi Boys for two years was beginning to fray.

Stories also began circulating of the Bakassi Boys turning their predation on poor members of society in Nigeria's south, the so-called Mama Put, eking out survival by selling rice and beans, levying taxes on the poor and beating them up, including women if they did not pay up. And just like SARS, the Bakassi Boys were

accused of abducting young men, claiming they were criminals, but letting them go if they paid a ransom.¹¹² It was only then that larger segments of Nigerian communities in the south came to see them as the same type of criminals as those they were supposed to fight.

STATE RESPONSE

The state response to the Bakassi Boys has oscillated between embrace by state governors and federal bans with questionable legal standing, sometimes coupled with repressive but often futile arrests of Bakassi Boys members. This pendulum dynamic persists today, including in the latest Ebube Agu initiative of which the remnants of the Bakassi Boys are expected to be a key feature.

As soon as state representatives embraced the Bakassi Boys, the Nigerian Federal Police was against them. In both Abia and Anambra, the relationship between the Bakassi Boys and the Nigerian Federal Police was fractious, conflictual and sometimes characterized by violence and competition over authority and patronage.¹¹³

Typically, the Nigerian Federal Police has proven unable to curtail the crimes and abuses of the Bakassi Boys, let alone controlling the vigilantes.¹¹⁴ Instead, the police had to negotiate with the vigilantes at various times, even under humiliating terms. In one such negotiation with the police commissioner, the Bakassi leaders apparently handed the commissioner a list of police collaborators with criminal gangs, threatening to target them.¹¹⁵ The police had multiple reasons to resent the Bakassi Boys, including because local units could no longer collect money from the traders.¹¹⁶

Then, Anambra officially entrusted crime fighting to the Bakassi Boys. In December 2000, Governor Mbadinuju signed the law that the Anambra State House of Assembly passed to legitimize the Bakassi Boys. The legislation, the Anambra State Vigilante Service Act Number 9, also led to their relabelling with a formal name – the Anambra State Vigilante Service, also interchangeably referred to as the Anambra Vigilante Services

(AVS). In Abia, their public legitimization led to their renaming as the Abia State Vigilante Services. In December 2000, the Imo State House of Assembly also passed a bill recognizing the state's Bakassi Boys as the Imo State Vigilante Service. The State of Ebonyi similarly "legalized" the local Bakassi Boys, and Edo explored such a move before subsequent federal Government actions discouraged legalizing the vigilantes under state auspices.

To be consistent with the Nigerian Constitution, the law did not permit them to carry firearms – let alone, of course, to execute people – with the groups mandated to hand suspects over to the police immediately. The officially recognized vigilantes, however, were given vehicles and further funding, in addition to that received from the traders. In Anambra, the AVS was allegedly also temporarily given an office inside the governor's official compound.¹¹⁷

As a result of the legislation, a supervisory committee was formed in Anambra, composed of the chairperson of the AVS, a police superintendent, state legislators, market associations, and traditional elders.¹¹⁸ However, the committee did not succeed in restraining (nor likely even attempted to) the Bakassi Boys' brutality.¹¹⁹ Nor did a Code of Conduct promulgated by Governor Mbadinuju reiterating that AVS should hand suspects over to the police make any difference, serving mostly as a political whitewash for the Governor. No meaningful prosecution of any of the excesses committed by the Bakassi Boys took place in the state. Rather, the supervisory committee was used as a mechanism for the various claimants to the Bakassi Boys' muscle and popularity to keep an eye on their rivals to ensure they did not use the Bakassi Boys against them.

The committee – and, more broadly, the creation of the state legislation – also failed to institutionalize not just accountability, but also allegiance to the state. The loyalty of the vigilantes remained to their political patrons, especially those who paid enough. The committee even refused to specify how many vigilante groups were part of the AVS, not maintaining any meaningful registry.¹²⁰

Thus, being on the states' payroll did not motivate the vigilantes to reduce their brutality and extrajudicial killing, since the state authorities did not meaningfully demand such improvements in behaviour or prosecute violations. Instead, the state glossed over them, dismissed them, or excused them. Some supporters claimed the Bakassi Boys merely aided the police, despite the ongoing frequent public nature of the executions.¹²¹

The federal Government's response, however, was the opposite. As early as 2000, the federal Minister of Police Affairs called for a ban on the Bakassi Boys because they acted "without due regard for law."¹²² President Olusegun Obasanjo – a southerner but a Yoruba and a fierce nationalist who was a key Nigerian military commander in the Biafra civil war in the 1960s – was strongly opposed to the formation of anything he saw as an ethnic militia, which included the Igbo Bakassi Boys.¹²³ Within months, he banned the Bakassi Boys, though without a legal mandate to issue such a ban or being able to formalize his executive order into law, and sent the military into Onitsha to arrest them. The operation, however, backfired, with the military running away from a Bakassi display of power – allegedly infused by demonstrations of *juju*.¹²⁴

The retreat was humiliating and also further endowed the Bakassi Boys with a sense of impunity. More important than the *juju*, however, was the backing of the Bakassi Boys by the OMATA and Governor Mbadinuju who organized public demonstrations of some 200,000 on behalf of the Bakassi Boys and against the federal Government. Subsequent negotiations between Mbadinuju and the federal Government¹²⁵ and the federal Government's assessment that arresting the Bakassi Boys would entail potentially highly violent clashes with their supporters among the public, led Obasanjo to rescind the ban on the Bakassi Boys.

But two years later, in the fall of 2002, the federal Government resurrected an effort to disband the Bakassi Boys and reissued a ban on the groups. Abuja had come under strong pressure from international human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights

Watch to crack down on the Bakassi Boys, with both groups having published devastating exposes of the Bakassi Boys' egregious criminality.¹²⁶ Perhaps more important, the federal actions followed a highly visible brutal murder of the Anambra President of the Nigerian Bar Association, Barnabas Igwe, a man who publicly criticized the Bakassi Boys for their human rights violations and condemned the Governor's embrace of them. In Abia, new violent confrontations between the Bakassi Boys and the Nigerian Federal Police left scores dead.

This time undeterred, the police continued raiding Bakassi detention centres and headquarters, arresting over one hundred vigilantes and releasing scores of detainees, many having been tortured.¹²⁷ However, state governors continued to attempt to interfere with the process, often negotiating the release of arrested vigilantes, with federal charges against them being dropped.¹²⁸

Some segments of the Nigerian public, nonetheless, had by then soured on the Bakassi Boys and approved of the federal actions. The political capital of the Bakassi Boys with other parts of the public, however, continued to hold, as did the support of traders' associations and many local politicians who vociferously called on the federal Government to reinstate the Bakassi Boys.¹²⁹

A PERSISTING RECOURSE, TEMPTATION, AND CHALLENGE – VIGILANTES 20 YEARS LATER

Neither the federal actions, nor some souring of public support, ended the existence of the Bakassi Boys and the formal iterations of Abia State Vigilante Service, Anambra State Vigilante Service, and Imo State Vigilante Service. In all three states, the Bakassi Boys continued to be active, even if, more clandestinely.¹³⁰ In fact, they grew in numbers. While in 2002, the Bakassi Boys were believed to number 500, in 2005, they were assessed to top 3,500.¹³¹

Extrajudicial killings also continued. In August 2005 in Aba of Abia State, the Bakassi Boys allegedly rounded up 37 suspected criminals, detaining them in a poorly ventilated cell where some 27 died of suffocation.¹³² In response to highly visible extrajudicial killings after 2002, the police at various times would conduct raids against the Bakassi Boys, rounding up suspects and publicly parading them, but failing to achieve deterrence capacity through meaningful prosecutions of a sufficient number of them, the few sporadic death penalties handed out to a few convicted alleged Bakassi Boys notwithstanding.¹³³

Nor did state-level authorities wean themselves off of their embrace of the now clandestinely operating vigilantes. Over the next two decades, most state administrations in Anambra and Abia continued either supporting them covertly,¹³⁴ or openly reauthorizing them. Even immediately after reissued federal bans on the groups, state-level authorities and traders maintained their financial support for the groups.¹³⁵

In recent years, the current Governor of Anambra, Willie Obiano (2014-), has openly spoken about his support¹³⁶ for the Anambra Vigilante Group,¹³⁷ the latest iteration of vigilantes in the state with origins in the Bakassi Boys. The Bakassi Boys were also used for anti-crime purposes by the two preceding Anambra administrations of Chris Ngige and Peter Obi. In 2019, Governor Obiano incorporated the remnants of and new iterations of the Bakassi Boys into his anti-crime state operations known as "Operation Kpochapu 1 and 2," without exact specification as to their role. Characterized by the Anambra government as inspired by Smart City approaches in Boston, Operation Kpochapu has also included the procurement of closed-circuit cameras to be installed in Awka Nnewi, and Onitsha, 111 vehicles with communication devices, 71 motorcycles, and other equipment to be distributed to the military, police, civil defence corps, and other law enforcement agencies in the state¹³⁸ - though without clarity as to whether vigilante groups, such as the Anambra Vigilante Group, would also receive such state handouts.

Obiano has, however, been explicit in this no-holds-barred approach to fighting crime in Anambra, warning that the second phase of Operation Kpochapu will be “deadlier” than the first:

“We have declared a total war on criminals such as kidnappers, human traffickers, bandits, cultists and car snatchers. I’m warning all criminals in the state to disappear and I am also warning those with the intention of coming not to try. This operation Kpochapu II will be deadlier. If you shoot at our law enforcement agents, we are going to wipe you out immediately because we are not interested in recycling any criminal.”¹³⁹

In Abia State, the Abia State Vigilante Service/ Abia State Vigilante Group wear arms and thus receive training from the police, facilitated by the state government. The group members were also issued distinctive uniforms and identity cards.¹⁴⁰ The existence of the Abia State Vigilante Service has not stopped the current Governor, Okezie Ikpeazu, (2015-), from also announcing the “resurrection” of the Bakassi Boys in 2019 as tensions with the Niger Delta militants have intensified. Thus, that year, the state government stated that it was recruiting 800 men and women into the newly “reestablished” Bakassi Boys who, according to the state government, will be tasked with tackling crime and cultism.¹⁴¹

Unlike in Nigeria’s North East where the anti-Boko Haram militia groups, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force, are receiving human rights training from Nigerian NGOs and the United Nations, no such training has systematically or even sporadically been provided to the vast majority of members and leaders of militia and vigilante groups in the South East.

The Oodua People's Congress



UN Photo

The Bakassi Boys not only spawned chapters in Nigeria's South East, but also inspired other groups to adopt the anti-crime agenda – one of the latter being the OPC in the South West and beyond. While the Bakassi Boys have been principally a vigilante group that at various times embraced ethnic elements, the OPC was at first an ethnic political and militia group that over time took on the anti-crime agenda in emulation of the Bakassi Boys. Cognizant of how much political capital with the street, the business community, and state politicians the anti-crime slaughter brought the Bakassi Boys, the OPC has been reinventing and adapting its anti-crime agenda over the past 20 years.

While South East cities like Aba and Onitsha are key trading hubs in West Africa, the South West hosts much of Nigeria's industrial capacity (some 60 per cent) and banking sector (about 45 per cent).¹⁴² It also hosts Nigeria's three deep sea ports and two of Nigeria's three largest cities – Lagos and Ibadan. They are the most important loci of the OPC. As detailed in the Landscape section of this paper, the OPC is hardly the sole militia group with an anti-crime agenda operating in the South West. Nor is it the only vigilante group operating in Lagos where other anti-crime vigilantes, frequently referred to by the area of their operation and including, for example, the Ajegunde group, the Adeniji Adele group, and the Gbogunleri/Isale Oja group,¹⁴³ have preceded or operated concurrently with the OPC.

ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The OPC was founded in 1994 by Dr Frederick Fasehun to resist the perceived marginalization of the Yoruba people in Nigeria's South West, a perceived injustice inflamed by the military's cancellation of the 1993 elections in which Chief Moshood Kashiwamo Olawale Abiola, a Yoruba, had a good chance of winning. Its founding and leading members also included Yoruba professionals and human rights activists. The OPC sought to ensure Yoruba self-determination through the creation of a distinct federal unit of all Yoruba people across the South West, West, and the Middle Belt, with its own political and security authorities. (The term Oodua is a short form of Oduduwa, the progenitor of the Yoruba ethnic group.) The OPC's objectives included an allocation of Nigeria's natural resources more in favour of the Yoruba as well as better access to power in the region and in Abuja.¹⁴⁴

OPC soon spread across many of South West urban spaces, over time also establishing a presence in rural areas. Chapters were formed in the states with a Yoruba presence in the South West and elsewhere, including Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Lagos, and in the western state of Kwara and Kogi State in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. In the early 2000s, it claimed to have five million members across Nigeria, though the number could have been as low one million. For many of the unemployed and frustrated Yoruba youth, the OPC became not only a vehicle for self-assertion and venting, but also of for getting access to taxes collected from local communities and jobs as OPC guards.

To pursue its local mobilization and Yoruba power objectives, the OPC did not shy away from the resort to mob violence, instigating urban riots, such as those in Sagamu of Ogun State and Lagos, or paralyzing cities with strikes. At various times, the OPC leadership would claim responsibility for (or conversely distance itself from) other acts of protest or violence by Yoruba youth.

The OPC has a national structure with a president, treasurer, secretary general, and other national functional authorities. The Annual National Conference is the OPC's supreme

decision-making body. Each state branch has its own secretariat and local units at the ward and zone level, including commanders, secretaries, and treasurers. However, because of the split between the Fasehun and Adam factions, many of these structures at times had two parallel officers for each position during the 2000s period until Fasehun's death in 2018.

By 1999, factionalism began to plague the OPC.¹⁴⁵ The prospect that a Yoruba – General Olusegun Obasanjo – would be elected president motivated Fasehun to begin deemphasizing violence as a tool of ethnic self-determination and justice, a change in direction opposed by Gani Adams, then the leader of OPC's youth wing.¹⁴⁶ Over time, Fasehun's faction started to focus on promoting Yoruba values and cultural heritage and was perceived as far more moderate than the Adams faction who in the early 2000s refused to engage with Nigeria's mainstream politicians in Abuja and kept promoting more maximalist demands. Two decades later, Adams, now the chieftain or generalissimo of the Yoruba, is extensively engaged in Nigeria's mainstream politics in the South West.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the violent clashes between the two OPC factions led to scores of deaths and violent attacks on property, including on Fasehun's clinic in the Mushin area of Lagos by Adams's faction. Adams branded Fasehun a corrupt traitor on the payroll of politicians in Abuja, and Adams requested police protection even though he had previously violently confronted the police.¹⁴⁷ The factional violence frequently indiscriminately affected local communities, causing deaths, injuries, and property loss to those not directly involved with the OPC. Consequently, various local Yoruba communities soured on the OPC.¹⁴⁸

The OPC's newly acquired anti-crime agenda proved to be a compensatory mechanism for retaining and increasing public support. By the early 2000s, the OPC thus coupled its Yoruba self-determination agenda with anti-crime activities (even as its factional violence was a major source of insecurity to local communities). A crucial motivator was the immense popularity and political capital of the Bakassi Boys in the South East. A second reason for embracing the

anti-crime role was a calculation that the anti-crime agenda would enable the OPC to evade or at least mitigate President Olusegun Obasanjo's January 2000 ban on ethnic militias; but the ban, though approved by Nigeria's National Assembly, was never formalized into law and its legal validity and practical implications were questioned by many. Deeply impressed by the Biafra War in which he was a key Nigerian military commander, Obasanjo was intensely opposed to ethnic mobilization.

Like the Bakassi Boys, OPC members armed with firearms, pistols, cutlasses, and knives undertook various anti-crime activities to kill and chase out alleged robbers, kidnappers, and bandits, conducting raids against them and tracking those on the run. Fasehun portrayed the adoption of the anti-crime activities as designed to "protect life and property" in response to requests from communities suffering from what he characterized as a "high crime wave"¹⁴⁹ – OPC's anti-crime drive being represented a manifestation of its social responsibility.¹⁵⁰

Soon, the anti-crime operations took on the form of an all-out war against alleged criminals, such as in the neighbourhood of Mushin that had also been a key centre of the power struggle between the Adams' and Fasehun's branches of OPC. Targeting both Hausa and Yoruba, the OPC would beat alleged thieves to death on the street in front of onlookers, purportedly setting them on fire, or cutting off their heads to display on pillars.¹⁵¹ Sometimes, the bodies of the slaughtered suspects would be dumped in front of military barracks or police stations to emphasize the police's incompetence and the superior anti-crime skill of the OPC. Worse yet, without interference from soldiers or the police who likely feared for their own lives, sometimes the OPC executed tortured suspects, in one case 20 at once, in front of the barracks.¹⁵² Such actions demonstrated not just superior anti-crime performance but also advertised OPC's power and impunity.

The expansive anti-crime roles the OPC arrogated to itself also included "investigating" how community residents acquired their economic assets, even the money that was at any point in their wallets. Unsatisfactory answers

would lead to allegations of the community members being criminals leading to either extortion or abuse.¹⁵³

At least to some extent, the OPC's "public safety" role predated the formation of the Bakassi Boys. As early as 1996, the OPC began to "regulate traffic" on the outskirts of Lagos. However, much of the traffic regulation amounted to violent extortion of vehicle operators and passengers.¹⁵⁴ This type of "traffic control" extended well past 2000. During various times of gasoline shortage in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the OPC also took it upon itself to ensure orderly queues and safe distribution at the gas stations.¹⁵⁵

The anti-crime activities spread across the states where the OPC operated. They targeted alleged highway robbers, extortionists at traffic junctions who would seek to rival the OPC's traffic "tax" collection, cultists, and armed robbers. Alleged suspects were brutally tortured and killed, sometimes in public executions. By the end of 2002, the OPC murdered or injured hundreds of unarmed civilians in its anti-crime or political activities, plus scores involved in the intra-factional fighting, in addition to killing hundreds of policemen.¹⁵⁶

And like the Bakassi Boys, the OPC also claimed to be in possession of powerful *juju* that allowed it to prevail against criminals. Charmed talismans and canes were advertised by the OPC as protecting them from bullets, while objects under the OPC's spells could combust into flames. Initiation rituals also involved the use of charms, with recruits trained not only in how to use weapons and in military tactics but also how to deploy charms.¹⁵⁷ However, many the OPC members interviewed by Human Rights Watch in 2002 claimed they received no training.¹⁵⁸

The OPC also inserted itself into management of cross-border crimes and smuggling at the Nigeria-Benin border where Yoruba communities also live, allegedly standing up some 600 OPC guards there – and even establishing an OPC chapter in Benin.¹⁵⁹ The OPC there apprehended alleged smugglers and robbers who would hide on the other side of the border, sometimes cooperating with a Beninois vigilante group called "The Committee." The OPC

would arrest the alleged robbers and hand them over to The Committee who would then set them afire. The Nigerian police would, in turn, target the OPC for its role in the crime, and arrest local OPC leaders.¹⁶⁰

The *ethnic* agenda also featured prominently in OPC's activities, sometimes disguised as public safety operations. The peak of OPC involvement in ethnic violence was probably the second half of 2000 when OPC attacks on the Hausa and other northerners killed hundreds and displaced many more. The OPC also justified its anti-Hausa actions in economic justice terms, such as objecting to the Hausa "hoarding" of markets in Lagos.¹⁶¹

Two years later, however, the OPC would attempt to portray its role in ethnic violence as primarily one of protection of the Yoruba. This evolution was all part and parcel of its expanded definition of ethnic self-determination including anti-crime vigilante activities. When Muslims burned three churches in Oyo State in May 2002, the OPC stationed its members as guards at other churches in the South West, claiming that this prevented the burning in Osun State.¹⁶² But it soon began to target the Hausa minorities on the payroll of Yoruba traders and others who wanted to seize the property of local Hausa people or settle other scores and disputes with them.¹⁶³ Killings of Hausa people in the South West, allegedly by the OPC, were frequently seen by the northerners as inadequately investigated and prosecuted.¹⁶⁴ The OPC was also implicated in crimes against other ethnic groups in the south, such as the Christian Igbo and Ijaw, characterizing the Igbos as "armed layabouts" from other parts of the country and "bandits."¹⁶⁵

And many victims of OPC's violence and anti-crime vigilante activities and extortion were fellow Yoruba.

Of course, the OPC public safety provision did not come for free. Streets and neighbourhoods had to pay taxes to the OPC for its anti-crime activities and sometimes refused to do so, incurring the wrath of the OPC. At other times, some local communities were able to get away with not paying and not receiving the OPC's protection.

Some of the neighbourhoods and associations did not want OPC's presence because they feared the violence the police-OPC confrontations would bring into the so-called OPC enclaves.¹⁶⁶

The self-appointed volunteer anti-crime vigilante agenda over time also mutated into security for hire. By 2007, for example, OPC units were regularly retained as security guards for private parties and professional functions or by landlords and community development associations in middle and low-income neighbourhoods with inadequate police presence.¹⁶⁷ Each landlord or community association had to pay between USD 50-80 per month per OPC security guard, often hiring six to eight in each area¹⁶⁸ – a hefty expense. (Rich neighbourhoods would have had their other pre-existing private security arrangements.) And individual houses in poor neighbourhoods had to pay about USD 1.3 a month to the OPC for its protection services, not a trivial expense for those living on a few dollars a day.¹⁶⁹

Not paying for OPC protection was rarely an option. Bus drivers in Lagos, for example, had to pay local OPC enforcers between USD 0.14 and 0.40 at every stop. Sometimes, local governments would even reach informal arrangements with the OPC and collect between 10 and 20 per cent of the money extorted from the bus drivers.¹⁷⁰

Over time, many of OPC's anti-crime vigilante actions became essentially extortion and even outright theft.

In some neighbourhoods, the OPC displaced preexisting vigilante groups that had been on the payroll of the associations, labelling them as ineffective. It should be noted, however, that many members of the Nigerian police or Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps are also hired as private security guards while holding their official positions, particularly in the Yoruba areas.

Well before taking the role of a semi-private security company, however, OPC members were hired as musclemen in settling personal disputes over land, property, and other issues for the highest bidder, sometimes disguising their murders and property destruction as targeting criminals.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND POWER ABUSE

The OPC's anti-crime activities were rife with egregious human rights violations and the most severe crimes – murder, extrajudicial killings and torture.¹⁷¹ Like the Bakassi Boys, the OPC vigilantes would hack its victims with machetes and set their corpses or severely injured, but still alive, bodies afire. Sometimes, they would pour acid on their victims. Often the OPC would also summarily kill apprehended suspects on the spot. The executions were frequently of scores of people at once. Boys and girls were also victims, sometimes disappeared by the OPC.¹⁷²

And in “judicial” processes conducted by the Bakassi Boys and many militias around the world, the evidence of the guilt of the suspects was typically inadequate or non-existent, with confessions mostly obtained through torture or the use of charms. Random people were simply rounded up on the streets and dragged off to detention and torture merely for being out on the street late at night. Raids on the OPC-run detention centres in the South West would discover tens of people held at any one time in poor conditions, most having been tortured.¹⁷³

The militia group also employed women and children as sources of intelligence -- a violation of international and Nigerian laws.¹⁷⁴ Moreover, the OPC would violently target those who opposed and condemned the group or attempted to conduct investigations into its activities.

Rapidly, the OPC's street popularity enhanced its sense of impunity and fuelled its own participation in predatory criminality. The anti-crime actor became one of the principal sources of crime. In the early 2000s, the police estimated that some 60 per cent of violence in the South West was perpetrated by the OPC.¹⁷⁵

Despite the existence of a national-level disciplinary procedure for offenses such as undermining the effectiveness and reputation of the OPC, sexual abuse, corruption, fighting, or religious and other discrimination, it appears that only rarely did OPC structure punish its own violators. In one case in 2002, when public frustration with the OPC behaviour became

vociferous, the Osun State chapter dismissed ten of its members for “intimidating the public and engaging in thuggery contrary to OPC objectives.”¹⁷⁶ The OPC would nonetheless claim that many had been expelled from OPC for such violations.¹⁷⁷

POLITICAL CAPITAL AND POLITICIZATION

The OPC was very systematic in mounting anti-crime operations that would be popular with the street, often reveling in exposing the ineptitude of the police and the OPC's superior capacity to deliver safety from crime. In Osun's city of Ilesa, for example, the police released suspect high-level members of a crime syndicate in what was a vastly unpopular move. With support of a mob, in turn the OPC burned down the houses, cars, and other properties of alleged members of the syndicate.¹⁷⁸ The community applauded. Actions like these built up the OPC's political capital. Interviews with local community members in Ibadan, the capital of Oyo, and Lagos are representative of the attitude of many: “Life is more secure with them [OPC]. With OPC you can sleep with your eyes closed. Police and other guards run away from robbers but OPC do not,” or “Armed robbers were like mosquitoes in my area but now OPC killed them all. Now we sleep well.”¹⁷⁹

Like the Bakassi Boys, the OPC did gain considerable political support for its anti-crime activities from local communities. But because the anti-crime raids often involve indiscriminate plunder and destruction, in addition to entailing factional infighting, the OPC's political capital even within the Yoruba community was continually challenged and undermined. For example, after a gang of robbers raided a bank and killed two OPC members in the process, the OPC raided the neighbourhood, killing 40 people, burning down 12 houses, and branding the area “Oodua village.”¹⁸⁰ In another incident, in retaliation for an attack on a female OPC member, the Gani Adams branch raided the neighbourhood, setting many houses on fire and killing various Yoruba youth, including OPC members. When the OPC tough men did not find an alleged criminal at home, they would sometimes kill his relatives, including pregnant

wives, sometimes returning to the area the next day, raiding homes, dragging out men and killing those accused of being criminals in the streets.¹⁸¹ Two decades later, interviews with community members in the Mushin area who lived through many such raids (though such behaviour was hardly confined to Mushin or Lagos alone), still reflected an ambiguity between the community's approval of the anti-crime verve and effectiveness and anger at the level of violence.¹⁸² While equally brutal, brazen, egregious, and unaccountable, the Bakassi Boys were much more discriminate in the slaughter of alleged criminals – for example, not burning down neighbourhoods wholesale – and thus their political capital was much stronger at first.

Rapidly, and unlike the Bakassi Boys at the time, the OPC developed an extensive propaganda machine, producing copious written materials to portray its version of events or stoke ethnic resentments against the Hausa and northerners in Nigeria's south in general.¹⁸³ At the same time, both factions of OPC consistently denied that their members carried arms, or killed anyone, or, in the face of irrefutable evidence, would blame the other faction of OPC for spontaneous outbreaks of violence. Fasehun himself would issue the following type statements on matters into which the OPC inserted itself and the outcomes of which it wanted to sway: "We do not want to kill because we are not murderers. But we want the whole world to know that OPC is an itching powder, whoever rubs it the wrong way will have himself to blame."¹⁸⁴

20 years later, this propaganda machine remains in full gear. In addition to the official press office of the OPC and Gani Adams (now not just the leader of the OPC but also appointed Aare Ona Kakanfo of Yorubaland, the Yoruba chieftain or generalissimo, with power easily surpassing that of elected state governors), key journalists in Lagos unofficially serve as his and OPC's mouthpieces.¹⁸⁵

Nonetheless, despite anger in some communities for the indiscriminate "anti-crime" raids, the OPC's role in anti-crime activity did give it popularity in the early 2000s. State authorities and local politicians took notice and sought to appropriate the OPC. Prominent political

figures, including elected state authorities in the South West, supported the OPC with financial donations, public endorsements, and personal protection.¹⁸⁶ For example, the Governor of the Lagos State, Bola Tinubu (1999-2007), started incorporating references to OPC in his public speeches, promising that the group, particularly when incorporated into the state's security structure, would protect the lives and property of all Lagosians and not pursue an ethnic agenda; still he refrained from commenting on its egregious extrajudicial killings and other human rights violations.¹⁸⁷ The Lagos State Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice similarly stated: "As long as people's lives and property cannot be guaranteed by the federal police, people will continue to depend on organizations like OPC ... You can't blame them."¹⁸⁸

In turn, the OPC provided security at public events for their political sponsors and even at official public functions hosted by state authorities courting the OPC. Strikingly, the OPC also provided security for the funeral celebration of the assassinated Minister of Justice and Attorney General, Bola Ige, that was attended by President Obasanjo as well as OPC leaders such as Gani Adams!¹⁸⁹ The OPC protected the venue, patrolled roads, and controlled crowds, significantly outnumbering the police. During the 2003 Presidential, Parliamentary, and Gubernatorial elections, the OPC also assumed a large role, claiming to defend the public against crime and, hypocritically, warning politicians not to use armed actors during their campaigns.¹⁹⁰

As mentioned before, local government authorities also sought to capitalize on the OPC's extortion, tolerating the OPC's traffic policing role and taking a 10-20 per cent cut for itself of the fees OPC collected from motorists and bus drivers.¹⁹¹

But because the OPC had a very explicit political agenda and large political ambitions, appropriating the vigilantes was far harder than for elected state authorities in the South West than politicians in South East.

Moreover, the OPC actively attempted to insert itself into local political power struggles. In Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, the OPC intervened

on the side of local groups who wanted to oust a Fulani ruler and replace him with a Yoruba one. The intervention entailed a convoy of 30 OPC vehicles with riled up armed members, ostensibly to rally in the streets; but panic spread that they would remove the Fulani amir by force. The police, however, interceded, killing some of the OPC men and arresting others.¹⁹²

At times, such meddling backfired politically. For example, the Gani Adams faction sought to shape the outcome of a power struggle over the Owo chieftaincy, symbolically a very important position for the Yoruba. A Local Government Area in Ondo State, Owo was the capital of a Yoruba city-state between 1400 and 1600, and the chieftaincy carries significant authority with the Yoruba. After Adams disagreed with the selection of the new chief, he attempted an invasion of the Owo palace, but was beaten back by the palace guards and the police. At least 40 died in the violence, and the OPC in the area lost much of its political capital, with the local OPC leader run out of town and the community switching support to the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps.

STATE RESPONSE

Like in the South East, the state response to the anti-crime role of the OPC and its own violence and criminality was mixed: The federal Government and police were vehemently opposed to the OPC's existence and tried to ban it and eradicate it with violence, but they often failed in their violent repression. Even while at times officially denying it, state authorities were far more inclined to embrace the OPC and incorporate it into the state's security structures, seeking the same legitimation of the OPC that their counterparts in the South East succeeded in bestowing on the Bakassi Boys.

The fluctuations in the federal-state tug of war over the OPC also pulled in the police and reflected its changing attitudes toward the OPC. The relationship varied not just in time but also across geographic areas. Between May and November 1999, for example, the police allowed several operations against robbers to be conducted jointly with the OPC.¹⁹³ But at the same time in other places, the relationship was

very violent, particularly before and after the 1999 elections when the OPC attacked at least ten police stations. By the end of 2002, the OPC killed over 200 policemen.¹⁹⁴ The OPC poured acid on some of them, others were hacked to pieces.

With Abuja's encouragement, the police response was characterized by equal violence; and at various times the government sought to suppress and perhaps altogether eradicate the OPC, as it did to all ethnic militias following Obasanjo's ban on them. Like the OPC anti-crime campaign, the relationship between the OPC and the police became an "all-out war."¹⁹⁵ National level authorities issued shoot-on-sight instructions against suspected OPC members; local police commanders condemned the OPC as "synonymous with anarchy" and "criminals themselves."¹⁹⁶ The police violently raided and broke up OPC meetings, killing scores in each raid and hauling off others into detention, using the same justification as the OPC – namely, that the detainees were violent robbers. The police would ambush OPC convoys, killing 30 or 40 OPC men at a time. Tens went missing.¹⁹⁷

The police killed hundreds of OPC members or those merely suspected of OPC membership; others were tortured and held in lengthy detention.¹⁹⁸ Police officials sometimes explained the detentions and subsequent release of OPC members without charge by saying that despite President Obasanjo's declarations of a ban on the OPC, there was, in fact, no actual law criminalizing the existence of the group or membership in it. Yet the police struggled to gather prosecutable evidence on actual serious crimes by the OPC, including public executions. That applied also to Gani Adams, whom prosecutors did accuse of murder and conspiracy to murder and who, after months in hiding, was arrested but ultimately released for a lack of evidence.

In Ibadan and Lagos, SARS was purportedly deeply involved in the police attacks on the OPC, including the torture during interrogation and detention.¹⁹⁹ But among the thousands of OPC members dragged to detention, very few were successfully prosecuted for violent or other crimes.

The violence, however, did not deter the efforts of the South West governors from bringing the OPC on state payroll and turning it into a state security branch, with several of governors condemning police ineffectiveness, praising the OPC and arguing that it be given a formal role. In 2001, Lagos Governor Tinubu sought to incorporate the OPC into the state's security structures, promising that "any means necessary to step down the crime wave in the state will be adopted."²⁰⁰ Similarly, the special adviser on security in the Lagos State argued at that time: "The police are overwhelmed by the enormity of the crime situation in Lagos. It is therefore absolutely necessary to involve citizens in maintaining security. Every group, be it OPC, Egbesu, or Bakassi are welcome as long as they help maintain security in Lagos. Who will not go to the devil for protection if you can't get protection from elsewhere?"²⁰¹ State officials also kept denying any personal knowledge of OPC's extrajudicial killings. However, the federal Government prevented the Lagos State from formally enrolling the OPC in security structures of Lagos, emphasizing that the OPC, like other ethnic militias, was banned and that any state use of the group for anti-crime purposes was in violation of the law.²⁰²

Nonetheless, state officials deliver patronage to the OPC through other means. Without much transparency, including merely just keeping a reliable registry, let alone investigations for abuses such as murders and extrajudicial killings, scores of OPC members were brought onto the state payroll through schemes such as the Lagos State Transport Monitoring Agency (LASTMA), created by Governor Tinubu.²⁰³ Meant as a local traffic police force and not meant to be armed, LASTMA became a de facto paramilitary body, its uniformed and arms-bearing members at times engaging in policing roles well beyond their statutory traffic regulation,²⁰⁴ as well as extensive extortion along highways in Lagos. In some cases, LASTMA officers were accused of causing crashes between autos and trucks resulting in deaths, at least inadvertently.²⁰⁵

Nor did the federal pressure prevent other forms of pushback from state authorities: Even as the federal police were arresting hundreds of alleged OPC members for crimes such as armed robbery and arson, the Lagos State Office of the Public

Defender was unconditionally releasing them.²⁰⁶ State prosecutors would excuse such actions by insisting that they never got any evidence from the police against them or even advice for prosecuting them.²⁰⁷ Nor did state authorities ever publicly condemn the vigilante actions or the OPC's inter-factional violence.

At the same time, at various moments of particularly intense inter-factional and police-OPC violence, the Lagos State governor played a role in attempting to mediate to reduce the violence.²⁰⁸

What ultimately emerged after three years of warfare between the OPC and the police, overlaid by the tug of war between state-level and federal authorities, was neither the victory of one over the other, nor adherence to rule of law and accountability norms. Instead, the new equilibrium became a balance of terror between the police and the OPC.

Several other factors enabled the reluctant détente with the federal Government: One was the OPC's decision to support President Obasanjo during an impeachment trial in the Nigerian Assembly in the fall of 2002. For the OPC leadership, the fact that Obasanjo was a Yoruba trumped his violent hostility toward the OPC. Second, the fact that the police did release Adams doused the OPC-police war.

In various states where the OPC operated, that balance of terror translated into not just accommodation but even some level of cooperation. For example, in March 2003, in Osun's city of Osogbo, the police began to collaborate with the OPC in anti-crime activities.²⁰⁹ In Lagos, the OPC would still illegally apprehend and torture people, but before they died, the OPC would hand them over to the police (in whose custody they frequently died).²¹⁰ Thus, both could claim anti-crime successes. Arguably, thus at least to some extent, the OPC's calculation that by adopting the anti-crime agenda and refashioning itself in part as a vigilante group would lessen the federal authorities' violence against it paid off.

In 2005, the federal Government attempted to get a handle on the OPC and other vigilante

groups by proposing that they become a part of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria, which is assessed to have some 3,500 members in Lagos.²¹¹ The OPC refused, fearing that such an enrollment would dilute its Yoruba message and that the federal Government then would be able to orchestrate the non-Yoruba, northern leaders to head the VGN and thus subjugate and eviscerate the OPC; and that being on someone's else payroll would undermine the allegiance of OPC members to the OPC leadership.²¹² Instead, some of them including the OPC, have appropriated the old proposal to make a counterproposal of their own, trying to induce local chapters of the VGN to join *them* – in other words, to be absorbed by them. That would eliminate the VGN as a competitor to OPC in the sale of security services to households, businesses, and community associations. Unwilling to agree to its local demise in the Yoruba areas through such an absorption, the VGN has refused, resentful of the counterproposal.²¹³

A PERSISTING RECOURSE, TEMPTATION, AND CHALLENGE – VIGILANTES 20 YEARS LATER

20 years later, the OPC is still alive and powerful, even though far less violent, for several reasons. First, the balance of terror with the police has held to a large extent. But the police have failed to develop a robust deterrence capacity in conjunction with the OPC, with many policemen still fearing the OPC.²¹⁴ Second, with Fahesun's withdrawal from more direct politics and focusing more on social issues until his eventual death, the factional war within the OPC evaporated and the OPC became unified. Third, Gani Adams has become the chieftain of the Yoruba, a powerful authority with expectations of a code of conduct, transforming from the violence-stoking firebrand he used to be. His leadership of the Yoruba also means that many state governors do not challenge his authority and actions, feeling compelled to consult with him on official and unofficial policy decisions without his having to resort to either threats or regularized violence.²¹⁵

Along with moderation in the leadership's behaviour, there has also come a moderation in the OPC philosophy. It now embraces a

concept of "true federalism," in which power would be significantly devolved from Abuja to states, and instead of budgets being allocated from the federal Government to the states, the states would control resources and pass some Abuja. Appointment power would also reside at the level of the state governments more than previously.²¹⁶

Crucially, the OPC was able to extract various security contracts from President Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2015), akin to the job and contract creation opportunities that characterized the Nigeria's peace 2005 deal with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta. That deal became a reference point for many militia and vigilante groups in Nigeria who have sought similar contracts and payoffs at both the federal and state level from Nigerian Government authorities.²¹⁷ In 2015, for example, as a price for its electoral support, the OPC, along with set of other armed groups in southern Nigeria, was awarded an USD 88 million contract for pipeline surveillance and protection against bunkering,²¹⁸ despite the fact that the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps, a formal institution, is tasked with protecting pipelines and other infrastructure across Nigeria. Since the OPC is not an official registered private security company or officially recognized security branch, the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps could not cooperate with the OPC in the pipeline protection.²¹⁹ By the end of 2019, the OPC was no longer believed to be engaged in protecting the pipeline, though at least one private security company was believed to still have such a contract.

Such contracts, that are *de facto* political payoffs, highlight a three-fold problem. If the money dries up after the programme expires, the contract is terminated, and if the state administration changes, the armed vigilante or militia group may increase the insecurity and violence to force a new contract. Or, despite the fact that the contract has expired, the money from state coffers will continue to flow to the militia group to avoid an increase in violence and retain the militia's political allegiance. Worse yet, other armed actors watch such payoffs and seek to emulate them, by upping violence and asking for similar deals. For example, the payment scheme to MEND members negotiated in the 2005 peace

deal expired in 2015, yet without a new legal mandate the federal Government has either continued to deliver unauthorized payments or, when it threatened to stop them, MEND would threaten insecurity.²²⁰ And the MEND deal has become a frequent reference point for other militias and vigilantes in Nigeria, including the OPC.²²¹

In Lagos, OPC members were also enrolled in Neighbourhood Watch schemes for which they received stipends.²²² However, since the Neighbourhood Watch was (and continues to be) formalized and not under the leadership of the OPC, such enrollment schemes brought money to the OPC and its members, but not necessarily political power. At various times, the leadership of the Neighbourhood Watch in Lagos opposed Gani Adams and his political moves, at least until Adams was sworn in as the Yoruba generalissimo. Other employment opportunities for the OPC (though not solely for the OPC) for example included a sanitation corps in Lagos created to absorb former vigilantes: the Oyo State Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES O) established in 2011 in the Oyo State. Meant to create 20,000 jobs for university and secondary school graduates,²²³ the scheme again did not entail vetting of the enrollees' criminal records; and that group too took on anti-crime functions beyond policing, often slipping into extortion. In 2017, the Ogun State authorized another paramilitary group, the So-Safe Corps.

The groups that are formalized, such as So-Safe, Lastma, and YES O can receive formal training from the Nigeria Federal Police and Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps. As soon as a crime case is reported to such groups by the public, they are supposed to report it to the local police chief and wait for police instructions. They are also supposed to hand over all arrestees to the police immediately and not to respond to public security threats on their own without the police.²²⁴ Some of these groups, such as Lastma, receive regular salaries from the state; others, such as So-Safe, do not, though they want it. At the end of 2019, at least some members of supposedly over 7,000-strong So-Safe were paid a stipend of about USD 50 a month, still hoping, however, that the Ogun government would soon start paying regular full salaries and retirement benefits. Meanwhile, many members

retain another principal job and they serve merely as part-time volunteers, unless they are unemployed.²²⁵ So-Safe is allowed to recruit non-Yoruba minorities such as the Hausa, Fulani, and Igbo if the recruits have been "settled" in Ogun State for at least five years. But it is not clear how ethnically diverse and representative So-Safe, in fact, is.²²⁶

Four key deficiencies of all such schemes plague the efforts. First, recruits, whether coming from OPC, other vigilante groups or the general public, are rarely vetted for serious crimes. Recruitment and vetting for Ogun's So-Safe, for example, only includes filling out a questionnaire in a Local Government Area (the lowest administrative unit in Nigeria), to demonstrate one's character, record and relevance to the community, without much independent verification.²²⁷ Second, many of their members still maintain their other vigilante roles, such as in the OPC. Thus, they do not disengage from vigilantism, but merely add another job and affiliation to the ones they had prior to enrollment. Third, frequently no accountability measures, or only profoundly inadequate ones, exist in practice for such state-approved security actors. Fourth, since the state payments tend to be unreliable, the temptation to resort to extortion and engage in crime remains, no matter what its origins, and is only amplified by the lack of systematically accountability.

That does not mean that the OPC has given up on selling protection or engaging in extortion. It also continues to play a significant role in political intimidation and can tie up even major cities, such as Lagos and Ibadan, for days. During the 2015 elections, for example, armed groups of supporters of President Goodluck Jonathan (who was running for reelection) widely believed to be OPC demonstrated in Lagos and intimidated motorists and passersby.²²⁸

The OPC is also believed to remain engaged in illegal taxation along roads in the Lagos State and elsewhere in the South West, competing in the illegal toll collection also with the military and police who also take advantage of the checkpoints they set up to collect money for themselves and their unit commanders.²²⁹ These illegal collections can bring up to thousands of dollars to the OPC daily, an income judged

important to keep the OPC from causing visible troubles during non-election periods when politicians do not have enough money to support the OPC through patronage handouts.²³⁰ Adams's position as the Yoruba generalissimo also compels state governors to turn a blind eye to generalized extortion by the OPC beyond highways.

At the same time, the OPC has been adroit maintaining its public image as an anti-crime protection force, for example by involving itself in responses to high-profile kidnappings, such as of prominent Yoruba and southern politicians. Across the South West, the OPC is still believed to counter predatory crime beyond kidnapping, cultism, and murders. In 2018, the OPC sent an official representation to a South West security summit in Ibadan.

Its potent propaganda machine is said to coopt some Lagos-based journalists who continue to highlight the OPC anti-crime role. OPC representatives maintain that people still prefer to report other assorted crimes to the OPC instead of the police because, unlike the police, the OPC will address them; and that now, thanks for the OPC, the crime rate in Lagos is "very low".²³¹ They also argue that the OPC maintains total discipline over its anti-crime vigilante cadres now, with no unauthorized violence taking place and any "excesses" in members anti-crime duties punished by the OPC leadership.²³²

Public executions have certainly gone away and the overall level of extrajudicial killings and murders conducted by OPC members has also declined according to Nigerian police officials and human rights activists.²³³ That said, journalists, security scholars and human rights activists in Lagos still regularly attribute various killings, such as of suspected cultists, to the OPC.²³⁴

However, more frequently than in the early 2000s, the OPC is now believed to cooperate with the federal police in the South West and hand over at least some of those it arrests as alleged criminals to the police.²³⁵ But since no official (or unofficial) records of such arrests are available (and frequently do not exist), it is not possible to estimate (beyond eyeball community

impressions) the level of such increased cooperation and reduction in non-public OPC extrajudicial killings. Example of current OPC collaboration with the police include joint targeting of the Badoo cult in the city of Ikorodu in Lagos State in 2017,²³⁶ and with the Nigerian military in patrolling the riverine areas of Lagos State.²³⁷

OPC members also gather intelligence – albeit of more or less the same poor quality as two decades ago – obtained from community denunciations; however, much of it is self-serving, and based on eye witness accounts of questionable reliability.²³⁸ Some security experts and NGO activists believe that the OPC still can get anyone in Lagos arrested if it wants to, or detain them on made up charges (but unlike 20 years ago, the group will not set them on fire in public).²³⁹ The OPC also performs patrolling rolls and protections of public and private functions.

It has inserted itself into the herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria's South West and western parts of the country, an agenda that is not only vastly popular given the struggling federal Government response, but also amplifies the ethnic protection element in the OPC's self-definition. OPC members characterize the response of the Buhari Government as "incompetent and pro-Fulani" and the OPC role in responding to the herders' "invasions" and alleged rapes and murders as driven by popular demand: "The people asked us [the OPC] to do something about it [the herders' presence in the south]. So we [the OPC] rose to the occasion."²⁴⁰ As was the case 20 years ago, the OPC claims to have superior knowledge of herders' alleged crimes because local people seeking it for protection provide them with intelligence, and also because of the OPC's *juju*.²⁴¹

The OPC maintains branches in rural areas of Yorubaland, such as in the state of Ogun. But its presence there is much thinner and its actual role and effectiveness in the rural areas are sometimes exaggerated in OPC accounts. At minimum, in these areas, the OPC competes with other formal and informal security actors in the provision of "public safety", including hunters' groups, newly formed militias of farmers and landowners that are either openly or covertly

funded (such as in Ekiti or Ogun States), and sometimes ethnically-based, as well as the federal Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps and its new subbranch, the Agro Rangers, and possibly other state-authorized paramilitary groups, such as So-Safe in Ogun State.

The quality of police interventions in the herders-farmers conflict vary. Some Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps commanders can be excellent and engage in both conflict reconciliation and dialogue with the herders and farmers and genuine efforts to get to know those communities (including the nomadic herders that frequently return to the same area in the south each year), seeking to prevent murders and diffuse retaliation as well as to gather prosecutable evidence.²⁴² Just as with the police, other Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps commanders are not merely collecting extortion fees and gifts from the farmers and herders or hoping to get rotated out.

Herders' communities in the South West frequently believe that they are unfairly accused and targeted by farmers' militias and the OPC, which they claim discriminates against all northerners, especially Hausa and Fulani in the area, of being recent "invaders" even if they have lived in the area for decades. The herders also do not trust the police.²⁴³ But members of southern ethnic groups and Christian farmers accuse some police units of being corrupt and in cahoots with the Fulani herders and not doing enough to stop the land invasions, property destruction, and alleged rapes by the Fulani herders. Murders and retaliatory killings abound, frequently under the nose of the police.²⁴⁴

Overall, despite the pervasive role of the OPC in informal policing and its presumed greater cooperation with Nigeria Federal Police, at the end of 2019, many actors, from community representatives to social science academics to tribal and ethnic leaders, expressed the view that security in Lagos and in Nigeria's South West more broadly, was the worst in years. Predatory crime, banditry, and violence associated with the herders-farmers conflict are rampant.²⁴⁵

Unlike in Nigeria's North East – where the anti-Boko Haram militia groups, such as the Civilian

Joint Task Force, are receiving human rights training from Nigerian NGOs and the United Nations – human rights training for militias and vigilantes in Nigeria's south has been offered only very sporadically. Most groups and militiamen have not been given any such training.²⁴⁶ Nonetheless, some Nigerian security think tanks and NGOs are trying to engage OPC members in dialogues on local security arrangements and community policing.²⁴⁷

Between 2012 and 2017, the then-named British Department for International Development funded a Justice for All Programme that sought to improve the responsiveness and effectiveness of policing in Lagos, increase the accountability of "voluntary policing groups" (the name the programme used for preexisting area-based vigilante groups), and improve their cooperation with the Nigerian Federal Police, with the recognition that vigilante groups and voluntary policing groups are often the first (and sometimes only) entities to which Nigerians turn for safety and justice.²⁴⁸ At the time, the voluntary policing groups, which did not include the OPC, were estimated to number around 2,200.²⁴⁹ They did not receive any official funding, other than sporadic voluntary contributions or extortion payments from the community. Composed of traditional rulers and elders, chairpersons of community development associations, religious leaders, women and youth groups, traders' associations, and leaders of ethnic groups, community accountability forums were established to supervise them. These supervisory bodies have followed a pattern established 20 years ago even toward the Bakassi Boys in Anambra, but in the case of the Lagos forums they were – at least formally – far more inclusive and representative of different segments and actors of the local communities.

These smaller area-based vigilante groups are nowhere as powerful as the OPC. And how willing the OPC is to allow them to operate in areas where it also collects money and sells its security services has varied. Sometimes the relationship could be very hostile, while other times the OPC ignores the groups, yet other times OPC members are also members of these other local vigilante groups.²⁵⁰

Conclusions and Recommendations



Immanuel A. Adabi/flickr

Since the end of the military rule in the late 1990s, Nigeria has been experiencing chronic security crises.²⁵¹ The widespread impression among many Nigerians is that the insecurity is only intensifying – stemming from ethnic and religious insurgencies, religious, ethnic, and other contestations over access to land, oil, and other resources – manifesting pervasive and intensely violent criminality.²⁵² The federal police and Nigeria’s military increasingly deployed across the country for all kinds of policing and internal security challenges have

been struggling to reduce the criminal and militant violence and deliver a sense of greater security. The weakness of police and policing also means that effective prosecution rates remain low and fail to create deterrent effects against crime and militancy.²⁵³ Moreover, the police and military forces often behave with the same brutality and adopt the same illegal practices of extrajudicial killings, illegal detention, torture, and other severe human rights violations as their targets.²⁵⁴

This context of insecurity and inadequate public safety and formal policing in Nigeria has generated two dynamics over the past two decades.

First, communities tend to embrace the anti-crime vigilante groups that emerge or other types of militia groups that adopt anti-crime agendas. Such vigilante groups are gaining prominence around Nigeria, including in the country's south.

Second, the past two decades has been characterized by endless tangles between federal and state-level authorities over the fate of these vigilante groups and the possibility of establishing state-level police forces. Federal Government authorities have been very negatively disposed to both, seeking to ban vigilante groups as they emerge, and being unenthusiastic toward the creation of state-level police forces. In addition to demanding the creation of state police forces, state governors have tended to embrace the vigilante groups and seek to formalize them under a variety of mechanisms, such as Neighbourhood Watches, and often to appropriate the vigilante groups even in their more formal guises for the governors' political purposes. In these back-and-forth struggles, the federal Government has not been able to carry out its plan to ban and dismantle the vigilante and other militia groups, despite sometimes greater brutality and violence on the part of the federal police toward such groups. Instead, the federal Government often has had to backtrack from very forceful and brutal responses against them. But while state governors keep pushing back against Abuja and embracing the anti-crime and anti-militancy vigilantes and militias and announcing their formation and the creation of various umbrella groups, such as Amotekun and Ebube Agu, the groups lack both a legal framework for their existence and sustained funding.

When vigilante groups are formalized by state authorities in any way, the arrangements remain problematically *ad hoc*.

But whether it is the rise of new vigilante groups or the creation of new policing units, there is one pattern that holds over and across space – namely, that both types of anti-crime bodies are characterized by a profound lack of accountability. Over time, both the police bodies and the vigilantes frequently come to act with the same impunity and abuse toward local communities, and with the most egregious violations of human rights as have the criminals against whom the vigilantes were established.

Very few of the groups as well as formal police units are held meaningfully accountable for even the most brazen illegality such as public executions, extrajudicial killings, and torture. Overall, neither the government at the federal or state level, nor local communities have managed to assert meaningful supervision over the vigilante groups and police bodies. The federal Government has often been reluctant to hold the federal police to account and stand up effective internal affairs units and other accountability mechanisms, and to dismantle particularly bad units – viz., the government papering of the SARS abuses in 2020 and merely renaming the unit²⁵⁵. State authorities have been similarly disinclined to reign in vigilante groups – both because they seek to appropriate them for their own political purposes and because anti-crime brutality is frequently popular in Nigeria, at least until major violence against the population begins.

Indeed, whether it is police units like the SARS or vigilante groups like the Bakassi Boys or the OPC, Nigerian communities are frequently willing to ignore and excuse such egregious patterns of behaviour – as long as the extrajudicial killings and torture of presumed criminals target others. It is only when the anti-crime agents, whether vigilantes or the police, turn on the broader community with extortion, illegal detention, torture and killings that communities sour on their erstwhile protectors. Yet even then, the police are often unable to act and bring to justice the perpetrators – whether from their own ranks or the vigilantes. This weakness of accountability persists despite the fact that there is no love lost between most of the vigilante groups and militias that take on policing anti-crime functions and the police.

This study explored in detail the evolution, effectiveness, and patterns of behaviour of and state responses toward two of the largest and most impactful vigilante and militia groups in Nigeria's south – the Bakassi Boys and the OPC. The study also situated this analysis in a discussion of the evolution of the SARS – from

the heroes of the late 1990s, who effectively and with illegal brutality temporarily suppressed crime, into to a reviled unit that widely abused Nigerians. So much so that in the fall of 2020, Nigeria experienced some of the largest protests over the past two decades – against the SARS.

SEVERAL KEY FINDINGS AND PATTERNS EMERGE OUT OF THE ANALYSIS:

First, vigilante groups like the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria's South East and militia groups like the OPC that adopt anti-crime activities to generate political capital as well as newly created special police units often are effective in suppressing violent crime initially. That crime suppression tends to involve intense brutality, including extrajudicial killings, torture, illegal detention, and sometimes public executions, that probably create temporary deterrent effects. This means that vigilante groups often build considerable political capital with local communities at the outset.

But the devil's pact entails the second part – namely, that the devil turns on the broader community. Willing to tolerate and extoll brutality against alleged criminals, the community comes to suffer the same brutality from the hands of its so-called protectors. The anti-crime agents too frequently become a key source of violence and criminality – both predatory and transactional. Engaging in extortion and great violence against the local community itself, they become the top or one of the top criminals on the bloc.

Second, the political capital that at first accrues to anti-crime vigilante groups and militias that adopt anti-crime agendas is acknowledged by state politicians and government authorities who then seek to appropriate the vigilante groups for their own political purposes. To some extent, politicians seek to ride the coattails of the vigilantes' popularity. This popularity for effective crime suppression is not insignificant, as state authorities have the responsibility for public safety in their states, albeit without controlling

any tools of accomplishing that primary task since the Nigerian Federal Police and military take their orders from Abuja.

From the perspective of state politicians and governors, however, more is at play. The various vigilante groups, even when formalized under state labels, have other uses for politicians – they can be a source of electoral muscle to beat out votes and contributions from local communities. They are also a tool of repression against rival politicians. Violence in Nigeria tends to spike up two years before elections, as both sitting elected officials and new contenders use armed groups to suppress opponents and obtain money and votes.

To secure their allegiance, politicians deliver special contracts, stipends, and other payments to the vigilantes. However, since these tend to be linked to particular politicians around elections and are not anchored in on a permanent basis, the militias' allegiance is limited to specific politicians, rather than to local communities (with the exception of ethno-religious allegiances), let alone to institutions.

The extent of the political appropriation of the vigilante and militia groups varies, of course, and depends on multiple factors, including whether the vigilante group had a political agenda prior to its engagements with local politicians and if so, what the content of the agenda was, as well as how many other influential politicians capable of handing out patronage to the militias are there to compete for them.

When governors have the capacity to institutionalize the militias in some form, such as in Neighbourhood Watches, they see such arrangements as mechanisms to deliver jobs and reduce unemployment, Nigeria's ever-present problem, not just political patronage.

Conversely, however, when militia groups do not receive the desired political patronage, such as contracts or stipends, they increase violence themselves to generate security problems for governors and politicians. Their extortion is therefore not limited to that of local communities: they also seek to extort the politicians who attempt to appropriate them. As a Nigerian security analyst put it: "As a Nigerian politician, you become the enemy of everyone if you decide that money, your budget, is for solving problems and not for sharing with your clique."²⁵⁶ The anti-crime vigilantes also reinforce such dynamics.

Third, neither the federal Government, nor state authorities, nor local communities exercise effective control over the militias and vigilante groups. What characterizes them, like that of the formal security apparatus in the country, is their profound lack of accountability. Very few members of the Bakassi Boys or OPC have, for example, been ever meaningfully prosecuted for their murders, including public executions and other egregious crimes. State governors in Nigeria's south rarely show a resolute and lasting determination to prosecute crimes and other violations of the anti-crime militias; often they praise the groups even as they are visibly committing such violations, extolling all-out wars on criminality and dismissing human rights concerns. Nor has the federal Government been able to disband the groups or have state governments showed a determined willingness to hold them accountable.

Neither does putting the militias on the state payroll alone moderate their behaviour, especially if state authorities do not demand accountability from them and praise their illegal acts in the name of anti-crime effectiveness. Unless their egregious violations, such as extrajudicial killings and torture, are diligently prosecuted and the violators are sent to

prison, in addition to other actions being taken against their units – almost none of which ever happens – putting them on state payroll does not adequately control their propensity toward abuse of local communities and human rights violations.

Indeed, a key deficiency of the efforts to legalize vigilantes and militias through programmes such as Neighbourhood Watches is that the vetting mechanisms are troublingly inadequate. Applicants are rarely, if ever, weeded out for having committed serious crimes. Moreover, even when the Nigerian states formalize vigilantes into state auxiliary forces, the oversight and accountability mechanisms remain poor.

To the extent that moderation of the vigilantes' behaviour does take place, it sometimes emerges as a result of a balance of terror with the police, who in its response to the vigilantes tend to be as brutal as the vigilantes and criminals and who extensively violate laws themselves. Alternatively, some moderation emerges out of idiosyncratic career developments of politicians who may find it more expedient to moderate their own rhetoric and the behaviour of the militias they sponsor if they manage to achieve prominent roles in the mainstream political system. International exposure and condemnations, such as by prominent international human rights groups, can be a third source of moderation of the behaviour of the vigilantes.

Most importantly, what can moderate the behaviour of vigilante groups – but materialized at best weakly in the case of the examined groups and particularly the OPC and Bakassi Boys – is strength of local communities and their structures of accountability. If local communities have the capacity to meaningfully punish the violent and misbehaving vigilantes, whether by handing them over to the police for state prosecution, cutting them off from money, or otherwise censuring within a community, the militias tend to behave better. Under ideal circumstances, such censure mechanisms would be formal and include mandated oversight tools. Local communities in Nigeria mostly lack such formal accountability power. Even informal

power of sanction and censure exerted ad hoc through key powerbrokers or stakeholders can make significant difference and improve accountability. Whether local communities in Nigeria possess such informal powers to punish varies widely. And such community accountability mechanisms were very weak with respect to the Bakassi Boys and the OPC.

Moreover, the moderation that has emerged does not mean that the vigilante groups, such as the OPC or the descendants of the Bakassi Boys, have stopped engaging in extortion or murders. Rather, the visibility and brazenness of such events goes away; instead of public executions, tortured victims on their death bed may be handed to the police more frequently.²⁵⁷ That is no doubt an improvement, but hardly a sufficient one. The groups can still act like the SARS and just be more clandestine about their misbehaviour.

Some Nigerian NGO representatives believe that Nigerians are now determined to demand more accountability – both from the state and the vigilante groups.²⁵⁸ They point to the anti-SARS protests for evidence, as well as to the less brazen behaviour of the vigilantes today. If that were indeed the case, Nigeria would progress toward greater rule of law and respect for human rights. However, demanding accountability, crucial as that is, is still far from having actual tools of imposing accountability. Even in the former, the proof is yet to be seen. The next time a militia group in the south slaughters alleged criminals, will the local community praise it and fund it, or condemn for extrajudicial killings?

Fourth, despite the fact that Nigerian state politicians and local communities continue embracing anti-crime vigilante groups and repeatedly keep putting their faith in the devil's protection, the groups' effect on crime suppression is far less than meets the eye. And this is the second trick that the devil played on Nigerian communities: the anti-crime protection that is delivered tends to be mediocre and complex at best, waning over time.

Despite the existence of many vigilante groups in Nigeria and many more militias that have taken on anti-crime and public safety functions, there is a broad consensus in Nigeria's south that security is the worst in years, with predatory crime, banditry, and violence associated with the herders-farmers conflict being seen as rampant. Yet, neither local communities nor the vigilante groups themselves tend to have a pervasive and robust explanation of why the militias like OPC or the descendants of the Bakassi Boys, whether formalized by the state or not, are able to achieve better crime prevention effects.

Explanations of the inadequate outcomes tend to centre on the lack of stable funding and other resources and support, weak administrative structures that often even fail to create credible registries of membership, let alone establish enforced rules of conduct, and inadequate to non-existent training, including in human rights and civil liberty protections of which vigilante groups in southern Nigeria tend to have meagre knowledge.²⁵⁹ The lack of a legal framework in Nigeria to regulate the formation, recruitment, training, and operations of non-State security actors compounds all these valid concerns and grave challenges.

But these explanations do not explain why the vigilantes were seen as effective at any point. The fact that some of their members are known to the communities and may come from the respective communities gives them an edge in popular acceptance. But the only substantial difference compared to the days of their presumably greatest effectiveness 20 years ago and their greatest brutality is precisely the less public and visible nature of their violence and illegality. However, if the anti-crime incapacitation and deterrence effects were based on profound illegality, then they were never truly effective in delivering rule of law. And even their brutal order proved ephemeral and limited.

This, far more limited effectiveness than is often assumed and extolled, also relates to the vigilantes' presumably superior intelligence-gathering capacities, a mantra often repeated even by Nigerian security think tanks and NGOs.

Their representatives frequently maintain that “since the vigilantes, like OPC, know who the thieves are, they should be brought in into local policing arrangements.”²⁶⁰ The fact that some of their members do come from local communities can sometimes give them a significant intelligence advantage over police units and commanders temporarily posted to an area from hundreds of miles away. But the vigilantes often operate outside of their geographic and ethnic communities in places where they do not have good local knowledge or access. And even within their communities, unless they catch some criminal *in flagrante*, they often do not have good information, let alone actionable and prosecutable intelligence. That is why, even today, the vigilantes frequently rely on torture and magic.

As a result, they rarely generate prosecutable evidence, which means that they would either have to let the alleged criminals go, kill them, or hand them over to the police.²⁶¹

Fifth, despite under-delivering public safety, engaging in increased abuse, and being subject to political manipulation over time, the vigilante and anti-crime militia groups tend not to go away. Their names may mutate and they may exist in different types of official or unofficial arrangements over time, but they or their descendants are still around 20 years later. Nor do local communities or state politicians who embrace them often consider how such groups will be disarmed and dismantled once their usefulness runs out.

The groups linger on, even when their political capital with local communities has tapered off as a result of the vigilantes’ increased abuse of communities through intensified extortion, indiscriminate violence and governance overreach, such as the groups’ insertion of themselves into domestic disagreements or dispute resolution.

Unlike in Nigeria’s North East where disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes have at various times been proposed to the Civilian Joint Task Force

and some small-scale public projects been launched, in Nigeria’s South, such programmes do not exist at all. But like in the North, such DDR programmes are not popular with militia members. Yes, the vigilantes want legalization and regular security contracts; no, they do not want to pack up their operations and go home and disengage from their vigilante roles and the prestige, authority, and formal and illegal profits such roles bring them.²⁶² The vigilante groups persist, as much a security challenge as a solution to intense insecurity.

Sixth, a local vigilante group will become a model for others, stimulating them either to incorporate anti-crime roles into their agendas, or contributing to their formation. The vigilante groups thus create complex and lasting effects. And so do the arrangements that governors strike with local vigilante groups and militias. The terms of the MEND peace deal, for example, are widely referred to by other militias in Nigeria’s South as well as in the North East, including by the Civilian Joint Task Force.²⁶³

Thus, formalizing informal vigilantes generates further contagion effects and potential moral hazard. Even when one group is formalized, and sometimes as a result of such formalization, other vigilantes will likely pop up and desire similar legitimation and formal benefits. Thus, solving unemployment through the expansion of the formal security sector will rapidly max itself out, unless state or federal authorities can keep generating more and more resources for more and more legalized vigilantes – which obviously they cannot, with many other claimants for funding, including the federal police.

This key challenge in Nigeria of more and more people seeking employment in government-approved security services, especially state-approved local vigilante groups, is compounded by the fact that many members of formalized auxiliary forces also maintain other employment as well as sometimes other vigilante roles. Thus, they do not disengage from vigilantism, but merely add another job to the ones they had prior to enrollment. Simply formalizing vigilante groups that pop up and putting them on the state

payroll, therefore, solves neither the country's insecurity, unemployment, or unaccountable vigilantism.

To truly address the intensifying challenge of vigilante groups, the Nigerian State must start addressing the deep root causes of criminality and insecurity: unemployment and marginalization that give many Nigerians a sense of having no prospect for socioeconomic advancement within legal rules and political arrangements. Also, as John Campbell, former US Ambassador to Nigeria, also eloquently points out in his book *Nigeria and the Nation-State*, the Nigerian State and political elite must halt and reverse the crumbling of Nigerian institutions and the deinstitutionalization of politics and administration, including of public safety and security, that has been under way for years.²⁶⁴ While vital, these are all long-term, multi-year, multi-decades propositions.

At least some of the following recommendations can be undertaken more rapidly. Still, there are not many signs that Nigerian State and political elite have the will to adopt even these (the deeply troubling and inadequate response to the SARS protests are yet another indication of the absence of this). But without at least moving toward such reforms, Nigerian institutions will be weakened further and pervasive insecurity, stemming also from the militias and vigilantes, will only intensify.

I. Adopt serious police reform.

In the absence of a deep police reform, militia and vigilante groups will keep popping up around Nigeria. Laid out below are steps to start managing the phenomenon somewhat better. Over time, however, Nigeria should seek to be in a position where the emergence of militias and vigilantes will be radically reduced. Effective police reform is a key tool for the prevention of militia and vigilante formation as well as for better managing the existing militias.

Police reform is probably the hardest institutional reform a country can undertake and there are relatively few examples of successful

police reform from around the world. It usually takes at least a decade to start seeing progress if diligent and steadfast focus on police reform is maintained. And as the experience with it around the world shows, police reform is hardly ever a finished business after that initial period – the reforms needing to be continually monitored, routinely maintained, and adapted to changing conditions.

The Nigerian Federal Police needs improvement in many dimensions: from training in human rights and law to strengthened capacities across the range of police functions, including intelligence collection, investigation and the gathering and analyses of prosecutable evidence; improvements in unit leadership and management; and better access to physical and online resources, such as cyber and forensic capacities. Effective reform must also include better salaries, retirement and injury benefits, and working conditions for police officers.

Recruitment vetting needs to be strengthened, but the vetting needs to be repeated throughout an officer's career. That requires building a sufficiently robust cadre of vetting officers and insulating them from political and institutional pressures.

Crucially, the police need to start being held accountable for the crimes they commit. This applies not only to extortion of the public, but also to use the torture and extrajudicial killing. Steps toward that include developing a robust internal affairs unit and empowering it with strong political backing that will span administration. Such units and at least a minimum adequate budget could be enshrined by law so that subsequent administration could not dismantle or defund them. The internal affairs units could be made accountable to a joint committee of the executive and legislative branches. Similarly, a set of prosecutors could be specially dedicated to prosecuting police-committed crimes.

In turn, the internal affairs units and Nigerian prosecutors must start sending officers found guilty of extrajudicial killings, torture, and running illegal rackets to prison. Dismantling

particularly bad units is important but inadequate if they are merely relabelled or the officers are sent to other units, and rarely do any of them face legal punishment.

Starting to build accountability for the behaviour of the police also includes publicizing the findings of truth and investigative commissions, and not locking these reports in drawers for decades, as has so often been the case in Nigeria when such commissions are actually established.

II. Devolve some formal policing power to states.

The current situation of state governors being responsible for security in their state and being asked by voters to provide it, but not giving the governors the tools to accomplish what is needed, sets up eternal temptation for the state to embrace vigilantes.

There is currently little prospect that the federal Government would authorize the establishment of formal state-level police forces. There are solutions and compromises that would address some of the core tensions between states and the federal Government regarding state police forces.

For example, although recruited and stationed within the state, all state police forces could be trained in Abuja to the same standard, code, and operating procedures. The training could be supervised by Nigeria Federal Police units. Federal-level internal affairs units could also be responsible for monitoring and investigating state-police forces. Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Justice could also be given the power to put delinquent state-level forces in receivership, in a system of accountability similar to the way the US Department of Justice handles particularly problematic police departments in the US.

In turn, governors could have the capacity to choose the police chiefs from within the trained state-level officers and with them to set priorities and strategy and the legal bounds for addressing crime.

In the absence of a political consensus favouring such devolution of policing capacities, state governors should at least have the capacity to set priorities, strategies, and agendas for the federal police deployed to their states, with rotations – say, of three years. This would be long enough to start making a difference on the ground.

III. Start holding accountable the vigilante forces who commit serious crimes.

Whether or not policing functions are devolved in some form, militia groups and vigilantes who engage in public executions and other extrajudicial killings, illegal detentions, and murders must start being held accountable for their crimes. They must be sent to prison.

No institutional reform is needed to adopt that fundamental step. The laws already exist in Nigeria, although they are very rarely implemented. Prosecuting such crimes committed by militias requires finding the political will to do so, including resisting the public praise and embrace of militias who commit the crimes – even when, in a particular period, the militias seem to be cutting down on crime.

Over time, monitoring and managing of the militias should also move to shutting down their extortion behaviour; but the first step should be not tolerating public executions and murders, and prosecuting their perpetrators with prison penalties. That requires that police develop the capacity to collect prosecutable evidence.

In the absence of the will to hold the vigilantes accountable for at least for the most egregious crimes, giving them state blessing and putting them on the state's payroll will not moderate their behaviour sufficiently.

IV. Develop a national-level legal framework for state-approved vigilante groups and other auxiliary police forces.

As with the possibility of the formation of state police forces, the federal Government could develop a uniform legal framework, code of conduct, and training programme for state-level vigilante forces. That could standardize the way they relate to the federal police, including the provision of intelligence and perhaps also the collection of evidence. Ideally, the formal police would be the only actor authorized to collect evidence, with the vigilantes merely providing tipoffs and engaging in patrolling; but if federal police forces remain too weak in this area, then the vigilante groups could be trained to collect some evidence.

However, whatever tipoffs and evidence are provided to the police, the police must conduct its own investigation and gathering of prosecutable evidence to verify or dismiss the information provided by the vigilantes. The training should also include gender- and ethnicity-sensitive training and recruitment, with the goal of making the auxiliary forces ethnically and gender diverse and representative.

Beyond existing state-level auxiliary forces, other security groups, such as the Vigilante Group of Nigeria, could also be enrolled in the framework, which could include recognizing them at the federal level.

Accompanying the framework could be legislating statutory federal funding for such auxiliary groups.

V. Vet and weed out vigilante groups who are accorded federal or state-level institutional support.

Whether a uniform federal framework for the vigilante militias exists or not, before any vigilante is enrolled even at the state level, he or she must pass background checks that they did not commit at least the most serious of

crimes, such as murders, extrajudicial killings, and torture. Devising systems for the vetting is difficult. The militia groups, their leaders, and political patrons themselves cannot be trusted. Ideally, the vetting would be conducted by professional officers, but governors do not have the capacity to direct the Nigerian Federal Police to undertake particular tasks such as vigilante vetting. There could be some role for civil society representation in such vetting, though civil society actors, such as community members and human rights NGOs, must be provided with adequate protection so they are not targeted by the disgruntled vigilantes and militia groups whose crimes they expose.

State authorities also need to start maintaining diligent registers of any state-permitted vigilante groups. The registrars need to be regularly updated, independently verified, and made available to the Nigerian Federal Police.

VI. Provide human rights training to vigilantes and anti-crime militias.

Whether or not a vigilante group is registered with state or federal Government authorities, there is an urgent need to provide human rights and civil liberties training to the vigilante groups. Such training may both improve their behaviour and reduce the level of serious abuse the militias inflict on the presumed suspects of crime and local communities as well as eliminate the vigilantes' excuse that they do not know how to behave and therefore should not be prosecuted for violations.

A lot of this training can be conducted by human rights groups and other NGOs, and international donors should fund such work.

VII. Provide justice, support, and compensation for victims of vigilante violence.

Victims of vigilante violence, including alleged criminals, should receive compensation from state and federal authorities. Beyond a reliable

mechanism to register complaints that will not leak out to the militias and provoke their retribution against victims, the compensation could include financial support, psycho-social therapy, or reconciliation processes with perpetrators, if appropriate.

Such justice and support for victims should also be available and systematized for victims of police abuse and of criminals.

VIII. Promote peacebuilding activity targeting toward crime and revenge prevention.

Peacebuilding dialogues, conflict resolution mechanisms, and reconciliation processes in the anti-crime domain are particularly pertinent for inter-gang or inter-cult warfare and herders-farmers conflicts. Such dialogues can dampen emotions and desire for revenge and motivate both gangs and militias to better police their own groups and punish perpetrators of crime or hand them over to the police.

Once again, Nigerian NGOs, funded by international donors, can lead such efforts. However, at least on occasion, including police forces and government officials would be highly desirable in such efforts. Competent police units and commanders could even come to play a significant role in such forms of restorative justice.

IX. Promote efforts to expose and limit political appropriation of militia groups by Nigerian politicians and their illegal use.

Nigeria falls far short of enforcing powerful laws that limit political appropriation of militias and the capture of politics by militias. Across the country, politicians develop and sponsor one or another type of armed cadre to obtain votes and hamper political rivals. Nonetheless, a Colombia-like “empty seat” law could serve as long-term guidance and a beacon of hope. The Colombian

law establishes that any politician with proven links to militia and paramilitary groups is not allowed to serve in Colombia’s Congress, and the banned politician’s party is not allowed to replace the person with another representative. (The party thus suffers “an empty seat.”)

More immediately, international partners and Nigerian and international NGOs can mount education campaigns to prevent the use of militias during elections, and to expose and shame politicians and militia units that intimidate rivals and otherwise violently manipulate politics. Such campaigns may have to include providing asylum to monitors and journalists willing to document such abuses and publish exposés.

The international community can strongly reinforce such public pressure toward legality and accountability by denying visa to Nigerian politicians who promote and protect vigilante groups perpetrating serious human rights violations. The international community could develop a package of leverage against them, as well as militia members themselves, including portfolios for international criminal indictments or asset seizure. Both vigilante leaders and their political sponsors could simply be denied a red-carpet treatment by other States.

X. Look out for windows of opportunity to move the above agenda forward.

These proposed recommendations are likely to encounter much resistance. The militias will be deeply opposed to being monitored and controlled and most importantly held accountable for their crimes. Politicians will be loath to sever their links with brutal militias that nonetheless obtain public accolades for suppressing crime through illegal behaviour. They may seek to sabotage any federal efforts to prosecute vigilante leaders and perpetrators of serious crimes. And the federal Government is likely to continue being loath to devolve some policing to the states and adopt a framework for auxiliary policing forces.

However, such opposition is not equally firm at all times. Moments of scandals that make state-level politicians vulnerable may allow for the applications of such sanctions and the promotion of some reforms. Major protests, such as against SARS, can be opportunities for deeper reforms. Particularly heinous brutality of vigilante groups against local communities may provide opportunities for punishing them also for their prior brutality against alleged criminals and subjecting them to more meaningful prosecution and monitoring.

Even starting with the most egregious crimes of the vigilantes, such as public executions of suspects, would start importantly chipping away at the pervasive impunity and insecurity.

Beyond taking advantage of these windows of opportunity, the crucial challenge, however, is translating them into sustained and gradually more and more systematic progress toward the rule of law and accountability, and shedding of the habit of vigilantism.

Amidst the deteriorating security situation in Nigeria's south, rapidly doing away with the various vigilante and anti-crime militia groups that have been forming over the past 20 years is not feasible. It will remain unachievable unless Nigeria profoundly reforms its formal police forces. Nonetheless, the above measures provide a way to begin mitigating at least the most pernicious dangers that the militias generate. Crucially and immediately, both the vigilante and anti-crime militia groups as well as the police forces must be prosecuted for their most egregious violations. These measures are necessary for various actors in Nigeria, including federal and state government authorities, politicians, the business community, militias, and the Nigerian people themselves, to start breaking out of the habit of readily disregarding laws and rules and making devil's pacts with extralegal actors who use illegal tools to seemingly protect them, with the extralegal protections rapidly becoming a new source of insecurity.

References

1. Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria's North East: Not Going Away," *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace* ed. Adam Day (New York: United Nations University, 2020), <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/3895/HybridConflictNigeriaWeb.pdf>; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, "In Nigeria, We Don't Want Them Back': Amnesty, Defectors' Programs, Leniency Measures, Informal Reconciliation, and Punitive Responses to Boko Haram," *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism* ed. Cale Salih (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2018), <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/3128/3-LoP-Nigeria-final.pdf>.
2. See, e.g. Samuel Fury Childs Daly, "Nigerians got their abusive SARS police force abolished – but elation soon turned to frustration," *The Conversation*, 8 December 2020, <https://theconversation.com/nigerians-got-their-abusive-sars-police-force-abolished-but-elation-soon-turned-to-frustration-150355>
3. See, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, "Press statement on human rights violations by law enforcement institution in Nigeria," 13 October 2020, <https://www.achpr.org/pressrelease/detail?id=536>.
4. Amnesty International, Nigeria: 'You have signed your death warrant' Torture and other ill treatment in the special anti-robbery squad (London: Amnesty, 2016); Andrew Chow, "The Nigerian Government Has Pledged to #EndSARS and Reform the Police. This Isn't the First Time They've Made That Promise," *Time*, 28 October 2020, <https://time.com/5904345/endsars-history-nigeria/>
5. Author's interviews with Nigerian security experts, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
6. The cults violently fight over territory on university campuses and beyond and perpetrate ritual killings as well as other types of homicides. Some, such as the Black Axe, the National Association of Air Lords, and the National Association of Seadogs (also known as the Pirate Confraternity) go back several decades. New cults keep emerging and the groups undergo fragmentation – for example, The National Associations of Sea Lords (also known as the Buccaneers Confraternity) broke off from the Pirates and became their archrival. Exclusive female cults have also been formed, with notorious gangs including the Black Bra, Viqueens, and the Damsels. Since in Nigeria many join the cults for power and prestige, members allegedly include civil servants, entrepreneurs, politicians, and members of the formal security agencies. Cult turf wars regularly leave scores of dead, with mutilated and beheaded bodies left on the streets, and become a major source of public safety concern. Some cults also appear to be involved in various forms of organized crime, such as oil theft. For background, see, for example, Fola Adekeye, "Killers on Campus," *Newswatch*, 29 July 29 2002; Issac A. Ajayi, Haastrup T. Ekundayo & F. M. Osalusi, "Menace of Cultism in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: The Way Out," *The Anthropologist* 12, 3 (2010): 155-160; and Babajide Saheed Owonikoko and Uche Ifukor, "From Campuses to Communities: Community-Based Cultism and Local Responses in the Niger Delta Region, Nigeria," *AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 5, 4 (2016): 80-93.
7. "Nigerian Government Declares 'Operation Amotekun' Illegal," *Sahara Reporters*, 14 January 2020, <http://saharareporters.com/2020/01/14/breaking-nigerian-government-declares-%E2%80%99operation-amotekun%E2%80%99-illegal>.

8. Sunday Aborisade et al., "Operation Amotekun: Carry Illegal Arms, Be Arrested, Police Warn OPC, Hunters," *The Punch*, 13 January 2020, <https://punchng.com/operation-amotekun-carry-illegal-arms-be-arrested-police-warn-opc-hunters/>.
9. Author's interviews with Nigerian experts on human rights and policing, Abuja, November 2019. See also, Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003); and Rufus Akinyele, "Federation, Democracy and the Minority Question in Nigeria," *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2, 1 (2000): 245-255.
10. "Operation Amotekun: Govs Meet Obisanjo, to Back Exercise with Law," *The Punch*, 24 January 2020, <https://punchng.com/operation-amotekun-govs-meet-osinbajo-to-back-exercise-with-law/>.
11. Anayo Okoli et al., "S'East Govs, IPOB on Collision Course over Ebube Agu," *The Vanguard*, 14 April 2021, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/04/seast-govs-ipob-on-collision-course-over-ebube-agu/>.
12. Ibid.
13. Author's interviews with retired Nigerian generals and experts on national security and domestic policing, Abuja, November 2019 and with Nigerian academics, Lagos, December 2019.
14. Cited in Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 49.
15. See, e.g. Samson Ezea, "Rising, worrisome cases of jungle justice in Nigeria," *The Guardian Nigeria*, 19 August 2017, <https://guardian.ng/saturday-magazine/rising-worrisome-cases-of-jungle-justice-in-nigeria/>
16. Leighann Spencer and Piero Morano, "Vigilantism is flourishing in Nigeria – with official support," *The Conversation*, 9 November 2017.
17. Human Rights Watch, "Everyone's in on the Game: Corruption and Human Rights Abuses by the Nigeria Police Force," 17 August 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/08/17/everyones-game/corruption-and-human-rights-abuses-nigeria-police-force>.
18. In 2012, then Nigerian Inspector General of Police Mohammed Abubakar, was quoted as saying: "The Nigeria Police Force has fallen to its lowest level and has indeed become a subject of ridicule within the law enforcement community and among members of the enlarged public [...] Our special anti-robbery squads (SARS) have become killer teams engaging in deals for land speculators and debt collectors." Oluwakemi Okenyodo, "Governance, Accountability, and Security in Nigeria," African Center for Strategic Studies, 21 June 2016, <https://africacenter.org/publication/governance-accountability-security-nigeria-html/>
19. Author's interviews with a police reform expert, Abuja, and with representatives of Lagos NGOs, November and December 2019.
20. Amnesty International, "Nigeria: Horrific reign of impunity by SARS makes mockery of anti-torture law," 23 June 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/nigeria-horrific-reign-of-impunity-by-sars-makes-mockery-of-anti-torture-law/>
21. International Crisis Group, "Nigeria's #EndSARS Protest: De-escalate Tensions, Start Deep Police Reform," 26 October 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/nigerias-endsars-protest-de-escalate-tensions-start-deep-police-reform>.
22. "Protestors Lock Horns over #endSARS Nationwide," *The Guardian* (Nigeria), 12 December 2017, <https://guardian.ng/news/protesters-lock-horns-over-endsars-nationwide/>.
23. See recently, Rick Gladstone and Megan Specia, "Nigeria's Police Brutality Crisis: What's Happening Now," *New York Times*, 14 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/sars-nigeria-police.html>.
24. Author's interviews with a police reform expert, Abuja. See also International Crisis Group, "Nigeria's #EndSARS Protest: De-escalate Tensions, Start Deep Police Reform," 26 October 2020.
25. Author's phone interviews with Nigeria's police reform NGO activists and security experts, October and November 2020.
26. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 42

27. "Fundamental Security Challenges Nigeria Must Face: Governance," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 11 June 2015, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/fundamental-security-challenges-nigeria-must-face-part-8-governance/>; Nkasi Wodu, "Nigeria's Internal Security Problem," Council on Foreign Relations, 26 February 2021; "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Nigeria," US Department of State, 30 March 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/nigeria/>.
28. Author's interviews with Nigerian human rights representatives and experts on police reform, Abuja, November 2019.
29. For background on the challenges of police forces in Nigeria, see, for example, Solomon Arase, "Police Organizational Capacity and Right-based Policing in Nigeria," *Policing Reform in Africa* eds. Etannibi E.O. Alemika, Mutuma Ruteere, and Simon Howell (Cape Town: African Policing Civilian Oversight Forum, 2018): 162-175. See also, Chatham House, "Police, Protest Power, and Nigeria's Young Democrats," 16 October 2020; "Under attack: The travails of the Nigerian Police," SB Morgen Intelligence, 1 December 2020. Directorate indicate that these complaint mechanisms have not been effective and that the police commit abuses with impunity."
30. Author's interviews with security experts in Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019; Oladiran 'Ola' Bello and Femi Balogun, *Ethnically Diverse Police Forces Recruited by Each Geopolitical Zone Is Needed* (Lagos: GGA, 2020); European Asylum Support Office, Nigeria Security situation (Brussels: European Union, 2021)
31. Mamdooh Abdelmottlep, *World Internal Security & Peace Index 1st ed.* (Land O'Lakes, FL: International Political Science Association and Institute for Economics & Peace, 2016).
32. "Press release re: Nigeria Police Rated Worst in the World," Nigerian Police Force, 10 November 2018, https://npf.gov.ng/information/pressdetails.php?news_id=280
33. Aly Verjee, "Is Insecurity Undermining the Coronavirus Response? Evidence from Nigeria," United States Institute of Peace, 18 August 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/08/insecurity-undermining-coronavirus-response-evidence-nigeria>.
34. Author's interviews with officials of two Western embassies in Abuja, Nigerian experts on policing, and civil society representatives, Abuja, November 2019.
35. Author's interviews with retired Nigerian generals and experts on national security and domestic policing, Abuja, November 2019 and with Nigerian academics, Lagos, December 2019. See also, e.g. Segun James, "Tackling All Sides of the State Police Debate," *This Day*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/03/31/tackling-all-sides-of-the-state-police-debate/>
36. Author's interview with police and security experts and former police officials, Abuja, November 2019.
37. Author's interviews with Nigerian security experts and academics, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
38. Author's interviews with current and former police officers, police experts, human rights activists, and politicians, Abuja, Lagos, and rural parts of Ogun State, November and December 2019.
39. Between 1999 and 2002, a dozen Muslim-majority northern states authorized hisba units to police the observance of sharia in everyday conduct, specifically to arrest adulterers and confiscate alcohol. At first, state authorities provided the hisba units with small stipends, vehicles, uniforms, and an office, though hisba units were not to carry firearms. Most were instead armed with sticks. Over time, hisba volunteers became implicated in a small number of extrajudicial killings, though nothing on the scale of the Bakassi Boys. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "The enforcement of Shari'a and the role of the hisbah," *"Political Shari'a"?: Human Rights and Islamic Law in Northern Nigeria*, *Human Rights Watch Reports* 16, 9 (2004), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/nigeria0904/8.htm>. In 2006, the federal Government of Nigeria banned the hisba, following unsuccessful attempts to improve its human rights record. See, for example, Leighann Spencer and Piero Moraro, "Vigilantism Is Flourishing in Nigeria – With Official Support," *The Conversation*, 9 November 2017, <https://theconversation.com/vigilantism-is-flourishing-in-nigeria-with-official-support-86867>. However, like in the south, the ban did not stick and the hisba still operates in Kano today, though its budget and volunteered

- base have dwindled. So has the popular support the group once enjoyed. As a 2019 *Economist* article put it, “many residents of Kano now see the Hisbah as little more than a counseling service, useful for settling family disputes but not much else.” See, “A Bias Against the Pious: Nigeria Vice Cops Are Feeling Squeezed,” *The Economist*, 11 April 2019.
40. Author’s interviews with Nigerian legal experts, Abuja, November 2019.
 41. Author’s interviews with security experts, police reform scholars, local business community representatives, ethnic leaders, human rights NGOs, Abuja, Lagos, and various parts of Edo state, November and December 2019.
 42. Author’s interviews with security experts, Abuja, November 2019.
 43. Tekena Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1970).
 44. Tekena Tamuno, “Crime and Security in Pre-Colonial Nigeria,” *Policing Nigeria: Past, Present, and Future* eds. Tekena Tamuno et al. (Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited, 1993): 123-150.
 45. For background on militia policing and vigilante groups in Nigeria and across Africa, see Bruce Baker, *Security in Post-Conflict Africa: The Role of Nonstate Policing* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2009); David Dalgleish, “Pre-Colonial Criminal Justice in West Africa: Eurocentric Thought versus Africentric Evidence,” *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 1, 1 (2005): 55-69; Lanre Ukuteyijo and Kemi Rotimi, “Community Partnership in Policing: The Nigerian Experience,” *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice, and Principles* 85, 2 (2012): 123-131; and Ogadimma Chukwubueze Arisukwu, “Policing Trends in Nigeria since Independence (1960-2012),” *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice, and Principles*, 85, 2 (2012): 151-159.
 46. For a review of vigilante groups in Nigeria from the 1930s through the 1990s, see Laurent Fourchard, “A New Name for an Old Practice: Vigilantes in South-Western Nigeria,” *Journal of the International African Institute*, 78, 1 (2008): 535-558.
 47. Author’s interviews with security experts, police reform scholars, and human rights NGO representatives, Lagos and various parts of Ogun state, November and December 2019. For how informal, including vigilante, structures could be partnered with formal police forces in Nigeria, see, for example, John Domingo Inyang and Ubong Evans Abraham, “Policing Nigeria: A Case for Partnership between Formal and Informal Police Institutions,” *Merit Research Journal of Art, Social Science and Humanities* 1, 4 (2013): 53-58.
 48. For other similar ethno-vigilante groups in other parts of Nigeria, such as in the North Central Region, see, for example, Philip Ademola Olayoku, “Between Vigilantism and Ethnocultural Preservation: An Investigation into the Legitimacy of the Non-State Policing Activities of the Ombatse Group among the Eggon People of Nassarawa State, Nigeria,” *African Security Review* 26, 4 (2017): 1-20.
 49. Author’s phone interviews with security experts on Nigeria’s south, April 2021.
 50. Author’s interviews with a chief of the Mushin area hunters’ group, Lagos, December 2019.
 51. Ibid.
 52. Other Lagos crime hotspot areas include Adeniji Adele, Ajegunde, and Oshodi/Mafoluku.
 53. International Crisis Group, “Stopping Nigeria’s Spiraling Farmer-Herder Violence,” 26 July 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiraling-farmer-herder-violence>.
 54. Marie-Therese Nanlong, “Agro Rangers to Act as Mediators in Farmers, Herders Conflicts – NSCDC,” *The Vanguard*, 25 September 2019, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/09/agro-rangers-to-act-as-mediators-in-farmers-herders-conflicts-nscdc/>. Author’s interviews with officers of NSCDC, Lagos and Ogun States, December 2019.
 55. A. Ekekee, “Association of Cattle Breeders Attacks Fayose for Introducing Grazing Enforcement Marshals,” *Newspeak*, 23 October 2016.
 56. Author’s interview with a head of VGN chapter, Abuja, November 2019. For background on VGN, see, for example, Chris Kwaja, Kemi Okenyodo, and Valkamiya Ahmadu-Haruna, *Non State Security Actors and Security Provisioning in Nigeria* (Abuja: Rule of Law and Empowerment Initiative, 2017), https://www.academia.edu/37719416/NON_STATE_SECURITY_ACTORS_AND_SECURITY_PROVISIONING_IN_NIGERIA.pdf.

57. Ibid.
58. Author's interview with a head of VGN chapter, Abuja, November 2019.
59. Kingsley Nwezeh, "Vigilante Group Canvasses Inclusion in Community Policing," *This Day*, 29 September 2020, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/09/29/vigilante-group-canvasses-inclusion-in-community-policing/>
60. Ibid., and author's interviews with Nigerian security experts and civil society NGOs, Abuja and Lagos, November 2019 and December 2019.
61. Author's interviews with Nigerian lawyers, civil society representatives, experts on policing, and a current and former high-level police officer, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
62. Author's interview with a head of VGN chapter, Abuja, November 2019.
63. Author's interviews with VGN representatives and policing experts, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
64. Author's interviews with representatives of hunters' groups, Lagos, December 2019.
65. Author's interviews with VGN and OPC representatives, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
66. For the rise of similar anti-crime vigilante groups at that time in other parts of Africa, see Nicolas Argenti, "Air Youth: Performance, Violence and the State in Cameroon," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, 4 (1998): 753-782; Bruce Baker, "Living with the Non-State Policing in South Africa: The Issues and Dilemmas," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 40, 1 (2002): 29-53; David Anderson, "Vigilantes, Violence and the Politics of Order in Kenya," *African Studies* 101, 405 (2002): 531-555.
67. Daniel Jordan Smith, "Ritual Killing, 419, and Fast Wealth: Inequality and the Popular Imagination in Southeastern Nigeria," *American Ethnologist* 28, 4 (2001): 803-826; Misty Bastian, "Diabolic Realities: Narratives of Conspiracy, Transparency, and 'Ritual Murder' in the Nigerian Popular Print and Electronic Media," *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* eds. Harry West and Todd Sanders (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003): 65-91.
68. For the cultural, symbolic, and economic significance of markets in Igbo culture, see Misty Bastian, "Fires, Tricksters and Poisoned Medicines: Popular Cultures of Rumor in Onitsha, Nigeria and Its Markets," *Etnofoor*, 11, 2 (1998): 111-132.
69. Bruce Baker, "When the Bakassi Boys Came: Eastern Nigeria Confronts Vigilantism," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20, 2 (2002): 225.
70. See, for example, Human Rights Watch and CLEEN, "Nigeria. The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture," *Human Rights Watch Reports* 14, 5 (2002), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3cea124a4.html>.
71. Mohammed Ibrahim, "An Empirical Survey of Children and Youth in Organized Armed Violence in Nigeria: Egbesu Boys, OPC and Bakassi Boys as a Case Study," *Neither War Nor Peace: International Comparisons of Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence* ed. Luke Dowdney (Rio de Janeiro: COAV, 2015).
72. Ise-Oluwa Ige, "AAGM: Bakassi Killings: FG, Abia At Loggerhead over Power of Inquisition," *Vanguard*, 14 November 2005, <https://allafrica.com/stories/200511140824.html>.
73. Ukoha Ukiwo, "Dues Ex Machina or Frankenstein Monster? The Changing Roles of Bakassi Boys in Eastern Nigeria," *Journal of Democracy and Development: A Journal of West African Affairs* 3, 1 (2002): 39-51.
74. Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Vigilante Violence in the South and Southeast Nigeria* (London: Amnesty, 2002), <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/112000/afr440142002en.pdf>: 8.
75. Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture," *HRW/CLEEN* 14, 5 (2002).
76. Daniel Jordan Smith, "The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria," *Cultural Anthropology*, 19, 3 (2004): 429-455.
77. Ibid.
78. Amnesty International, *Vigilante violence in the south and south-east* (London: Amnesty, 2002).
79. Author's interviews with human rights NGO representatives, experts on policing in Nigeria, and academics, Abuja and Lagos, November

- and December 2019; Human Rights Watch and CLEEN, "Nigeria. The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture," *Human Rights Watch Reports* 14, 5 (2002), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3cea124a4.html>; Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 30.
80. See, for example, Amnesty International, "Nigeria: Execution/ Fear of Further Executions: 32 Prisoners Convicted of Armed Robbery," 13 September 1995, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/172000/afr440171995en.pdf>.
81. Chukwuma Innocent, *Above Law: A Report on Torture and Extra-Judicial Killings by the Police in Lagos State, Nigeria* (Lagos: Civil Liberties Organization, 1994).
82. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 32.
83. Misty Bastian, "Bloodhounds Who Have No Friends: Witchcraft and Locality in the Nigerian Popular Press," *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* eds. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993): 129-66.
84. Ray Abrahams, "Vigilantism: Order and Disorder on the Frontiers of the State," *Inside and Outside the Law: Anthropological Studies of Authority and Ambiguity* ed. Olivia Harris (New York: Routledge: 1996): 41-55.
85. Daniel Jordan Smith, "The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria," *Cultural Anthropology*, 19, 3 (2004): 441.
86. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 33.
87. Ibid.
88. Human Rights Watch and CLEEN, "Nigeria. The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture," *Human Rights Watch Reports* 14, 5 (2002), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3cea124a4.html>.
89. Author's interviews with Nigerian experts on vigilantism in South East Nigeria, Abuja, November 2019; Amnesty International, *Vigilante violence in the south and south-east* (London: Amnesty, 2002): 9.
90. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 44.
91. Cited in Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 26.
92. Ibid.
93. Charles Gore and David Pratten, "The Politics of Plunder: The Rhetoric Order and Disorder in Southern Nigeria," *African Affairs* 102, 407 (2003): 211-240.
94. Cited in Daniel Jordan Smith, "The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria," *Cultural Anthropology*, 19, 3 (2004): 439.
95. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 24.
96. Ibid.: 45.
97. Ibid.
98. Ibid.: 37.
99. Amnesty International, *Vigilante violence in the south and south-east* (London: Amnesty, 2002): 9.
100. Ibid.: 18.
101. Ibid.
102. Norimitsu Onishi, "Nigerian Militias Wield Power through Intimidation," *New York Times*, 6 October 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/06/world/nigerian-militias-wield-power-through-intimidation.html>.
103. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 40.
104. Author's interviews with a security and crime expert, Abuja, November 2019; Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 27.
105. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 41.
106. Ibid.: 40.
107. Author's interview with an expert on crime in southern Nigeria, Abuja, November 2019.

108. Author's interviews with a security and crime expert, Abuja, November 2019.
109. Ukoha Ukiwo, "Dues Ex Machina or Frankenstein Monster? The Changing Roles of Bakassi Boys in Eastern Nigeria," *Journal of Democracy and Development: A Journal of West African Affairs* 3,1 (2002): 39-51.
110. The CJTF in Nigeria's north has a similar mixed record of satisfying local communities with its involvement in civil disputes and domestic quarrels, often displeasing communities by such actions. These failures stand in stark contrast to the successes of other groups around the world to develop political capital through the provision of dispute resolution mechanisms, including gangs in Brazil's favelas, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo, the FARC), the Taliban in Afghanistan or al Shabab in Somalia. For details, see: Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas, and Shadi , *Militants, Criminals, and Warlords: The Challenge of Local Governance in an Age of Disorder* (Washington DC: The Brooking Institution, 2017).
111. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 42.
112. Daniel Jordan Smith, "The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria," *Cultural Anthropology*, 19, 3 (2004): 448.
113. Author's interviews with civil society representatives, experts on police reform, a former high-level police officer, and Nigerian academics, Abuja, December 2019.
114. HRW and CLEEN: 38.
115. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 24.
116. Author's interview with the security experts, Abuja, November 2019.
117. Author's interviews with Nigerian experts on police reform and academics, Abuja, November 2019. See also Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 37; and Daniel Jordan Smith, "The Bakassi Boys: Vigilantism, Violence, and Political Imagination in Nigeria," *Cultural Anthropology* 19, 3 (2004): 429-455.
118. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 31.
119. Author's interviews with Nigerian experts on police reform, Abuja, November 2019.
120. Kingsley Omonobi, "Police Give Reason for Dislodging Bakassi Boys," *Vanguard*, 26 September 2002.
121. See, e.g. "Nigeria: Lawyers demand emergency rule in Anambra State," *The New Humanitarian*, 10 September 2002, Ody Chukwube, "The Anambra Security Example," AFP, 2 January 2001; "Beware the Bakassi Boys," *The Economist*, 19 May 2001.
122. Cited Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 26.
123. Bruce Baker, "When the Bakassi Boys Came: Eastern Nigeria Confronts Vigilantism," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20, 2 (2002).
124. Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: Fighting Crime in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003): 30.
125. Emmanuel Onwubiko, "Obasanjo Forgives NAU Students, Okays Bakassi Boys," *The Guardian* (Nigeria), 28 August 2000.
126. Human Rights Watch and CLEEN, "Nigeria. The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture," *Human Rights Watch Reports* 14, 5 (2002); Amnesty International, *Vigilante violence in the south and south-east* (London: Amnesty, 2002).
127. Kingsley Omonobi, "Police Give Reason for Dislodging Bakassi Boys," *Vanguard*, 26 September 2002; and Kingsley Omonobi and Olanokomi Akoni, "Police Rescue 45 Detainees from Bakassi Boys' Dungeon," *Vanguard*, 30 September 2002.
128. Amnesty International, *Vigilante violence in the south and south-east* (London: Amnesty, 2002).
129. Osborne Peters, "I Will Reinstiate Bakassi Boys, Says Aspirant," *This Day*, 19 October 2002; and Vincent Ujumadu, "Aba Traders Clamour for Return of Bakassi Boys," *Vanguard*, 27 September 2002.

- ¹³⁰. Nicolas Florquin and Eric Berman, "Armed Groups and Small Arms in ECOWAS Member States (1998-2004)," *Armed and Aimless: Armed Groups, Guns, and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2005), www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/D-Book-series/book-01-Armed-and-Aimless/SAS-Armed-Aimless-1-Full-manuscript.pdf: 332-334; Christiane Agboton-Johnson, Adedeji Ebo, and Laura Mazal, "Small Arms in Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal," *International Alert West Africa Series 2* (2004), https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/Small_Arms_Control_In_Ghana.pdf.
- ¹³¹. Mohammed Ibrahim, "An Empirical Survey of Children and Youth in Organized Armed Violence in Nigeria: Egbesu Boys, OPC and Bakassi Boys as a Case Study," *Neither War Nor Peace: International Comparisons of Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence* ed. Luke Dowdney (Rio de Janeiro: COAV, 2015).
- ¹³². "Nigerian Police Parade Suspects after 27 Die in Illegal Custody," *Agence France-Presse*, 16 August 2005.
- ¹³³. Four members of the Bakassi Boys were sentenced to death by Umuahia High Court in February 2006 for murders they committed in 1999. See "4 Bakassi Boys to Die for Murder," *This Day*, 3 February 2006.
- ¹³⁴. Olly Owen, "Mass Deaths in Custody of Prisoners Held by Illegal Nigerian Militia," *Global Insight Daily Analysis*, 19 August 2005.
- ¹³⁵. Author's interviews with experts on vigilante groups in Nigeria's south and representatives of Nigerian police reform and human rights NGOs, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019. See also, Nicolas Florquin and Eric Berman, "Armed Groups and Small Arms in ECOWAS Member States (1998-2004)," *Armed and Aimless: Armed Groups, Guns, and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2005).
- ¹³⁶. C. Don Adinuba, "Anambra State Commissioner for Information and Public Enlightenment," Anambra State Government, 10 October 2019, <https://old.anambrastate.gov.ng/news?r=the-anambra-digital-security-level&hs=a80d98f52ec06f6e647e3826b484cd55>.
- ¹³⁷. Jeff Amechi Agbodo, "Why We Support Community Policing in Anambra – Okpomp, Vigilante Chairman," *Sun News*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.sunnewsonline.com/why-we-support-community-policing-in-anambra-okpomp-vigilante-chairman/>.
- ¹³⁸. Titus Eleweke Awka, "Obiano's Bakassi Boys Tackling Insecurity on a Digital Level," *Daily Trust*, 20 October 2019, <https://www.pressreader.com/nigeria/sunday-trust/20191020/282303911909983>.
- ¹³⁹. Governor Willie Obiano cited in Titus Eleweke Awka, "Obiano's Bakassi Boys Tackling Insecurity on a Digital Level," *Daily Trust*, 20 October 2019, <https://www.pressreader.com/nigeria/sunday-trust/20191020/282303911909983>.
- ¹⁴⁰. Maurice Ogbonnaya, "Non-State Security Actors in the South-East Zone of Nigeria," *Non State Security Actors and Security Provisioning in Nigeria* eds. Chris Kwaja, Kemi Okenyodo, and Valkamiya Ahmadu-Haruna (Abuja: Rule of Law and Empowerment Initiative, 2017), https://www.academia.edu/37719416/NON_STATE_SECURITY_ACTORS_AND_SECURITY_PROVISIONING_IN_NIGERIA.pdf: 54.
- ¹⁴¹. Uche Mbah, "Militant Ultimatum Expires Today as Bakassi Boys Are Resurrected," *The Source*, 1 June 2019, <https://thesourceng.com/militant-ultimatum-expires-today-as-bakassi-boys-are-resurrected/>.
- ¹⁴². Falalu Bello, "Nigeria: One Country Four Economies Discussion Points," 18 April 2015, <http://www.gamji.com/article6000/NEWS7879.htm>.
- ¹⁴³. Foluso Aboderin and Kemi Okenyodo, "Non-State Security Actors in the South-West Zone of Nigeria," *Non State Security Actors and Security Provisioning in Nigeria* eds. Chris Kwaja, Kemi Okenyodo, and Valkamiya Ahmadu-Haruna (Abuja: Rule of Law and Empowerment Initiative, 2017): 72, https://www.academia.edu/37719416/NON_STATE_SECURITY_ACTORS_AND_SECURITY_PROVISIONING_IN_NIGERIA.pdf.
- ¹⁴⁴. Oodua People's Congress Constitution cited in Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports 15. 4, (2003): 1. For background on the rise of ethnic militias in Nigeria in the 1990s and after

- transition to democracy, see, for example, Tunde Babawale, "The Rise of Ethnic Militias, De-Legitimization of the State and the Threat to Nigerian Federalism," *West African Review* 3, 1 (2001): 1-9; Rufus Akinyele, "Ethnic Militancy and National Stability in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Oodua People's Congress," *African Affairs* 100, 401 (2001): 623-640; Insa Nolte, "Ethnic Vigilantes and the State: The Oodua People's Congress in South-Western Nigeria," *International Relations* 21, 2 (2007): 217-235.
145. Beyond the two Fasehun's and Adams's factions, other Yoruba self-determination organizations or splinter groups existed, such as The Oodua Youth Movement, the Oodua Liberation Movement, Oodua Republic Front, and the Federation for Yoruba Culture and Consciousness, which came together and apart under various umbrella coalitions.
146. Rufus Akinyele, "Federation, Democracy and the Minority Question in Nigeria," *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2, 1 (2000): 245-255.
147. Human Rights Watch, *The O'odua People's Congress (OPC): Fighting Violence with Violence*, *Human Rights Watch Nigeria* 15, 4 (2003): 5.
148. Author's interviews with community members in Mushin, Lagos, and with NGO representatives, university academics, and Nigerian security experts, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
149. "OPC Will Unite Again – Fasehun," *Newswatch*, 10 September 2001.
150. Cited in Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 145.
151. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 24.
152. *Ibid.*: 26.
153. Author's interview with a Mushin community member who lived in Mushin for several decades, including in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and regularly dealt with and still deals with the OPC, Lagos, December 2019.
154. Author's interviews with NGO representatives, security experts, and community representatives who lived in Lagos during the 1990s and 2000s and regularly encountered the OPC extortion along the roads.
155. Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 145.
156. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 1.
157. Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 152.
158. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 8.
159. "Police Hand Over Detained OPC to Interpol," *The Punch*, 24 September 2000.
160. "Chained for Retributive Justice," *The Punch*, 11 October 2003.
161. Author's interview with a Nigerian security expert, Abuja, November 2019.
162. "OPC Metamorphosis," *National Concord*, 13 May 2001.
163. Author's interviews with Nigerian security experts and NGO representatives, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
164. Amnesty International, *Vigilante violence in the south and south-east* (London: Amnesty, 2002).16.
165. Author's interview with a community member who lived in one of the Lagos neighbourhoods who became a centrepiece of OPC activities in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Lagos, December 2019.

166. Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 148.
167. Ibid.: 143.
168. Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 151.
169. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 10.
170. Ibid.
171. Ibid.
172. Ibid.: 26.
173. See, for example, "22 Arrested for Operating Detention Camp," *The Punch*, 25 February 2003.
174. Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 152.
175. Police records cited in Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 150.
176. OPC representatives cited in "OPC Dismisses 10 Members for Thuggery," *The Punch*, 14 August 2002.
177. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 8; Author's interviews with Gani Adams and his retinue, Lagos, December 2021.
178. "Ilesa: A City under Purge, OPC Vs 419 Internationals," *Nigerian Tribune*, 15 January 2000.
179. Interviews in Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 149.
180. See, for example, "Mushin Killings: The Inside Story of Akala," *National Encomium*, 17 January 2000 : 7; "Akala: A Fortnight after Bloodbirth and Arson," *Nigerian Tribune*, 15 January 2000.
181. Author's interviews with community member, Mushin, Lagos, December 2019, and HRW (2003): 25.
182. Author's interviews with community members in Mushin, Lagos, December 2019.
183. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 37.
184. "OPC Protest against Planned Impeachment of Obasanjo," *Vanguard*, 2 October 2002. See also "OPC Mounts Pro-Obasanjo Procession in Lagos," *This Day*, 2 October 2002.
185. Author's interviews with those and other journalists, Lagos, December 2019.
186. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 1.
187. "OPC: Won't Pursue Ethnic Agenda, Says Tinubu," *This Day*, 26 June 2001.
188. Cited in Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 50.
189. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 10.
190. "OPC TO Arrest Political Thugs during 2003 Polls, Fasehun," *Vanguard*, 13 December 2002.
191. Author's interviews with community representatives, NGO representatives, and Nigerian security experts from Lagos, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019; Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 10.

192. Yvan Guichaoua, "The Making of an Ethnic Militia: The Oodua People's Congress," *Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity (CRISE Working Paper 26)* (2006), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08c3040f0b652dd001180/wp26.pdf>.
193. Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris): 145.
194. "Police Vs OPC: One Week, One Trouble," *The Champion*, 15 January 2003.
195. Author's interviews with Nigerian security experts who lived in Lagos in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Lagos and Abuja, November and December 2021.
196. Rufus T. Akinyele, "The involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in crime control in South-Western Nigerian cities," *Gouverner les villes d'Afrique. Etat, gouvernement local et acteurs privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, Paris); "Why I'm Fighting OPC-Aghedo," *The Punch*, 4 April 1999.
197. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 34.
198. Ibid.: 1.
199. See e.g. Peter Uzoho, "OPC Backs Anti-SARS Protest, Demands Compensation for Slain Members," *This Day*, 14 October 2020, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/10/14/opc-backs-anti-sars-protest-demands-compensation-for-slain-members/>
200. "Lagos Considers Vigilantes to Fight Crime Wave," *Reuters*, 14 June 2001.
201. Cited in Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 49.
202. "OPC Remains Banned," *New Agency of Nigeria*, 26 June 2001.
203. Author's interviews with security experts and academics and human rights NGO representatives, Lagos and Abuja, November and December 2019.
204. Philip Ademola Olayoku, "Between Vigilantism and Ethnocultural Preservation: An Investigation into the Legitimacy of the Non-State Policing Activities of the Ombatse Group among the Eggon People of Nassarawa State, Nigeria," *African Security Review* 26, 4 (2017): 7.
205. Author's interviews with community member representatives, Lagos, December 2019.
206. Amnesty International, *Vigilante violence in the south and south-east* (London: Amnesty, 2002): 16.
207. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 50.
208. Interviews with top level OPC members conducted by HRW, Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 47-8.
209. Rufus Akinyele, "The Involvement of the Oodua People's Congress in Crime Control in Southwestern Nigeria," *Gouverner les Villes d'Afrique: Etat, Gouvernement Local et Acteurs Privés* ed. Laurent Fourchard (Paris: Karthala, 2007): 139-159.
210. Human Rights Watch, "The Oodua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence," *Human Rights Watch Nigeria Reports* 15. 4, (2003): 26.
211. Foluso Aboderin and Kemi Okenyodo, "Non-State Security Actors in the South-West Zone of Nigeria," *Non State Security Actors and Security Provisioning in Nigeria* eds. Chris Kwaja, Kemi Okenyodo, and Valkamiya Ahmadu-Haruna (Abuja: Rule of Law and Empowerment Initiative, 2017): 74.
212. Author's interview with high-level OPC members, Lagos, November 2019.
213. Author's interviews with a high-level VGN representative, Abuja, November 2019.
214. Author's interviews with a police commander who had been posted to Lagos in recent years, with Nigerian security and policing experts and academics, and human rights NGO representatives, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.

215. Author's interviews with security experts and academics and NGO representatives, Abuja and Lagos, December 2019.
216. Author's interviews with Nigerian academics, Lagos, December 2019.
217. For details about the MEND and its referencing by Nigerian militia groups far away from the Niger Delta, including the CJTF in the north, see, Vanda Felbab-Brown, "In Nigeria, We Don't Want Them Back: Amnesty, Defectors' Programs, Leniency Measures, Informal Reconciliation, and Punitive Responses to Boko Haram," *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism* ed. Cale Salih (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2018), <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/3128/3-LoP-Nigeria-final.pdf>; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria's North East: Not Going Away," *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace* ed. Adam Day (New York: United Nations University, 2020): 92.
218. Author's interviews with security experts and academics, Lagos and Abuja, November and December 2019.
219. Author's interview with a top officer of NSCDC, Lagos, December 2019.
220. Author's interviews with security experts and academics, Lagos and Abuja, November and December 2019.
221. Author's interviews with OPC members, Lagos, December 2019.
222. Author's interviews with an NGO representative, Lagos, December 2019.
223. Emmanuel Aziken, "YES-O, Ajimobi Has a Jobs Plan," *The Vanguard*, 6 December 2011, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/12/yes-o-ajimobi-has-a-jobs-plan/>.
224. Author's interviews with commanders and members of So-Safe, Ogun State, December 2019.
225. Author's interviews with So-Safe commanders and NGO representatives in Ogun State, December 2019.
226. Ibid.
227. Author's interviews with commanders and members of So-Safe, Ogun State, December 2019.
228. Nuruddeen Abdallah, "Buhari Campaign to Drag Jonathan to ICC," *Daily Trust*, 18 March 2015, <https://dailytrust.com/buhari-campaign-to-drag-jonathan-to-icc>.
229. Author's interviews with security experts and a police official who had been posted in Lagos, Abuja, November 2019. Various community members in Lagos, such as drivers, interviewed by the author in Lagos State in December 2019 also stated they regularly pay extortion fees to members of LASTMA, OPC, and the police and military as well as to other actors, not always able to identify to whom they forced to pay along the roads.
230. Author's interviews with security experts, Abuja, November 2019.
231. Author's interviews with high-level OPC members, Lagos, December 2019.
232. Ibid.
233. Author's interview with a Nigerian police official who had been posted to Lagos in recent years, Abuja, November 2019, and human rights activists, Lagos, December 2019.
234. Author's interview with a Nigerian police official who had been posted to Lagos in recent years, Abuja, November 2019, and human rights activists and academics, Lagos, December 2019. See also Esther Onyegbula, "We Killed the Victim to Avenge the Death of Our Member... -- Suspected Cultists," *Vanguard*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/04/we-killed-the-victim-to-avenge-the-death-of-our-member-%E2%80%95suspected-cultists/>.
235. Author's interviews with community and NGO representatives, Nigerian scholars and academics of crime and policing, and a police commander formally posted to Lagos, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
236. Evelyn Usman and Dapo Akinrefon, "Police, OPC Nab 100 Badoo Cult Members," *Vanguard*, 3 July 2017, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/07/police-opc-nab-100-badoo-cult-members/>.
237. Author's interview with a Nigerian security and policing expert, Lagos, December 2019.

238. Author's interviews with high OPC officials, human rights NGO representatives, a police commander formally posted to Lagos and community members, and officers of Nigeria's Security and Civil Defense Corps, Abuja, Lagos, and town and rural areas of Ogun State, November and December 2019.
239. Author's interviews with human rights NGO representatives and security and policing experts, Lagos, December 2019.
240. Author's interviews with high-level OPC members, Lagos, December 2019.
241. Ibid.
242. Author witnessed such a NSCDC commander in rural areas of Ogun State, visiting both herders' and farmers' communities with him and having her own independent conversations with members of both communities – Ogun State, December 2019.
243. Author's interviews with representatives of a herders' community in Ogun State and with human rights NGOs and think tanks in Lagos, December 2019.
244. Author's interviews with representatives of farmers, Ogun state, December 2019.
245. Author's interviews with NGO representatives, community representatives, security experts, academics, and journalists, tribal leaders, Lagos, and both rural and town areas of Ogun state, December 2019.
246. Author's interviews with Nigerian security experts, human rights activists, and security NGO representatives, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
247. Author's interviews with Nigerian security experts, human rights activists, and security NGO representatives, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
248. Foluso Aboderin and Kemi Okenyodo, "Non-State Security Actors in the South-West Zone of Nigeria," *Non State Security Actors and Security Provisioning in Nigeria* eds. Chris Kwaja, Kemi Okenyodo, and Valkamiya Ahmadu-Haruna (Abuja: Rule of Law and Empowerment Initiative, 2017): 72.
249. Ibid: 73.
250. Author's interviews with community representatives, Mushin, Lagos, December 2019.
251. Nigeria also experienced many intense periods of insecurity during the era of the military dictatorships. However, the visibility and brazenness of violent crime intensified significantly after the military rule ended.
252. For example, a poll from Pew Research Center in 2015 found that more than eight-in-ten Nigerians say crime (88%) and corruption (86%) are "very big problems" in their country. See, Jacob Poushter, "6 facts about public opinion in Nigeria before election day," Pew Research Center, 24 March 2015.
253. Official statistics on effective prosecution rates in Nigeria are not available. However, Nigerian legal experts and experts on policing believe that the effective prosecution rate for violent crimes in Nigeria is no higher than 10 per cent. Author's interviews with Nigerian legal experts and experts on policing and a current and former high-level police official, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
254. Chidi A. Odinkalu, *Criminal Force: Torture, Abuse and Extrajudicial Killings by the Nigeria Police Force* (New York: Open Society Institute and Network on Police Reform in Nigeria, 2010); Ndubuisi J. Madubuike-Ekwe and Olumide K. Obayemi, "Assessment of the Role of the Nigerian Police Force in the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Nigeria," *Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law* 23, 1 (2019); Prisoners' Rehabilitation and Welfare Action and Network on Police Reforms in Nigeria, "Torture and Extrajudicial Killings in Nigeria," *Universal Period Review* (2013); Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Time to End Impunity* (Abuja: Amnesty International Nigeria, 2020).
255. See, e.g. "SARS: Why are tens of thousands of Nigerians protesting?," *Al Jazeera*, 21 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/21/endsars-protests-why-are-nigerians-protesting>
256. Author's interview with a Nigerian security analyst, Abuja, November 2019.
257. Author's interviews with civil society representatives, Nigerian academics, human rights NGO representatives, and experts on police reform, Lagos, December 2019.

- ²⁵⁸. Author's phone interviews with Nigerian security experts and human rights NGO representatives, Fall 2020 and Spring 2021.
- ²⁵⁹. Author's interviews with Nigerian security experts, NGO and community representatives, and members of OPC and VGN, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
- ²⁶⁰. Author's interviews with representatives of a prominent Nigerian security think tank, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
- ²⁶¹. Author's interviews with Nigerian legal experts and experts on policing and a current and former high-level police official, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
- ²⁶². Author's interviews with representatives of OPC and VGN, Abuja and Lagos, November and December 2019.
- ²⁶³. Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria's North East: Not Going Away," *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace* ed. Adam Day (New York: United Nations University, 2020): 92.
- ²⁶⁴. John Campbell, *Nigeria and the Nation State* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).
- ²⁶⁵. For details of the law, see, for example, Adriaan Alsema, "Colombian House agrees on "empty chair" solution to fight parapolitics", *Colombia Reports*, 15 April 2008, <https://colombiareports.com/amp/colombian-house-agrees-on-empty-chair-solution-to-fight-parapolitics/>.



 UNITED NATIONS
UNIVERSITY
Centre for Policy Research

cpr.unu.edu
@UNUCPR

767 Third Avenue, Suite 35B
New York, NY 10017, USA