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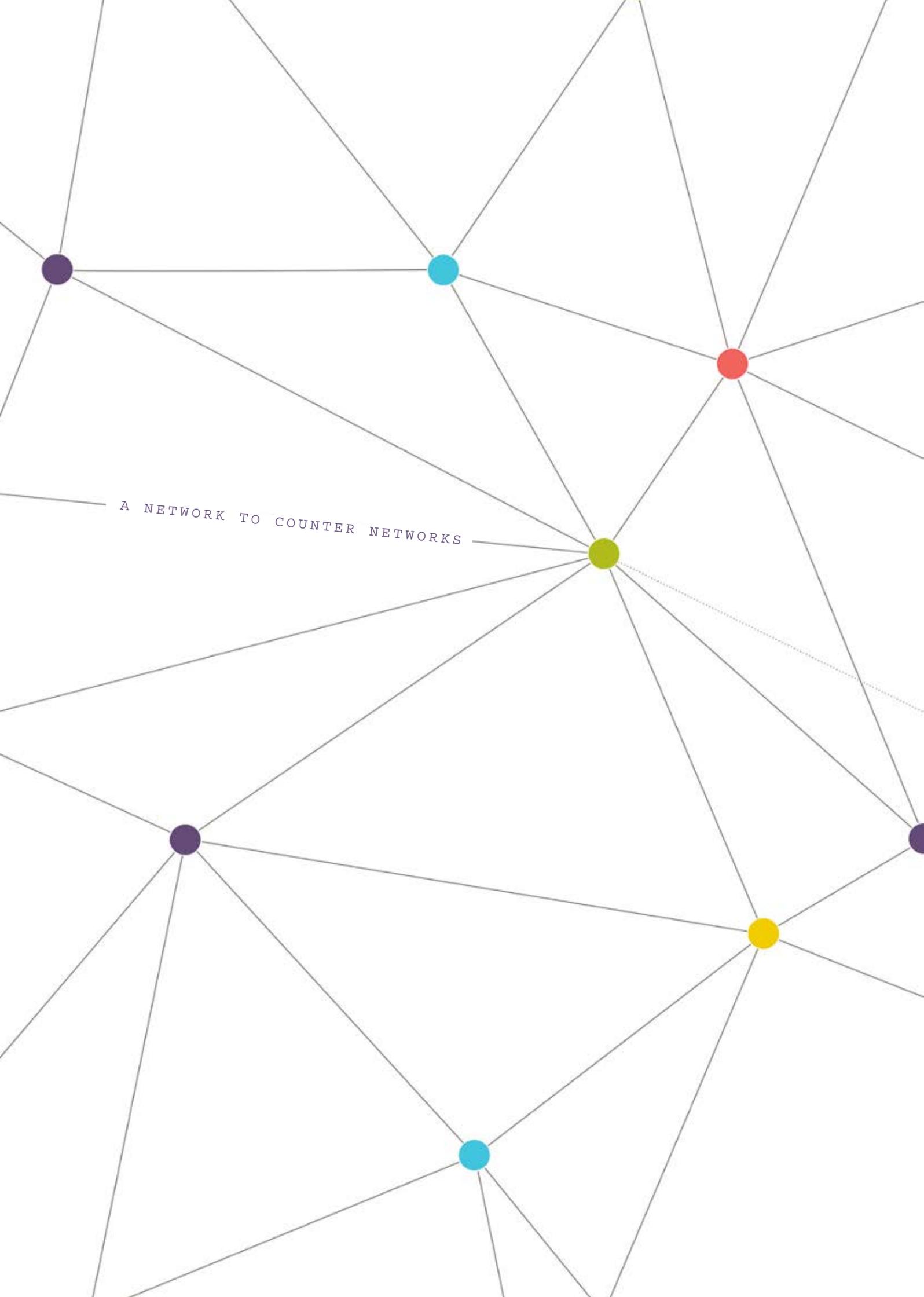
Power, elitism and history

Analyzing trends in targeted killings
in Nigeria, 2000 to 2017

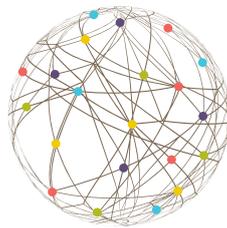
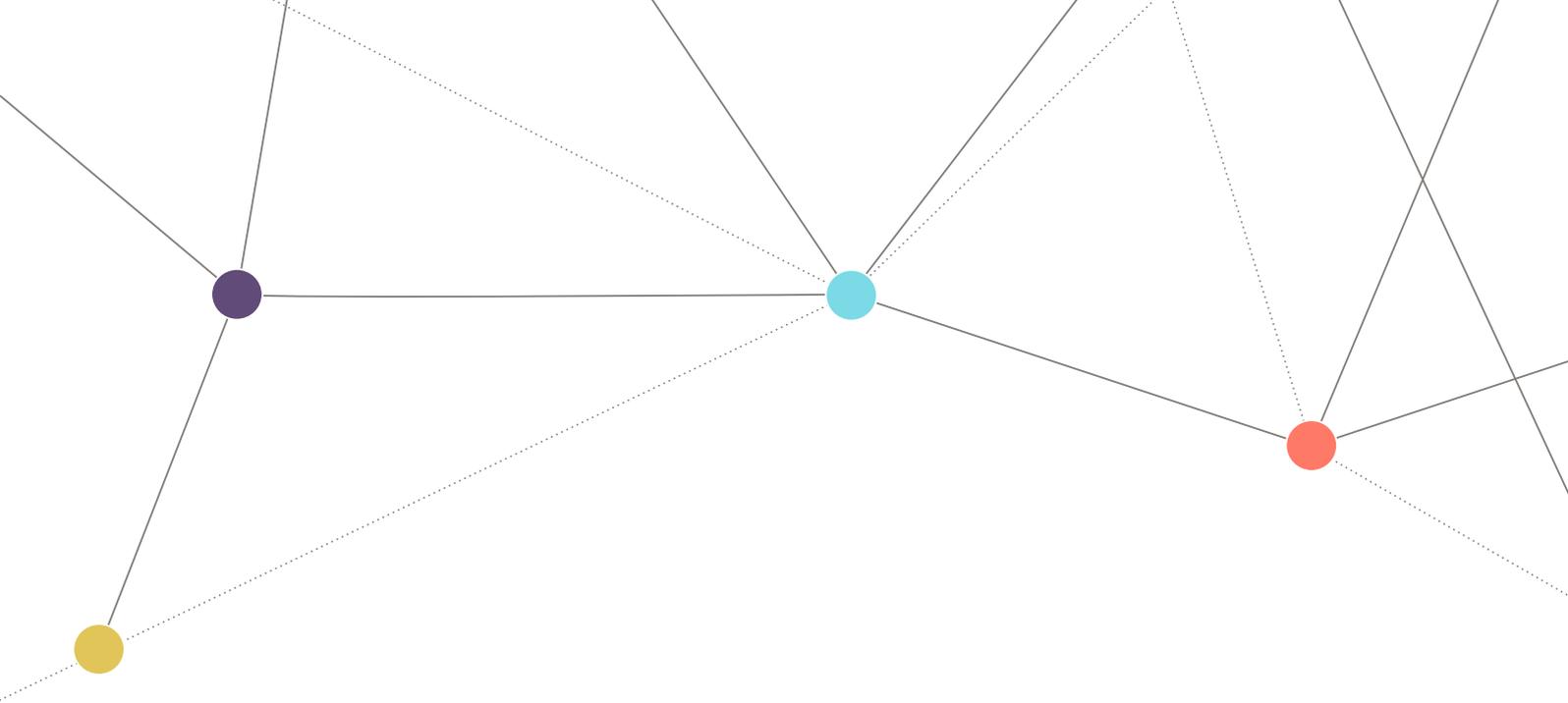
Hilary Matfess



December 2018



A NETWORK TO COUNTER NETWORKS



Power, Elitism and History: Analyzing Trends in Targeted Killings in Nigeria, 2000 to 2017

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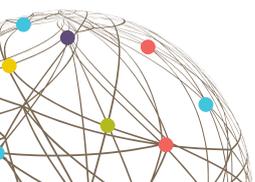
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'Violence has never been an instrument used by us, as founding fathers of the Nigerian Republic, to solve political problems. In the British tradition, we talked the Colonial Office into accepting our challenges for the demerits and merits of our case for self-government. After six constitutional conferences in 1953, 1954, 1957, 1958, 1959, and 1960, Great Britain conceded to us the right to assert our political independence as from October 1, 1960. ...

I consider it most unfortunate that our 'Young Turks' decided to introduce the element of violent revolution into Nigerian politics. No matter how they and our general public might have been provoked by obstinate and perhaps grasping politicians, it is an unwise policy.'

– Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe's reaction to Nigeria's first military coup of 15 January 1966¹

'In such a regime, I say you died a good death if your life had inspired someone to come forward and shoot your murderer in the chest – without asking to be paid.'

– Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People*



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Acronyms and abbreviations

AC	Action Congress
APC	All Progressives Congress
NURTW	National Union of Road Transport Workers
PDP	People's Democratic Party

Summary

Despite the prevalence of assassinations and targeted killings in Nigeria, there has not yet been a systematic account of this kind of criminal activity in the country. This report analyzes the dynamics of targeted killings in the country using a specially designed dataset over the period 2000 to 2017. The report relays the highlights of this data through a discussion of the demographic patterns of targeted killings in Nigeria, including certain groups that are frequently targeted, such as politicians, civil servants, traditional and religious leaders, journalists and others,² as well as where assassinations predominantly occur. It contextualizes the findings within Nigeria's historical and political development, and foregrounds certain key patterns in targeted killings, describing the trends that have incentivized targeted killing. Finally, a discussion of the implications of targeted violence for broader social violence in Nigeria and policy recommendations for reducing the levels of targeted killings are provided.

Key points

- Targeted killings are not evenly distributed across Nigeria; the country's southern states are the sites of considerably higher numbers of targeted killings than elsewhere.
- Association with power (such as being a politician, a civil servant, or a traditional or religious authority figure) attracts violence. However, those without significant authority are also victims of targeted killings.
- Historical, political and social developments, which have shaped institutions in Nigeria, drive the characteristics and location of targeted killings.



Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy, has attracted considerable policy and academic attention. Studies by Transparency International and others have revealed breathtaking levels of official corruption and graft in the country. Despite the attention paid to Nigeria, there is little information about the prevalence of targeted killings against individuals in the country – and the relationship between this phenomenon and corruption is not well understood.³

The lack of attention paid to targeted killings in Nigeria reflects a gap in the literature on political violence more generally. Zaryab Iqbal and Christopher Zorn lament in their paper 'The political consequences of assassination' that social scientists 'have paid relatively little attention to explaining assassination as a form of political violence, and even less to assessing its social and political consequences'.⁴ In Nigeria, where power is often personalized and the mechanisms to transfer power are often opaque and non-institutionalized, assassination and other types of targeted killings play a particularly important role, making the dearth of information on this type of violence all the more glaring.

Reflecting on the country's history of targeted killings and assassinations, a 2009 op-ed published in news agency Sahara Reporters said, 'Obviously, Nigerians are accepting the situation as part and parcel of our day to day living, thus it is not unusual that when news about the assassination of a journalist, politician, businessman or just about any other Nigerian breaks on television or radio, people no longer cringe. We just shake our heads and move on.'⁵

The first step towards explaining a phenomenon lies in knowing its dimensions. To this end, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized crime created a dataset, Targeted Killings in Nigeria, 2000–2017, as a means of remedying these gaps. This data sought to document instances in which individuals were specifically targeted for violence.

For the purposes of this report, the term 'targeted killings' is used to denote planned violence directed at an individual, which may not necessarily result in death. In this paper, 'targeted killing' therefore includes planned, fatal and non-fatal attacks on specifically targeted individuals.

By analyzing newspaper reports from 2000 to 2017 using LexisNexis, and a small team of researchers and human coders, the Targeted Killings in Nigeria dataset has catalogued more than 1 650 targeted killings in Nigeria. Emerging from the dataset is the suggestion that criminality may be linked with targeted killings to a greater degree than with other forms of non-state, anti-state or violent organizations. Whereas the country's North East has been ravaged by Boko Haram, whose indiscriminate violence has claimed tens of thousands of lives, the region has seen comparatively few targeted killings. Conversely, the country's southern states, which are renowned for criminal activity, are where most targeted killings occur. The dataset suggests that the current configuration of power and authority in Nigeria, and particularly in the country's south, has resulted in staggering numbers of targeted killings, which require domestic and international policy attention. This report examines the patterns of targeted killings in Nigeria in an attempt to shed light on this oft-overlooked category of political violence, and to probe what historical, economic and social forces have contributed to the prevalence of this form of violence.

The dataset also suggests that the country's return to democracy in 1999 did not herald an era of peace and stability, nor a shift away from criminality within the political sphere. The findings corroborate the idea that electoral freedom has been insufficient to comb through the tangled relationships between politicians, businessmen, criminals, civil servants, traditional leaders and the perpetration of violence. If this is the case, Nigeria is far from alone in experiencing a deeper entanglement of criminality with the state following the introduction or resumption of electoral freedom. Instances in which democratization has increased opportunities for criminal outfits have been noted elsewhere: in describing 'criminal politics', Nicholas Barnes notes that in many instances, 'the transition to democracy has also produced, not resolved, competitive state-building dynamics', offering as an example the



development of the Russian mafia, whereby 'violent entrepreneurs – former military and public security officers – form[ed] their own criminal organizations and private protection firms that undermined the state's own monopoly of violence'.⁶ It is therefore entirely possible, though beyond the scope of this dataset, that the imperfect process of democratization, the shadowy workings of Nigerian political parties, and the demands of competition over votes in Nigeria may have contributed to the further entanglement of these various sectors and groups since the end of military rule in 1999.

By documenting and assessing instances of targeted killings between 2000 and 2017, the Targeted Killings in Nigeria dataset is the first step towards assessing the prevalence and characteristics of targeted killings in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, and the data and findings lay a foundation for further study of criminality, corruption, governance and violence in modern Nigeria.

Methodology

This research project primarily relies on an automated search string used in LexisNexis's archived newspapers to construct a unique dataset cataloguing targeted killings in Nigeria over the period 2000 to 2017.⁷ To supplement the less comprehensive archival record that exists before 2010, the project supplemented the years 2000 to 2009 with secondary sources from AllAfrica's newspaper archives, using a condensed search string, as well as a review of the grey literature and historical records of targeted killings in Nigeria. As mentioned, the phrase 'targeted killing' refers to actual, attempted or planned violence against specific individuals. In other words, 'targeted killing' (for the purposes of this study) does not include violence directed at a random member of a particular group (be it an ethnic or religious affiliation, for example, or some other community or organization). It is defined as violence targeted at, or intended for, a specific person because of their identity or position within a community or organization.⁸

The resultant dataset, which was assembled using systematic sampling methods, contains more than 1 650 incidents of attempted, planned and actual killings. Throughout the report, the term 'targeted' is used to describe all three of these categories: plots to assassinate, instances in which the target survived, as well as fatal targeted killings.

Each of our observations includes, where possible, information about where and when the attack took place; the significance of the target; the outcome of the attack; the method of violence deployed; the classification of the attack (i.e. political, related to organized crime or personal in nature); and a brief description of the event. Outcomes were classified as either 'died', 'survived', or 'plot/threat'. The distinction between 'survived' and 'plot/threat' serves to differentiate between the deployment of violence in incidents in which the targeted individuals survived and the threat of violence that was not deployed. The uneven and often incomplete nature of the historical record and journalistic accounts are such that not every observation in the dataset is 'complete'. For approximately 170 of our observations, the victims' names were not available and were coded as 'anonymous'.

It is likely, given the project's reliance on newspaper reports, that the research has a bias towards reporting targeted killings that resulted in death. Figure 1 shows, however, that the project was also able to capture a significant number of instances in which there was merely a plot or threat to someone's life, as well as instances in which targets survived attacks. It is also worth noting that the veracity of our data depends on the accuracy of newspaper reporting. A number of the threats of violence against politicians were reported by politicians themselves, and some of these incidents may be part of a political game; it is beyond the capacity of this report to assess the trustworthiness of these reported attempts.

Our dataset reveals a marked preponderance for guns as the method used in targeted killings; more than 550 of the observations include references to gun violence.

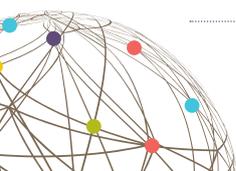
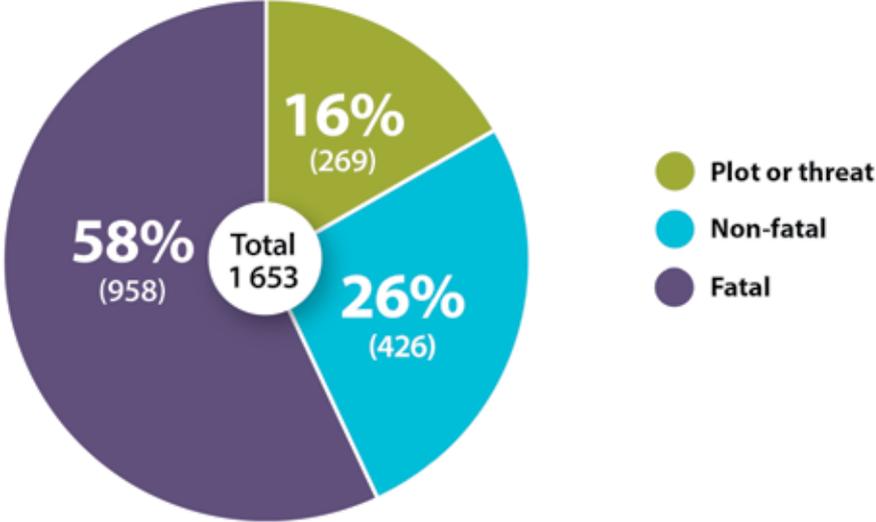


Figure 1: Defining targeted killings by outcome, Nigeria 2000–2017



Note: These categories do not include those incidents without a coded outcome.

Though instances of communal or indiscriminate violence were not included, deaths incidental to the attack are included in the dataset (e.g. cases where a family member or bodyguard was not directly targeted, but was killed in the course of an attempted targeted killing) when such information is included in the news reports. Kidnappings, which feature prominently in some aspects of Nigerian criminality, are included only if they also entailed attempts at lethal violence.⁹

The categories of targeted killings in the dataset extend beyond just the political sphere. The eight targeted demographic groups discussed in this report are presented in Figure 2. From this, it is clear that, although those involved in government in Nigeria (i.e. politicians and civil servants, collectively) are the most commonly targeted group of professionals in the dataset, they are far from being the only type of target. Whereas the attention paid to targeted killings has focused primarily on the subset of political assassinations, our broader conceptualization allows us to present a more textured and rich assessment of the patterns of targeted killings in Nigeria.

There were, inevitably, ambiguous cases that arose during the course of data coding. To the best of our researchers' and coders' abilities, we attempted to determine in what capacity or role a person was targeted in the course of being attacked. There was also substantial difficulty discerning the line between communal violence and violent reprisals or mass targeting. To account for instances of significant ambiguity, we introduced primary and secondary classifications in the full dataset, and included a note if the victim was anonymous and killed as part of a group. The data analysis and visualization concern only primary classifications and include each anonymous victim as a single observation. Although our dataset has a number of temporal and methodological shortcomings, based on the quality and availability of the data, it is nevertheless the most comprehensive attempt at cataloguing targeted killing in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

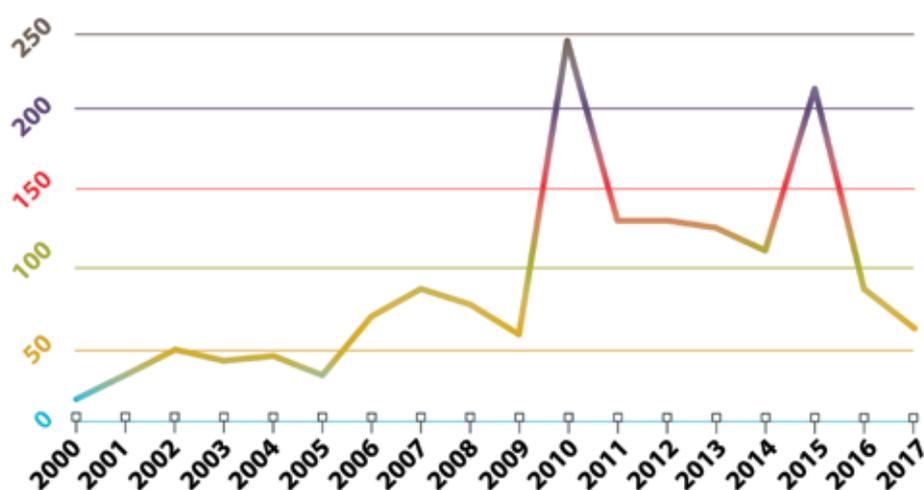
Finally, a note concerning Nigeria's subnational geographic divisions: the country is made up of 36 states and six geopolitical regions (North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South and South West). For ease and comprehensibility, some statistics are reported at the level of geopolitical regions; case studies and vignettes are presented at the state level.



Targeted killings in Nigeria, 2000 to 2017

Figure 2 shows the numbers of targeted killings in Nigeria by year in the period under study. The categories of people most commonly targeted in our dataset over the study period were politicians, followed by traditional and religious leaders. The dataset catalogues more than 540 targeted attacks on politicians and party affiliates (by which we mean individuals identified in the reports as being targeted for their positions either as members of a political party or supporters of a party), and nearly 200 targeted attacks on traditional and religious leaders (by which we mean authority figures or elites associated with ethnic, religious and other identity-based communities). In addition, we catalogued attacks on more than 140 civil servants (this grouping does not include police officers or members of the military, who were also frequently targeted). In the private sector, more than 100 businesspeople and more than 100 trade-union affiliates were targeted – another major segment for targeted killings. Alarming, about 50 journalists were targeted over the data period.

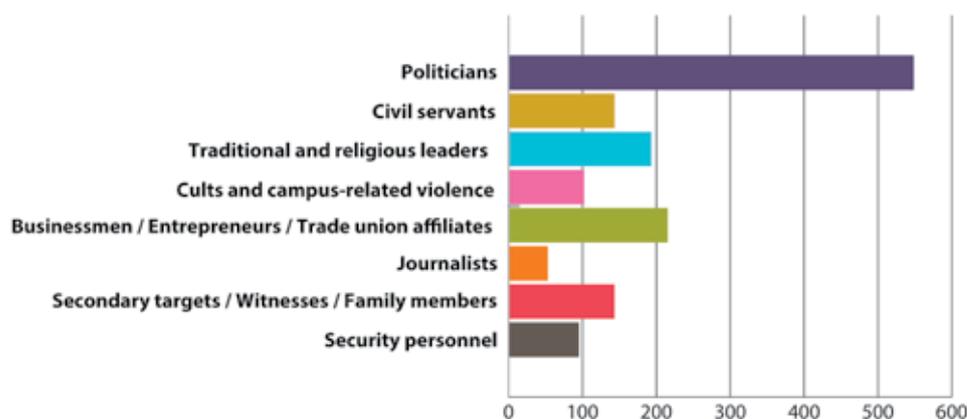
Figure 2: Number of targeted killings by year



Note: The spike in events in 2010 is the result of a change in the availability of newspaper reports from Nigeria and should not be interpreted as an increase in the number of targeted killings.

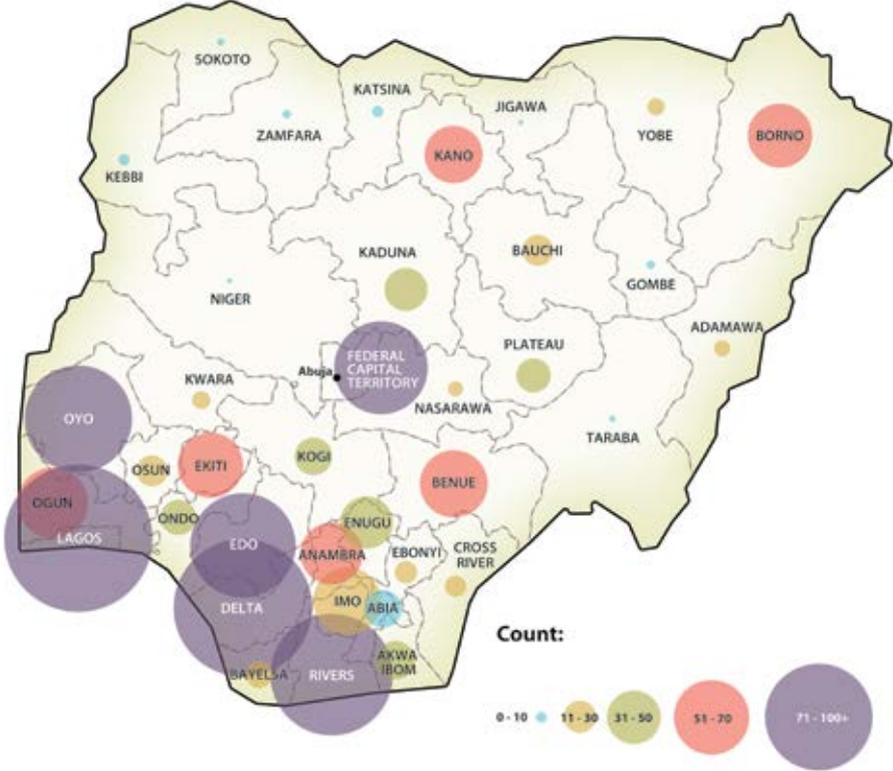
Figure 3 shows the eight categories of targeted individuals under analysis. These are examined in the subsections that follow.¹⁰

Figure 3: Number of targeted killings by demographic



Our data reveals that the patterns of targeted killings are not necessarily similar to the characteristics of other forms of violence experienced in Nigeria. For example, as mentioned, the country's North East geopolitical zone, where tens of thousands of lives have been lost to Boko Haram's brutality, has experienced few instances of targeted killings.¹¹ On the other hand, the southern states experience acute levels of targeted killings. The most deadly region (in terms of targeted killings), South West, had more than 400 recorded attacks in the study period, whereas the least deadly region, North West, had about 130. This pattern is all the more striking when one considers that the population of North West, which was estimated to be 35.9 million in the most recent census (2006), was greater than that of South West (27.7 million).¹² Figure 4 shows the number of attacks broken down by state, illustrating the subnational variation in the incidence of targeted killing.

Figure 4: Number of targeted killings, by state



The prevalence of targeted killings in the country's southern states (such as Lagos, Delta and Rivers) is a function of a number of interrelated factors, including natural-resource wealth, the legacy of colonial rule, the presence of secret societies and criminal networks, the lack of a clear hierarchy of authority and the self-perpetuating characteristics of targeted killings. These factors are discussed in greater detail in a later section of the report, 'A long-standing pattern'.

Politicians and political-party affiliates

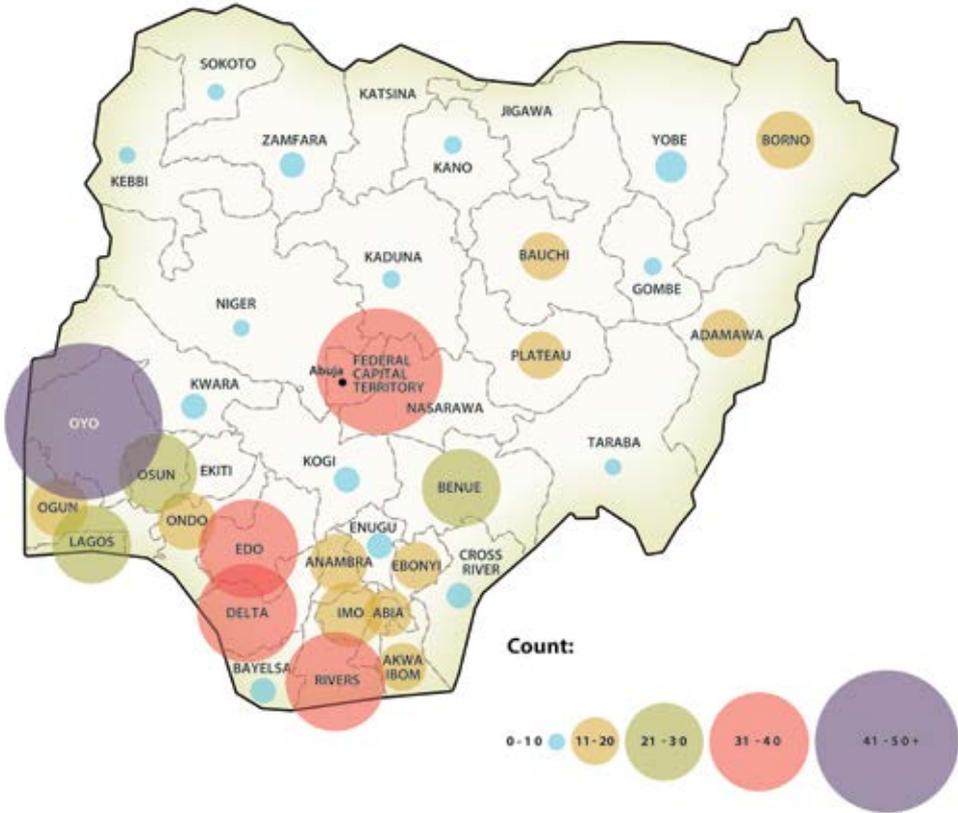
By far the most frequently targeted demographic segment in Nigeria is politicians and political-party affiliates. Our dataset collected more than 540 attempted or successful targeted attacks on this group. These were carried out by a number of perpetrators: our dataset collected several instances in which politicians were targeted by their former benefactors, their political rivals and armed groups operating within their constituencies. The diversity of threats that politicians in Nigeria face reflects the coalescence of business interests, the influence of secret societies, godfatherism and criminality in the country's politics (more of which later in the report).

A note before delving into the analysis: disaggregating targeted killings directed at politicians according to their political parties yields little in the way of interesting results. This is due to both the longevity of the People's



Democratic Party (PDP) in the country (the party was founded in 1998), as well as the propensity for party switching among Nigerian politicians. Political affiliations in the country are fluid over time or correspond to ideological positions and don't necessarily capture elite dynamics. Consider, for example, the case of Ali Modu Sheriff: as a member of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Sheriff was the first governor of Borno State to be elected for two consecutive terms (from 2003 to 2011). In 2014, however, he defected to the PDP and was subsequently made the national chairman of the party.¹³

Figure 5: Targeted killings in Nigeria of politicians

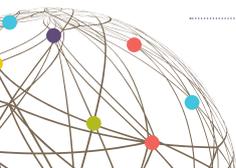


Patterns of violence against politicians and political affiliates

There is significant geographic variation in the distribution of targeted killings in this category. Figure 5 shows the distribution of attacks by state, revealing that targeted killings of politicians is more common in the country's south. This category of violence is not necessarily confined to general-election years – though there does appear to be an uptick associated with elections, it is also worth noting that targeted killings of political elites do not disappear in non-election years – hence politicians face a persistent threat to their safety.

Though the state of Oyo has the most instances of targeted attacks on politicians and political party affiliates, Rivers is often identified as one of the country's most violent and corrupt political landscapes.¹⁴ Another illustrative case study is that of Borno State. Although Borno has borne the brunt of the Boko Haram insurgency, suffering the loss of tens of thousands of lives since 2011, it is not a hotspot for targeted killings.¹⁵ Furthermore, as Boko Haram has become more lethal in its activities, the number of targeted attacks on politicians in the state has fallen.

Analyzing targeted killings against politicians in Rivers and Borno states sheds light on the different dynamics between violence targeted at political elites and more general violence (see the case studies that follow).



Political killings: Rivers and Borno states

One commentator noted that 'the stakes are quite high in Rivers because of the state's capacity to deliver mega votes, a highly conscious electorate and volatile political environment'. Since Nigeria's transition to democracy, politics in Rivers have been marred by gang violence, electoral irregularities, political intimidation and delayed voting. And all this besides the fact that Rivers is one of the wealthiest states in the country.¹⁶ Following the 2007 elections, the extent of the electoral irregularities were such that Human Rights Watch recommended an independent inquiry to look into a number of issues, including 'the links between Rivers State politicians ... and criminal activity, including sponsorship of criminal gangs and organized criminal activities, such as oil bunkering; the source of gangs' arms and ammunition; the relationship between the Nigerian police and gang leaders; [and] the problem of impunity, in particular the long-term failure of the police to effectively combat gang and cult violence, protect state residents from gang abuses, or apprehend leading perpetrators and sponsors of violence.'¹⁷

Despite the inquiry's recommendations, the pattern of electoral violence and the prevalence of criminality among Rivers politicians has continued. As one political analyst noted, reflecting on the electoral violence in 2015, 'While these political elephants, each with [the] enormous weight of either federal or state influences behind [them], continue their untiring and protracted wrestling for control of the people's resources, the grass of democracy and its dividends suffer under their mindless stomping.'¹⁸

Our dataset shows a sharp increase in the number of targeted attacks in 2015 in Rivers, which seems to correspond with the general election that year. Interestingly, however, the 2015 elections were generally regarded as more legitimate, and certainly more competitive, than previous elections. One of the notable differences in 2015, compared with previous elections, was the rise of the APC's prominence in the state, challenging what had previously been a single-party state under the PDP.¹⁹ As the Fund For Peace noted in its assessment of the prospects for the 2015 elections:

Since May 2013, political tensions were high in Rivers State after the disputed Nigeria Governors' Forum election. Formerly a member of the PDP, Governor Rotimi Amaechi, who is from Ikwerre (Rivers East Senatorial District), switched affiliation to the APC in November 2013. Despite the zoning formula, which would have given the PDP gubernatorial candidacy to an aspirant from Rivers South-East, Nyesom Wike (Rivers East) won the PDP primaries, upsetting the rotation and raising ethnic sentiments across the state, including the Ogoni axis.²⁰

The Rivers case suggests that the introduction of uncertainty or political competition may lead to an increase in targeted killings. This did not go unnoticed by electoral authorities: in May 2013, the state's chief of staff said that 'the government was aware of a hit list of Rivers State politicians loyal to the governor' and asserted that 'they had been marked for assassination in order to create a climate of insecurity in the state.'²¹ Also that month, Eric Ezenekwe, an aide to the former chairman of the PDP in the state, was ambushed in his home and killed. According to Ezenekwe's relatives, 'assassins pounced on him and pushed him into his bedroom where they tied his hands, tortured him with electric wires before shooting him.'²² In March 2015, the Rivers State governor, Rotimi Amaechi, was targeted by gunmen while campaigning, but survived the attack. A month later, the APC reported that in one week, nine members of their party had been killed in cold blood, with many others injured, when 'armed PDP thugs' invaded the Obrikom and Obor communities of Rivers.²³ The spokesman also accused the PDP of setting ablaze the residence of their candidate for the House of Assembly elections.²⁴

Violence targeted at politicians in the country's North East is largely driven by Boko Haram's activities in Borno State. In the insurgency's early years, Boko Haram engaged in a handful of targeted killings. An article published in *This Day* in 2011 noted:



In the last one year alone, many leaders of the Borno State ANPP [All Nigeria People's Party] have been assassinated by suspected members of the [group]. They include the late Awagana Ali Ngala, then North-east Vice-Chairman of ANPP; Alhaji Modu Fannami Gubio, ANPP gubernatorial candidate Borno State; Honourable Mustafa Baale, Chairman of Jere Local Government; Fannami Ngranam, ANPP Chairman for Jere Local Government; Ali Goni Modu Sheriff, Chairman of Ngala Local Government and many others.²⁵

This period of escalating violence against politicians coincided with an escalation in the group's violence more generally. It is important to note, however, that in recent years the instances of targeted killings against politicians in Borno have fallen off, while Boko Haram's lethality has continued to escalate, suggesting that the group no longer sees strategic benefits from engaging in targeted killings against politicians.

In Rivers and Borno states, patterns of violence against the political elite suggest that, while in some instances targeted killing of elites is linked to broader social violence, it need not be. Intra-elite power competitions and violence can be divorced from social violence and from electoral legitimacy.

Although a significant proportion of the violence targeted at politicians takes place in their homes, such attacks are not always carried out on private property. Consider a targeted attack in Edo State in February 2010: the State House of Assembly was thrown into disarray when an attempt to replace the speaker (a member of the PDP) with a member of the Action Congress (AC) resulted in bloodshed. A member of the AC was reportedly hospitalized and received treatment for wounds inflicted on his head with an axe by his political opponents in the PDP.²⁶ Similarly, in Oyo in 2010, Nigerian daily newspaper the *Vanguard* reported that 'efforts by some lawmakers in the Oyo State House of Assembly to remove the Speaker, Mr. Moruf Atilola, were resisted by some people believed to be hired thugs who invaded the hallowed chamber'; the men attacked nine members.²⁷

A common form of public attack on politicians involves targeting their vehicles or convoys. In Anambra in November 2003, for example, Governor Chris Ngige accused his former godfather, Chief Chris Uba, of attacking his convoy while they were driving. The dynamics of politics and targeted killings in Nigeria illustrate powerful feedback loops in which violence tends to beget violence – or at least a pervasive sense of tension and insecurity. Events in Anambra illustrate this: seven years after the attack on Ngige, the political situation remained contentious. In July 2010, Chief Ndubuisi Nwobu, the state chairman of the AC, was targeted in an assassination attempt in the state's capital. According to *The Daily Champion*, while the chairman was driving, 'he was suddenly waylaid by the gunmen ... who allegedly shot at him [several times] before whisking him away in their vehicle.'²⁸ According to news reports at the time, this incident made politicians in the state 'jittery, as many [received] threat text messages from suspected kidnapers and killers, especially in Awka metropolis'.

In Anambra, Rivers and other states wracked by political violence, a vicious cycle of violence and reprisal threatens the prospects for the consolidation and legitimacy of democracy.²⁹

The dynamics of politics and targeted killings in Nigeria illustrate powerful feedback loops in which violence tends to beget violence.

Civil servants

Closely related to the killings of politicians is the targeting of civil servants. Our dataset catalogues more than 140 attempted or lethal attacks on civil servants (see Figure 6). The prevalence of targeted killings among this group suggests that the politicization of allegedly independent and non-partisan positions in a system deeply tied to criminal interests has fatal results. A number of the attacks on civil servants occurred in the country's North East and North Central geopolitical zones.

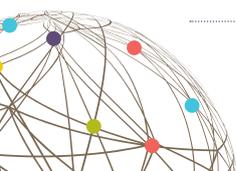
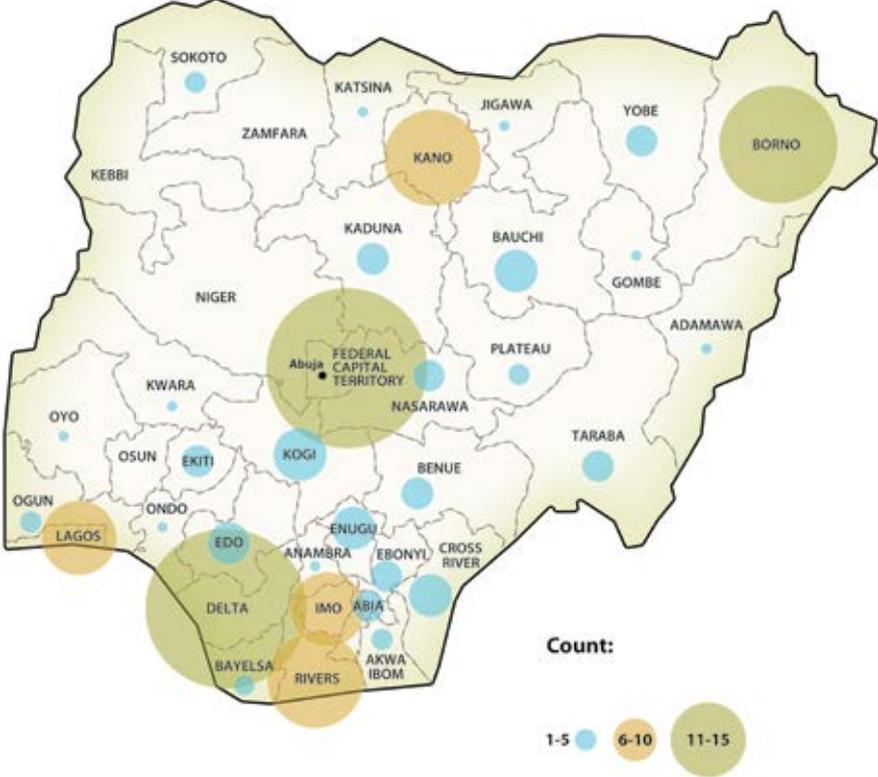


Figure 6: Targeted killings of civil servants

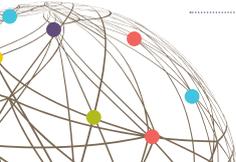


The fact that Abuja, the country’s capital and its political and bureaucratic centre, is situated in the North Central region explains the high number of civil servants targeted in that region. Then the prevalence of attacks targeting civil servants in the country’s North East can, in large part, be attributed to the activities of Boko Haram, which, as detailed in the previous section, was also earlier engaged in targeted killings of politicians. Like the group’s attacks on politicians, these targeted killings have tapered off even as Boko Haram’s overall level of lethality has accelerated. One attack on a civil servant during the group’s ascendancy, in February 2012, resulted in the death of the district head of Geidam, Mustapha Geidam. The *Vanguard* reported that Geidam, previously a protocol officer to a senator, was assassinated at his residence after a religious service: ‘Confirming Mustapha’s assassination, Lawan Tanko, Yobe’s police commissioner, said the district head was relaxing in front of his residence when he was attacked and killed, adding that the Boko Haram had sent him a letter, alerting him that he had been marked for death and would be killed unless he relocated from his palace.’³⁰

The civil servants targeted between 2000 and 2017 across the country range from internationally known professionals in highly visible federal posts to relatively anonymous local officials. Election officials, in particular, appear to be commonly targeted, highlighting the connection between violence and the country’s contentious politics. Election officials at the state level in Kogi, Kwara, and Imo reported being targeted.

In one reported attack, in Abuja in January 2013, Abdulrasheed Maina (of the Pension Reform Task Team), managed to survive an attack by more than 40 gunmen wearing police uniforms at his office.³¹ Other members of the Pension Reform Task Team accused lawmakers of ordering the attack, as a result of political disagreements over pension reform and the team’s success in detecting pension fraud. In condemning the attack, the task team coordinator, said:

As at the end of December, 2012, the Task Team had seized and returned to the treasury over N254 billion cash from pension suspects, detected over 73,000 ghost pensioners and brought on board over 43,000 genuine pensioners, who have never been paid pensions and gratuity since 1968. The Task Team has equally seized over 200 choice properties and is prosecuting the suspects at various courts in Nigeria.³²



As the attempt on Maina's life suggests, civil servants who challenge the corruption or criminality that exists at the state level may be at greater risk of being assassinated. This pattern is further illustrated by the two attempts on Dora Nkem Akunyili's life, in August 2001 and December 2003. Akunyili was director general of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration, and a powerful campaigner against counterfeit drugs. A survey conducted by the World Health Organization concluded that 'more than half the drugs on sale in Nigeria were fake or sub-standard' – the consequences of which Akunyili had experienced in her own life, when her diabetic sister died from what Akunyili is convinced were fake insulin and antibiotics.³³

Akunyili told the BBC in 2005: 'Counterfeit drugs are murder. It is the highest form of terrorism against public health because it kills [masses].'³⁴ The BBC reported in 2005 how the counterfeiters had fought back, burning down the offices of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration, threatening the lives of Akunyili and her children, and launching an assassination attempt in which gunmen shot at her car. The BBC noted that although the 'bullet grazed her skull', Akunyili survived and continued her campaign against substandard pharmaceuticals.³⁵

A number of other civil servants, like Akunyili, have been subjected to repeated harassment. The Rivers Commissioner of Power was kidnapped in 2012 and targeted in an attempted assassination in 2015. It was reported that 'PDP hoodlums went to the house of the Commissioner of Power, Hon. Augustine Nwokocho [in] military uniforms and killed his relations, injured others and ... burnt down the house of his personal assistant'. This incident can be seen as part of the political violence surrounding the 2015 elections and points to the politicization of the civil service in the country.³⁶ The credibility of Nigerian elections as being free and fair is undermined by the number of attacks on politicians and civil servants, and the widespread impunity enjoyed by those who perpetrate this form of violence.³⁷

Civil servant assassinated because of activism: Bola Ige

One of the most high-profile assassinations of a civil servant in Nigeria was that of Chief Bola Ige, shot dead in Ibadan in 2001. Ige was the attorney general and an important figure within the Ministry of Justice. Ige's legacy looms over Nigerian political and historical consciousness. A number of newspaper articles referenced Ige's fate as a tragic precedent. An obituary published in *The Guardian* noted that Ige, 'affectionately known as "Uncle Bola", ... was a member of the post-independence generation of politicians'. Ige was lauded for his activism against military rule and for shaping Nigeria's legal and political system.³⁸

On the 10th anniversary of Ige's assassination, online news agency Sahara Reporters published a story arguing that although the perpetrators behind Ige's assassination were known, they had been released: 'Arrests were made, confessional statements were made and the perpetrators known. But under our own very eyes the criminals were set free.' One of them, Iyiola Omisore, who was detained for interrogation, was made a senator while in prison.³⁹

A number of reports cite Ige's death as having set a dangerous precedent in Nigerian politics, or describe more recent assassinations of prominent government figures as merely the latest addition to the tragic log of targeted killings that began with Ige's death.

Ige's continued relevance is illustrated by the order given in July 2016 by President Buhari to the Inspector General of Police to reopen the case.⁴⁰

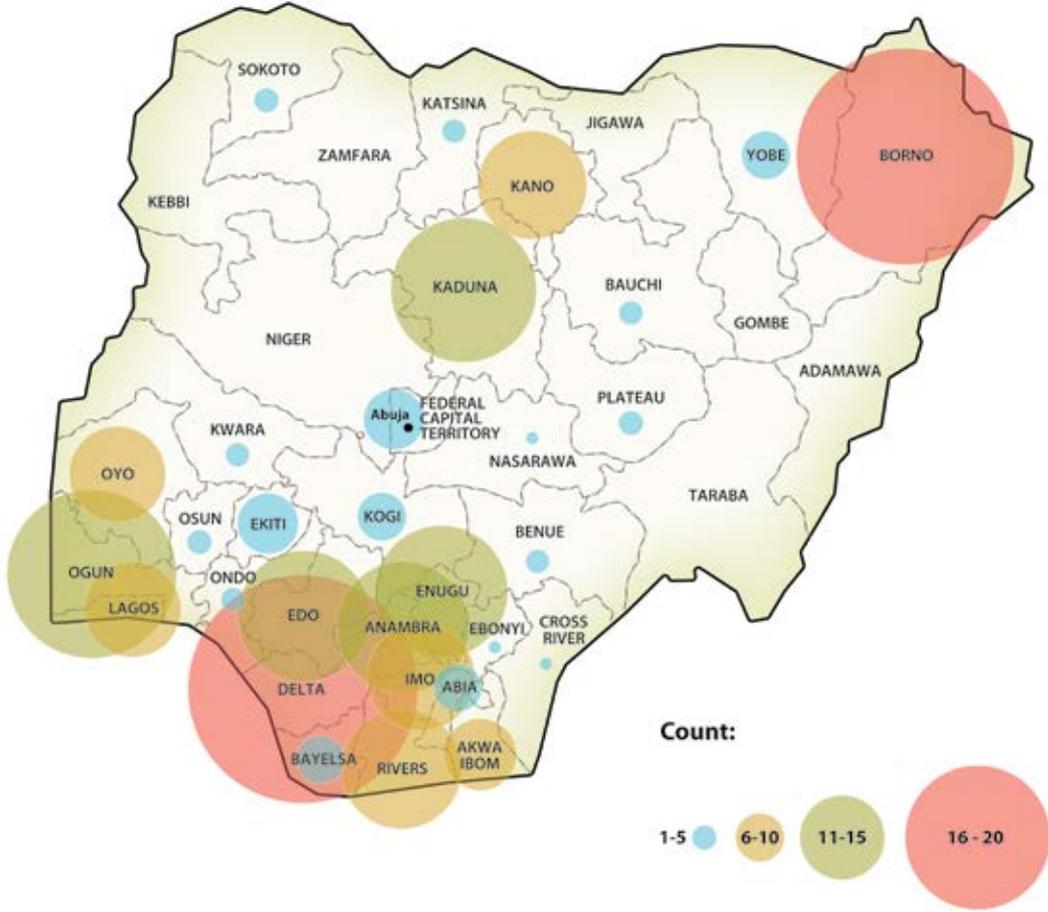
Traditional and religious leaders

Traditional leaders and religious authorities wield significant influence in modern Nigeria, which has made the representatives of such organizations susceptible to targeted killings. Our dataset catalogues nearly 200 attempted or fatal attacks on such leaders. In addition to the spiritual and occult authority that these leaders represent, many are also politically influential or have significant business interests, making them the targets of attacks orchestrated



by various actors. Our data found that annual rates of targeted killings of such figures (and assassination attempts) were similar to the pattern of such attacks on politicians (with increases in 2010 and 2015), an indication of the political sway held by many customary and religious leaders. The data also shows significant concentrations of this type of violence in certain states, as seen in Figure 7.

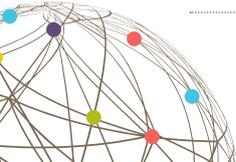
Figure 7: Targeted killings of traditional and religious leaders



Targeted killings of traditional or religious leaders may be particularly destabilizing, as violence against customary and religious authorities can result in scapegoating of certain groups and catalyze wider violence. For example, the murder of a female evangelist preacher, Eunice Elisha, in Abuja in 2016, was described as the latest episode in an ‘ongoing escalation of sectarian hatred in Nigeria’. The author of the report said that Elisha’s stabbing raised ‘fears that Islamist fanatics and their sponsors are spreading their murderous tentacles from the Northern states to the Federal Capital Territory’, demonstrating the capacity for violence against traditional and religious figures to catalyze the use of ‘othering’ narratives and incendiary language.⁴¹

Traditional leaders and religious authorities wield significant influence in modern Nigeria, which has made the representatives of such organizations susceptible to targeted killings.

In another incident, in Delta State in January 2016, the monarch of the Ubulu-Uku Kingdom, Akaeze Edward Ofulue III, was abducted and later found dead. A news report at the time described the event as ‘abominable’ and noted that it had ‘caused agony for the people of Ubulu-Uku Kingdom in Aniocha South Local Government Area of the State’, before attributing blame for the incident to Fulani herdsmen.⁴²



It is easy, from this description, to understand how the reporting on these kinds of issues can feed into broader social violence and trigger reprisal attacks by fuelling community tensions.

Many figures of authority among traditional and religious groups were targeted during this study period while engaging in official duties, such as attending public ceremonies, leading worship, or taking part in community or political events. For example, in Anambra in 2014, Reverend Emmanuel Obimma narrowly escaped death when gunmen fired gunshots at him at close range. The incident occurred while he was on his way to celebrate mass.⁴³

In another incident, in Rivers in 2007, a number of chiefs were on their way to a meeting in one of the communities around Kula when the boat in which they were travelling was attacked. According to one account,

the assailants got close to the boat and ordered those they deemed innocent to jump out before pumping several volleys of shots into it. After certifying that their victims had all died, they reportedly took their corpses to an undisclosed location. The passengers allowed to escape were those who later went to alert of the killings of the chiefs.⁴⁴

Many others in this category were targeted while at home. And it is significant that their places of residence often play important roles in the public lives of their followers, serving as places of worship or important symbols of local leadership.⁴⁵ One such attack occurred in Anambra in 2009, when the official residence of the Obi of Onitsha and chairman of the Anambra State Council of Traditional Rulers, Igwe Alfred Achebe, became the site of a shoot-out between a number of gunmen and the police that left two dead.⁴⁶

Why Boko Haram targets traditional and religious leaders

As was the case with politicians and civil servants whom it targeted, Boko Haram also set its sights on a large number of traditional and religious leaders in the period 2010 to 2012. Many of these leaders were targeted for publicly criticizing Boko Haram's ideology. One of the most significant examples of this was the murder of Sheikh Ja'afar Adam in 2007 in Kano (in the country's North West). Adam had previously served as a mentor and patron to Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of the militant group. The two had had a falling-out over Yusuf's increasingly vehement denunciation of the Nigerian state and those who worked with it. Adam was killed while leading morning prayers at his mosque. According to Major General MD Isah, now retired but then a part of the security sector in Kano, Adam had approached Yusuf asking for security because of threats to his life made by Boko Haram. Adam also asked for support from the police commissioner, MD Abubakar. According to Isah, the two managed to deter Boko Haram from attacking Adam, but after Isah and Abubakar were transferred for duty to other parts of the country, Adam was killed.⁴⁷

Having dispatched one of their most vocal and high-profile critics, Boko Haram continued to target other community leaders. In July 2012, the group deployed a suicide bomber to a mosque associated with the Shehu of Borno (an influential traditional leader in the region). Although the Shehu and the state's deputy governor, Alhaji Zannah Ummar, who was also targeted in the attack, managed to survive, at least 10 others were killed.⁴⁸

In May 2014, Boko Haram attacked a convoy of emirs, taking aim at the Emir of Uba, the Emir of Askira and the Emir of Gwoza, who were travelling to attend the funeral of the Emir of Gombe. The emirs from Uba and Askira managed to escape, but the Emir of Gwoza was killed during the attack.⁴⁹ The Nigeria Governors' Forum described the attack as an 'act of callousness taken too far'.⁵⁰

One thing in common between the militant group's targeting of traditional and religious leaders, and its targeting of civil servants and politicians is that these categories of assassinations both began to taper off in 2012 as the group shifted to more indiscriminate forms of violence.



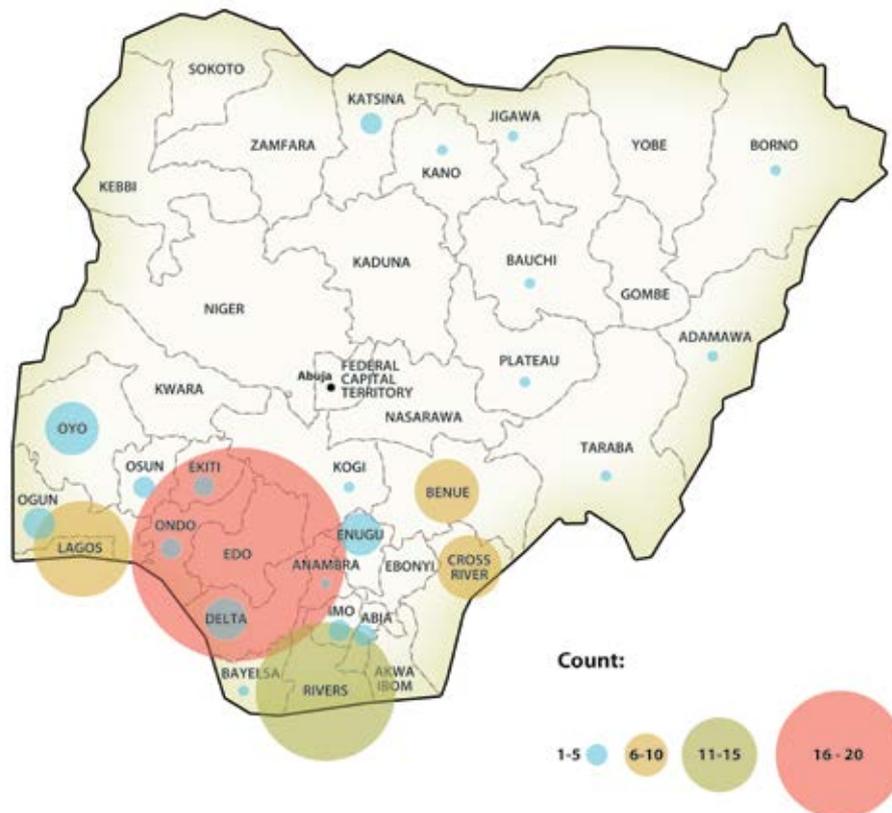
Cults and campus-related targeted killings

Targeted killings of students, academics, other university staff and cult members are included in the overall category of cults and campus-related violence. These targets are analyzed as a group because reports of targeted killings of students, academics and other university staff often referenced the activity of cults; in a number of instances, it was difficult to discern whether a student victim was a member of a cult or not. When including victims of targeted killings who were described as students or academics (but who may, plausibly, have been targeted for their cult affiliation or because of cult-related violence), our dataset includes more than 90 instances of attempted or lethal attacks on individual cultists, academics or students.⁵¹

'Cults', as they are known in Nigeria, began as fraternal organizations on college campuses, but began to take on a propensity for violent crime and murder. The origins and evolutions of cults in Nigeria are discussed at greater length later in this report. Cults in Nigeria have morphed from an expression of student independence and fraternal bonds into groups that are politically charged and often connected to criminal activity. As can be seen from Figure 8, Rivers, Edo and Lagos are the states that experienced the highest levels of cult-related targeted killings.

Cults in Nigeria have morphed from an expression of student independence and fraternal bonds into groups that are politically charged and often connected to criminal activity.

Figure 8: Targeted killings of students, academics and cult members



There is a significant geographic concentration of targeted killings of cultists in the country's South South and South West regions. In these two regions, however, there are different temporal patterns of violence. Some reports suggest that surges in violence are the result of inter-cult conflict. For example, a *Vanguard* report from October 2015 described entire communities (and not just college campuses) in Lagos as being wracked by inter-cult violence, manifesting both as general violence and as targeted killings of individual cultists. The report quotes an anonymous

resident, who said that many of the cult members are young boys: 'Some of them are secondary-school drop-outs, but they are very deadly, and have no mercy. It is not unusual to suddenly start hearing gunshots around here ... In fact, we don't feel safe at all.'⁵² Cult and campus-related violence can therefore spill over into widespread insecurity.

Another article in the *Vanguard*, published in February 2015, provides insight into communities in Lagos where incidents of cult clashes were frequent.⁵³ The report says that 'money, supremacy, and tussles over girlfriends, are usually behind such deadly clashes.'⁵⁴ Similar reports were filed in South South during the escalation in violence the region experienced. A report from Edo State in October 2010 said: 'The [motivation for the] latest cult war initially is unknown, but it was gathered that some politicians' search for thugs to hire for the forthcoming elections led to the infighting. Also, the Maphite and the Black Axe [cults] are said to be engaged in a superiority contest.'⁵⁵

Violence against cultists appears to have a number of motives besides the potential political or inter-organizational rivalries that cultists are drawn into. The manipulation of cultists by politicians, the criminal character of many of the cult members and competition between cults are all factors in the targeted killings of cultists. In some instances, they are merely the result of personal grudges. In 2012 in Lagos, for example, a young man (implied by some reports to be a cult member) was stabbed by cultists for his romantic pursuit of a young woman.⁵⁶

In other instances, the violence is motivated by revenge. For instance, during the surge in targeted killings of cultists in the country's South West in 2015, a leader of the Eiye confraternity in the Somolu and Pedro areas of Lagos State revealed how he had butchered two members of a rival cult group, Aye, to avenge the death of a fellow cult member.⁵⁷

Although many of the attacks in this category were straightforwardly violent, cult violence often has symbolic or performative characteristics. For example, two undergraduate students at Abia State University were beheaded in March 2016 by suspected cultists, who afterwards 'used their victims' heads as goalposts.'⁵⁸

It is worth noting that, although joining a cult incurs the risk of violence, not joining also has its own risks. In February 2012, it was reported that a number of cultists in Benue were detained in relation to the assassination of a fellow student because he had refused to be enlisted into the group.⁵⁹ Similarly, in April 2004, the vice chancellor of the University of Benin was threatened by cultists for his 'attempts to fish out cultists in the institution and force them to renounce their membership.'⁶⁰

Two undergraduate students at Abia State University were beheaded in March 2016 by suspected cultists, who afterwards 'used their victims' heads as goalposts'.

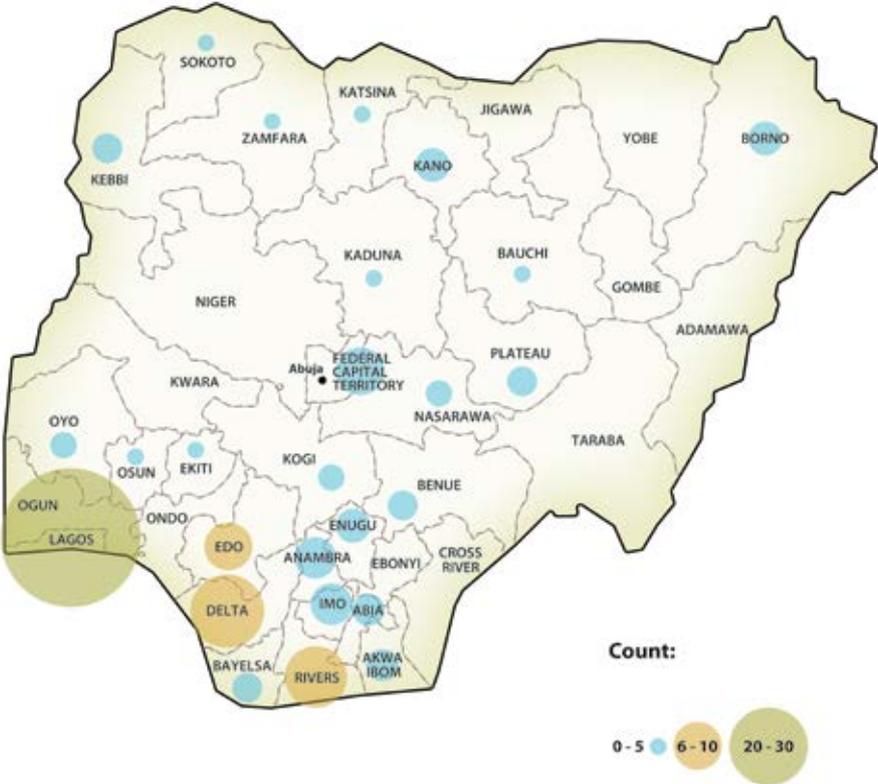
Businessmen, entrepreneurs and union affiliates

Businessmen and entrepreneurs

Our dataset includes more than 100 targeted killings of businesspeople.⁶¹ Again, the patterns of violence differed greatly among the geopolitical regions. As with other categories of targets, businesspeople face significantly higher levels of violence in the South South and South West than in other regions. Figure 9 shows the numbers of such attacks by state, illustrating the high prevalence of such attacks in Lagos State.



Figure 9: Targeted killings of businesspeople and entrepreneurs



Although most of the businessmen who were targeted over the period had achieved significant financial success, or held top positions in their organizations, this was not always the case. Pa Nwokoye, for example, who was killed in Anambra in September 2016, was described as ‘an average income earner’ and a ‘very popular man’, who made his money by selling palm wine that he tapped. Despite his modest business credentials, Nwokoye was killed in his home, where he was found with his hands and legs bound, and a pillow on his chest, which had probably been used to suffocate him.⁶²

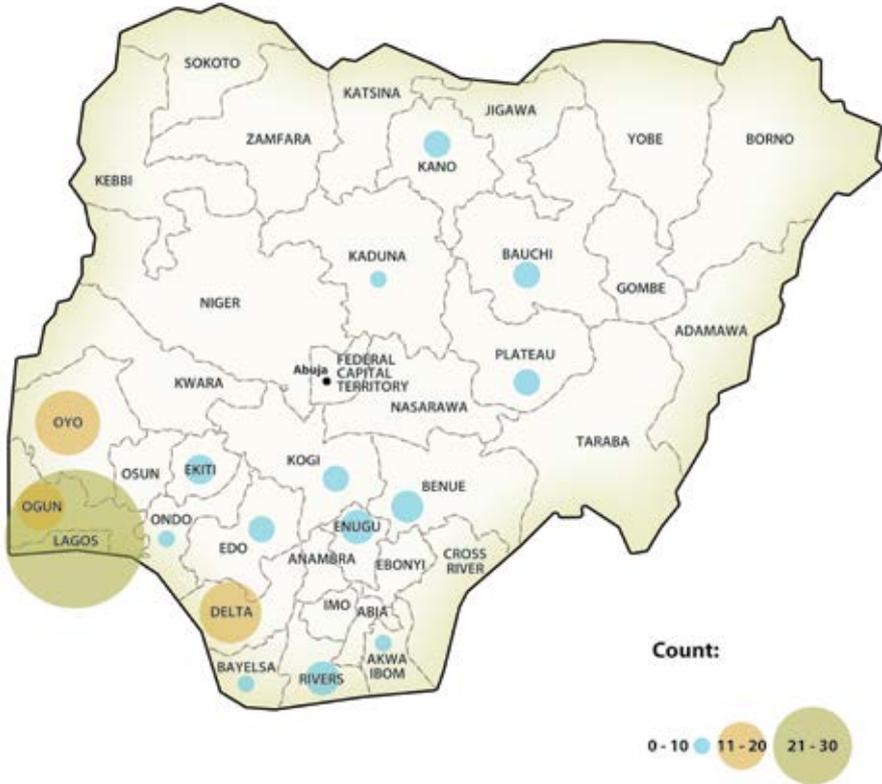
Nevertheless, more common are targeted attacks on prominent members of the business community. In Abuja, in May 2015, the owner and founder of Capital Oil Limited, business mogul Ifeanyi Ubah, appeared to have been targeted for assassination but fortuitously escaped being killed. He was due to inspect a property in Abuja, but instead sent two of his directors to the site. The gunmen, who were awaiting Ubah, opened fire, killing one; the other man was abducted.⁶³

Union affiliates

In addition to the previously discussed attacks on businessmen, there are more than 100 documented attacks on trade-union affiliates recorded in the dataset. Many from this category are concentrated in a handful of states, particularly Lagos, Delta and Oyo (see Figure 10).



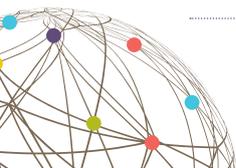
Figure 10: Targeted killings of union affiliates



Members of a number of unions were targeted, but, according to our dataset, members of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) feature prominently in targeted attacks. Previous work by Mark Shaw has shown how the minibus-taxi industry in South Africa is closely connected to criminal networks, resulting in violence among taxi and transport workers. Similarly, in Nigeria, the possible criminal connections of the NURTW, as well as its politicization and contentious intra-union politics have all contributed to the high rates of hits among members of this union. Although the extent to which the NURTW can be compared to assassination patterns in the taxi industry in South Africa is unclear, there have been a number of instances in which NURTW leaders have been implicated in criminal activities: a May 2014 report named a former NURTW leader in Oyo who was arrested on gun-possession charges,⁶⁴ and in February 2018 a former NURTW chairman was arrested for the murders of members of the organization’s Lagos State chapter.⁶⁵

A factional crisis within the NURTW in 2010 may largely explain the surge in targeted killings in South West around that time. In Oyo, the press reported that these ‘factions of the Union [were devising] new methods of attacking and killing “sworn-enemies” in their homes.’⁶⁶ Chairmen of the NURTW seem especially susceptible to being targeted. In January 2007, the chairman of the Lagos chapter of NURTW was assassinated in front of his home.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, his Oyo counterpart, Lateef Akinsola Oloruntoki, told reporters from the *Daily Independent* in 2010 of how people believed to be hired assassins had visited his Ibadan home on several occasions. These incidents were apparently the result of a leadership struggle in the Oyo chapter of the union.⁶⁸

As is also the case with cult groups described above, refusing to take part in violent activities on behalf of a union can result in certain people being targeted. A May 2010 report from Ogun State catalogued attacks on four members of the NURTW, who were said to have refused ‘entreaties to be conscripted into a killer squad’ organized by union leaders.⁶⁹

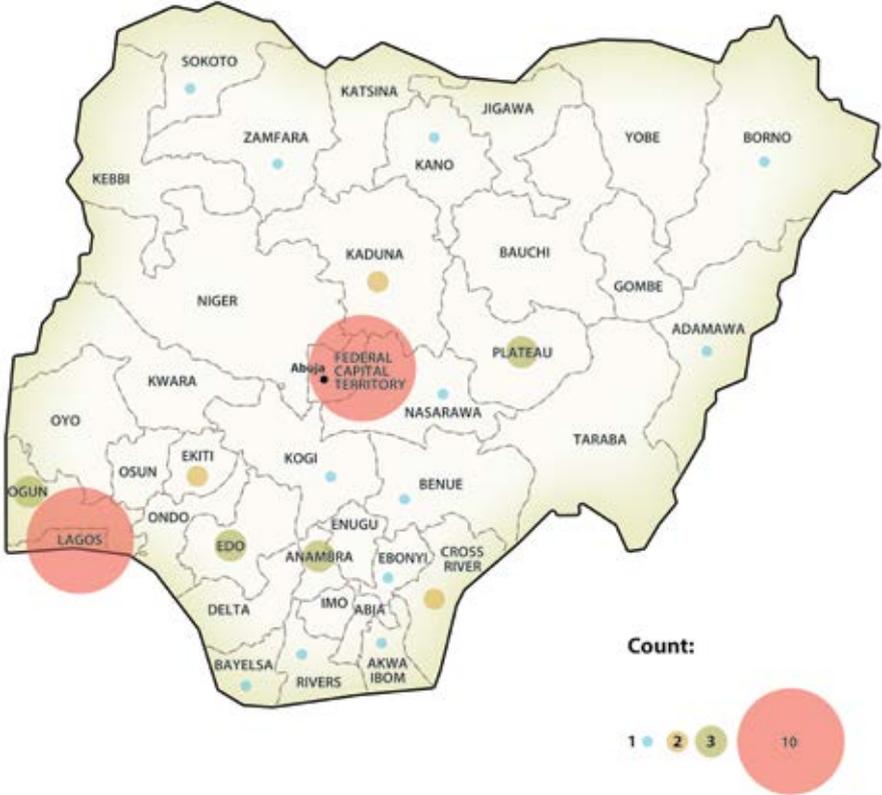


Journalists

Nigeria has repeatedly been identified as one of the deadliest countries for journalists to work in.⁷⁰ Our dataset records more than 50 attacks on journalists since 2000 – though not all of these targeted killings proved fatal.⁷¹

As can be seen in Figure 11, Lagos and Abuja are particularly dangerous places for journalists to work in. This is most likely driven by the concentration of journalists in these two urban areas, the business and political centres of the country, respectively.

Figure 11: Targeted killings of journalists



One of the most notable assaults on journalists occurred in Kaduna and Abuja in 2012, when two newspaper offices were bombed, in what appear to be coordinated attacks on *This Day*, *The Moment* and the *Daily Sun* newspapers. Six people associated with the newspapers were killed and 25 others injured.⁷² It is unclear who was responsible for the attack.

Earlier, in Edo in October 2007, a reporter with *The First*, Kola Eke, 'escaped death by the whiskers ... after gunmen suspected to be hired assassins tricked him out of the premises of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) secretariat ... under the guise that they wanted to place an advertorial in his magazine and shot him at close range.'⁷³

While a number of attacks on journalists occurred at their place of work or in the course of their jobs, journalists are also frequently targeted in their homes. One such example is Edo Ugbagwu, a reporter who covered the court system for Nigerian daily *The Nation*, who was shot at close range in his Lagos home in April 2010.⁷⁴

Journalists have also been targeted by Boko Haram. The militant group has lodged threats against some journalists, including one as recently as 2015, after a journalist published an article titled 'Why Boko Haram don't deserve our amnesty'. The reporter received an email a few days after the report was published, stating, 'You will die like other infidels that we captured ... You're now a walking dead and a prey to the Lions of Islam from the bullet of a passing car or a nearby rooftop.'⁷⁵

Nigeria has repeatedly been identified as one of the deadliest countries for journalists to work in.

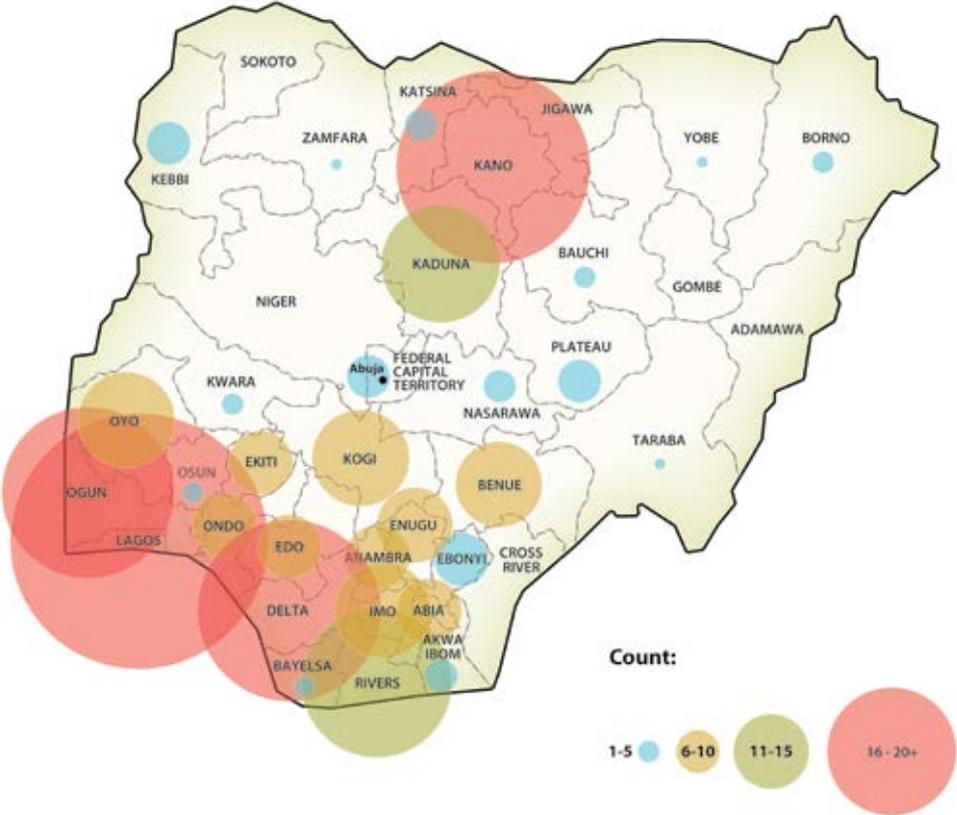


Secondary targets: Witnesses and family members

Those who have been targeted because they are associated with the actions or identities of others, such as witnesses and family members, were also frequently the victims of targeted killings. Family members of those who were subjects of planned or attempted targeted killings and witnesses to criminal activity have been the victims of targeted violence; their deaths have been either collateral damage during the course of an attack on someone else or the result of attacks against them specifically.

Our dataset catalogues more than 200 instances in which this was the case among the categories of civilians, witnesses and family members. Figure 12 illustrates the prevalence of such practices by state.

Figure 12: Targeted killings of civilians, witnesses and family members



Often, the families of prominent members of Nigerian society have been threatened by means of messages or an intimidatory tactics. Consider the plight of Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, a prominent Shia cleric, who has been a critic of the Nigerian government. Zakzaky lost three of his sons in an arson attack on his Kaduna home in 2015 – this after Zakzaky had earlier lost three sons in a similar attack carried out by the military.⁷⁶

Although Zakzaky’s case is exceptional in terms of the number of family members who were killed, the targeting of children is not unheard-of in Nigeria. Aminat Lateef, the nine-year-old daughter of an NURTW member involved in an intra-union dispute, was killed in Lagos in 2010. The girl was sent on an errand and was shot just minutes after leaving her family’s home. Her uncle, who witnessed her murder, had tried to shield her from the gunfire, but bullets hit her in the face and chest.⁷⁷

In 2004, the wife of the chairman of the Ado-Ekiti Local Government Area in Ekiti State told in court of how she had escaped death after gunmen invaded her home by hiding underneath clothes and carrier bags.⁷⁸ In a 2010 attack,

a 79-year-old woman, Lady Mercy Onyirimba, the mother of Chief Onyirimba, former leader of the Imo State House of Assembly, was kidnapped from her home and threatened with death. At the time, her son expressed his alarm at how his mother had been a captive, and said that his entire family was 'under serious threat' and that kidnappers were threatening his properties with arson.⁷⁹

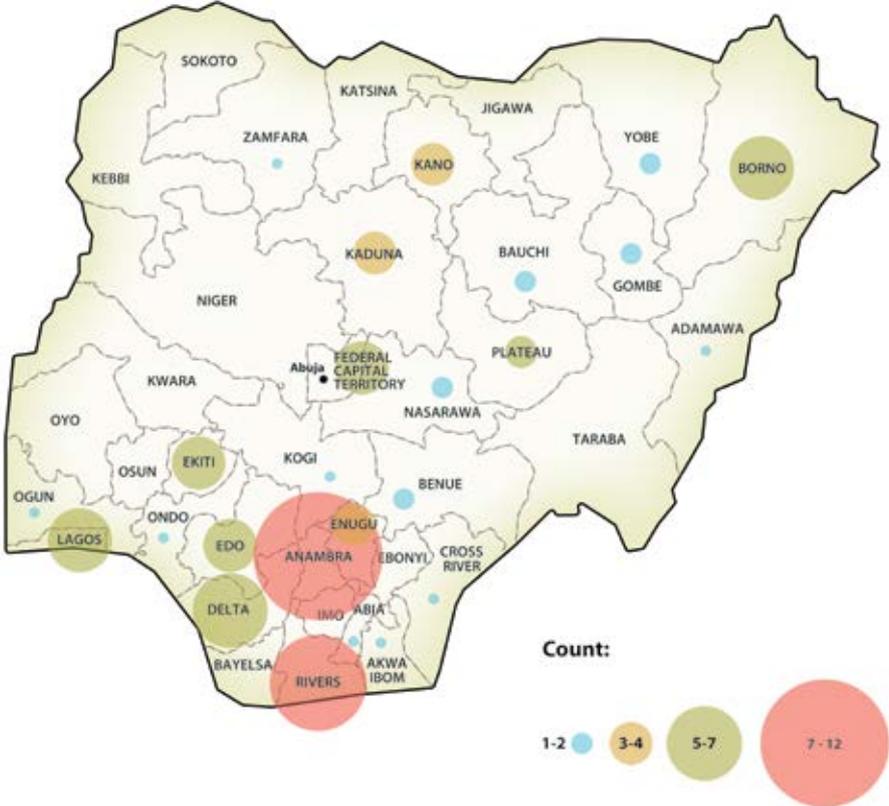
Our dataset also catalogues instances in which individuals cooperating with the authorities as witnesses or blowing the whistle on violence meant that they became targets for assassination. In Anambra in 2010, for example, two people who were informing the police in their efforts to track down the kidnappers of four journalists in Abia State were found dead. It is suspected that they were killed by accomplices of the abductors.⁸⁰

One of the most notable assassinations of a witness (one that attracted the attention of the US State Department, which discussed this particular assassination in a 2008 report on electoral irregularities and violence in Nigeria) was the killing of Victor Obafaiye, the main witness for the Action Congress in the Kogi State election tribunal. Obafaiye was supposedly in possession of documents that would have provided evidence of election tampering on the part of the PDP candidate, Dino Melaye.⁸¹ Though some have laid the blame for Obafaiye's death at Melaye's feet, no one has been charged with murder.

Security officials: Police officers, the military, bodyguards and vigilante forces

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the observed relationship between criminality and targeted killings, representatives of the government's security forces, personal bodyguards and members of vigilante groups (who often serve as community security providers) were also often the victims of targeted killings and attempted targeted killings, or were killed in the course of such attacks on someone else. The Targeted Killings in Nigeria Dataset contains records of more than 90 targeted attacks on members of the police, military and local vigilante groups. Figure 13 shows the prevalence of such incidents by state.

Figure 13: Targeted killings of security officials



Within this category, some of the hits occurred while the targets were on duty, protecting the public or otherwise doing their job. For instance, a police officer lost his life in November 2010 in Oyo State when gunmen launched an attack on the residence of two representatives of the Oyo State House of Assembly.⁸²

In other instances, police officers and military officials were themselves the direct targets of lethal violence. In Delta State in 2010, for example, a divisional police officer, Mercy Dagogo was killed while running errands at Asaba Market.⁸³ A bodyguard for an Independent National Electoral Commissioner was followed and killed by 'suspected assassins' in Rivers State in May 2010.⁸⁴ In Lagos in December 2010, two members of a vigilante group were killed during their routine patrol.⁸⁵ And, in January 2010 in Oyo State two police officers were lynched following a 'minor disagreement' with the local NURTW chairman.⁸⁶

Boko Haram have also been responsible for a number of attacks on police officers. In Borno State in 2011, 'sect gunmen' stopped a police officer at gunpoint near a mosque, where he had gone to pray with his family. After sending away the officer's family, they shot and killed him.⁸⁷

The myriad of threats to the safety of those tasked with enforcing the law is illustrated by the discussion following the murder of a police officer in Kano State in 2011. Although, at the time, press reports suggested that there was an initial fear that the attack had been carried out by Boko Haram, the deputy commissioner of police, B Dikko, said it was a 'robbery incident'.⁸⁸

As with the other targeted groups, attacks on security forces show a regional pattern over the study period. Many of those killed in the country's north were targeted by Boko Haram, though the majority of the security officials who were victims of targeted killings were based in the south.

A criminal pattern long in the making

'Thirty years before the emergence of mass advance-fee fraud, Nigeria had the misfortune to acquire a political elite and a political system that were shot through with practices of fraud and embezzlement, not to mention illicit violence. ... Nigerian organized crime is not created by culture, but it does arise from a particular history. Where else could it possibly come from?'

– Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness*⁸⁹

Having examined the patterns of targeted killings in Nigeria since 2000, we must ask, how did this phenomenon become so prevalent? The prevalence of criminality in Nigeria is surely part of the answer. Tying together two of the most frequently identified characteristics of Nigeria, the ubiquity of corruption and the shocking institutionalization of criminal networks in the country, Stephen Ellis notes that an 'obvious feature of organized crime in Nigeria is its association with state corruption'.⁹⁰ Though this dynamic has driven violence in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the activities of criminal networks – of which Ellis considers the most established to be 'the diversion of profits from the oil industry; fraud, particularly credit card and advance fee fraud; drug smuggling; and human trafficking' – existed well before the country's return to democracy in 1999.⁹¹ Long-term trends of government corruption and connections to criminality and fraudulence mar governance in Nigeria.

An 'obvious feature of organized crime in Nigeria is its association with state corruption!'

Traditionally, political entrepreneurs in Nigeria often expected to turn a profit, just like their counterparts in the private sector. Ellis notes that 'when professional politicians made their appearance in Nigeria, it was often hard to distinguish their personal financial ambitions from their political goals'.⁹² He cites an American diplomat who compared the Nigerian political class to the American political system in the late 19th century, observing that



A Nigerian politician is expected to support worthy causes in his district, to help his constituents with jobs and finance, and to always be good for a touch. He is likely to hold an influential position in his clan union and to contribute to its treasury. He needs a force of organisers, ward heelers, and thugs to perform his political errands. In short, he operates in much the same fashion as the old-fashioned American political boss.⁹³

Understanding the Nigerian elite as either being ‘captured’ by criminal interests or being in control of these networks is not quite right: the two sectors are frequently deeply entangled, but are obviously not synonymous with one another. Many of the targeted killings in our dataset are driven by the following characteristics of power in Nigeria: fragmentation, the influence of ‘godfathers’, the role of cults and secret societies, lack of formal institutionalization, and the frequency with which institutions are connected to criminality. These patterns have their roots in Nigeria’s colonial history. Path dependency is perhaps not a satisfying explanation, but it is an important part of the story of targeted killings in Nigeria.

The fragmentation of authority

A valuable starting point in understanding the nature of power in modern Nigeria is the period of British colonization.⁹⁴ Ellis notes that under colonial rule, there were multiple sources of authority – ‘in the form of the colonial government on the one hand, and local custom on the other, [which] gave astute chiefs room to play the two against each other.’⁹⁵ Despite British efforts to unify their rule by banning some traditional sources or expressions of authority, even when aspects of traditional rule were ‘technically outlawed’, they remained legitimate in the eyes of much of the governed population.⁹⁶

The colonial era also witnessed a proliferation of falsified credentials – often as a means of capitalizing on the confusion caused by the debate over legitimacy between colonial and traditional bodies. Ellis notes that even in the early years of colonial rule, ‘there were ... cases of people masquerading as local officials of the colonial government in order to enrich themselves, setting up pseudo-courts that purported to have the backing of the colonial authorities but that were no more than personal creations.’⁹⁷ Deception and criminality therefore became bound up with the practice of authority in Nigeria during the colonial era as a strategy of survival and means of navigating the political system, setting the stage for closer ties between criminality and power in subsequent years.

Deception and criminality became bound up with the practice of authority in Nigeria during the colonial era as a strategy of survival and means of navigating the political system, setting the stage for closer ties between criminality and power .

Geographic distribution of fragmentation of authority

This fragmentation of authority and falsification of credentials under colonial rule had geographic patterns from the very start.⁹⁸ This is in large part due to the relationship between the colonial authorities and the emirates that existed in the north. Under Lord Lugard, the governor-general of Nigeria, the administrative structure of emirates developed under the Sokoto Caliphate was largely maintained and leveraged to improve the colonial tax-collection capacity.⁹⁹ This is in contrast to the Southern Protectorate, where the British were more prone to intervention in traditional power relationships, a tendency that contributed to the obscuring of ‘legitimate’ authority and the proliferation of new authority figures who were unsupported by the populations they were charged with.¹⁰⁰ And, today, the dynamics of targeted killings, while present in the north, do not characterize the sociopolitical landscape in the same way that they do in the country’s south, as seen in the findings. In contrast to the ‘aristocratic tradition’ of emirate leaders, who were incorporated into the colonial administration in the north, politicians in the south ‘were simply men on the make’, whose criminality has been described as a form of political entrepreneurship.¹⁰¹ Our



data suggests that the concentration of criminality and secret societies in the country's south continues to present day.¹⁰² Ellis, reflecting on the geographic characteristics of fraud, notes that '... it is striking that no known reports of such misrepresentation on an international scale concern people from northern Nigeria.'¹⁰³

The Biafran Republic: Political violence and criminality

An especially demonstrative example of how regional political developments facilitated the rise of criminality comes from the Biafran Republic, a movement in the country's South East that attempted to secede in the 1960s and which faced a brutal crackdown by the Nigerian government. Samuel Fury Childs Daly has convincingly argued that the activities that are necessary to survive in wartime (which included 'forgery of passes and other documents, fraudulent commercial transactions, and elaborate schemes involving impersonation and racketeering') can explain the disproportionate levels of criminal activity of this nature in the modern states that form the Biafra region today.¹⁰⁴ Daly notes:

Fraud was not invented in Biafra; forgery and confidence scams had existed throughout prewar Nigeria and had never been limited to any particular region or community. But fraud took place on a larger scale in Biafra and was perceived differently there. Judges often remarked that the incidence of fraudulent activity in Biafra was unprecedented, and their ethical stances toward it changed over the period of the war.¹⁰⁵

More than 50 years after Nigerian independence and the Biafran War, the patterns of social and political organization that arose remain relevant to the practice of politics today. As Daly suggests, the incentives for criminal behaviour established decades ago in the country's south may be linked to that region's disproportionate level of targeted killings today.

Godfatherism

Another characteristic of Nigerian politics that is related to the prevalence of targeted killings is the influence of so-called 'godfathers' in the selection and sponsorship of Nigerian politicians. According to Human Rights Watch,

In many parts of Nigeria, successful candidates are often those who are 'sponsored' by wealthy and powerful individuals known in Nigerian parlance as political 'godfathers' ... dependence on godfathers is the result of a system in which few aspirants to political office in Nigeria can raise on their own the substantial resources usually necessary to compete in the country's violent and corrupt political system – especially if they do not enjoy control over public resources to begin with.¹⁰⁶

The incentives for criminal behaviour established decades ago in the country's south may be linked to that region's disproportionate level of targeted killings today.

Godfathers and godfatherism contribute to, and are a product of, the fragmentation of authority, which leads to targeted killings by concentrating authority in the hands of individuals, rather than institutions. The echelons of influence in Nigeria can be reached through a number of routes – by way of traditional lineages, political ascendancy and wealth (from illicit activities or business acumen) – and once this has been achieved, influence can be leveraged to increase one's status in other areas.¹⁰⁷ The result is that the elite in Nigeria often have their fingers in many pies, and exercise multiple forms of influence, spanning politics, business and customary realms.

A godfather's support comes with expectations; as Human Rights Watch noted, godfathers

demand a substantial degree of control over the governments they help bring into being – not in order to shape government policy, but to exact direct financial 'returns' in the form of government resources stolen



by their protégés or lucrative government contracts awarded to them as further opportunities for graft. Godfathers also require their sponsored politicians to use government institutions to generate patronage for other protégés.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, they are also capable of leveraging violence and corruption 'to manipulate national, state or local political systems in support of the politicians they sponsor'.¹⁰⁹

Secret societies and cults

Secret societies and cultism also play an important role in political life and the exercise of power in Nigeria. Some are innocuous social groups; others have evolved into criminal, or criminally adjacent, organizations. Secret societies existed under colonial rule, projecting influence to the extent that colonial officials posted to Calabar Province were convinced that the machinations of 'shadowy sodalities' could explain 'almost everything' about political developments in the area, including the violence directed by and at elites.¹¹⁰ Ellis cautions that writing cults off as mere criminals or thugs risks overlooking their deep political connections and role in the political order.¹¹¹

Secret societies gained influence in tandem with the rise of nationalist political movements in the 1950s. Ellis notes that as the first nationalist political parties emerged, 'Benin City contained at least four powerful secret societies vying for influence'.¹¹² It was not only the colonial government that felt threatened by the influence of secret societies: in 1977, more than a decade after independence, the military government issued a ban preventing public servants from joining secret societies.

The era of nationalistic mobilization also saw the establishment of so-called cults (a type of secret society) on university campuses.¹¹³ Splintering among groups and the proliferation of such organizations across university campuses in the 1970s resulted in cults becoming a normal feature of many Nigerian campuses. As cults became more significant (and numerous, taking advantage of the post-independence growth in educational institutions),¹¹⁴ the military governments of the 1980s and 1990s saw an opportunity to take advantage of the cults to 'confront the leftist student unions, often aligned with pro-democracy movements'¹¹⁵ and provided them with money and weapons. Unsurprisingly, violence in the country's institutions of education erupted.¹¹⁶

At the same time that cults were proliferating, employment opportunities were shrinking. This created a situation in which criminal networks could successfully recruit from Nigeria's pool of graduates. *The Economist* noted that 'though the cults charge membership fees of between 10 000 and 30 000 naira a year (US\$85 to US\$255), the boys can expect to make a profit on the streets'.¹¹⁷ As a result, cult networks turned into 'authentic breeding-grounds of Nigerian organized crime', subsuming the country's best and brightest, and giving Nigerian organized crime a pool of innovative and educated members.¹¹⁸ Politicians continued to use cults to their own advantage, often deploying the groups as political thugs to suppress dissent and consolidate power.

As the country transitioned to democracy in 1999, cults remained a significant influence and elections created a new business opportunity for members, who were now often used to ensure voter turnout and obedience in 'democratic' elections. Professor Chiedu Mafiana of the National Universities Commission noted in 2008 that 'if a student has [committed] some level of atrocities on behalf of a political group and comes back with good money, another person joins the bandwagon in order to make money for himself'.¹¹⁹ Cults were therefore often involved in criminal activity and political malpractice, and engaged in intense campus rivalries – all of which frequently resulted in bloodshed.

The violence had reached such heights by the first decade of the 2000s that a number of laws were passed to outlaw these cults. *The Economist* reported that the criminalization of cults in Rivers State in 2004 included a special court and a rehabilitation programme, but said that 'the law has had little effect, since politicians play a big part in keeping the groups rich in cash and arms'.¹²⁰ One academic said, 'Most of these politicians are linked to cult groups – they finance them, they maintain them, they sustain them. And all of this is out of the use of government funds'.¹²¹



Cults: The Black Axe

The Black Axe cult provides an illustrative case study on the idealistic origins of cults and their descent into criminality, as well as the process of co-optation by politicians and the persistence of criminal networks. The group, also known as the Neo-Black Movement, was founded at the University of Benin in the late 1970s, with the objective of ‘promoting black consciousness and fighting for the dignity of Africans and their freedom from neo-colonialism’.¹²² This original intent gave way to activities that are ‘notoriously brutal and violent’, as well as to a sense of pride in their reputation for a ‘willingness to instigate violence on campus’.¹²³

The organization was also involved in trafficking women and girls to Italy, where it was engaged in criminal partnerships with Italian criminal organizations (including Cosa Nostra, the Sicilian mafia). In 2016, Italian authorities cracked down on Black Axe’s presence in Italy, arresting more than 20 members in a raid in Sicily.¹²⁴ Almost immediately after this, however, another Nigerian cult, the Vikings, quickly replaced the vacuum left by the arrest of the Black Axe affiliates – testament to the resilience of Nigeria’s cults.¹²⁵ Rodolfo Ruperti, a police chief in Sicily, noted ruefully that ‘when you take one out, others will try to fill the gap’.¹²⁶

Criminality in legitimate organizations

Even ostensibly legitimate and legal business entities have been marred by criminality and violence. The NURTW is one union that has been particularly marred by targeted killings (analyzed above). As has been noted, like Nigerian politics in general, public transport in the late 20th century in Nigeria was characterized by moments of democratic promise that descended into corruption and violence.¹²⁷

The NURTW was established in the late 1970s as a representative body for drivers.¹²⁸ The nation’s political tumult at that time, however, extended to taxi ranks and to the union’s leadership. Tom Goodfellow recalls that the ‘NURTW’s increasingly authoritarian and extortionary behaviour was contested by rival associations, culminating in an extremely violent, though ultimately unsuccessful, 2001 “coup” against NURTW in Ibadan’.¹²⁹ Competition within the union has driven many of the targeted killings in the group, as various factions compete for influence.

It is also possible that the violence afflicting the NURTW and other unions is a result of their links to criminal networks in Nigeria. A similar dynamic of criminality within transport organizations has been observed in South Africa, where

a dramatic expansion in the number of mini-bus taxis plying their trade within the larger cities and on long-distance routes has unsurprisingly given rise to turf wars for profitable routes, as well as the growth of tightly organised taxi organisations, who employ ‘hit squads’ to eliminate potential competitors and actively engage in the corruption of state officials.¹³⁰

The Global Initiative’s Mark Shaw has convincingly demonstrated that the inherent characteristics of a largely unregulated transport sector, combined with ‘the need to move illicit goods’, has resulted in the minibus-taxi industry of South Africa being drawn into criminal activities.¹³¹ Shaw concludes that ‘[t]he growth and consolidation of a few powerful figures in the taxi industry constitute a classic case of the overlap between legitimate and illegitimate business and the development of organised crime. Given their capacity for mobility, taxi operators are useful partners in (or in some cases initiators of) smuggling networks across the sub-continent’.¹³² As previously discussed, both intra-union tussles for power and criminal ties drive much of the targeted killings associated with the NURTW.



Conclusion and recommendations

The knotted relationship between criminal business groups, secret societies and politicians can make it difficult to characterize the nature of violence in Nigeria. Documenting the patterns of targeted killings in Nigeria illustrates the extent to which criminality has been woven into political and social life in many parts of the country over many years. Understanding how and where this pattern manifests is critical for developing and implementing effective policies to counter it.

Despite the limitations on the collection of data before 2010, our dataset contains details on more than 1 650 attempted and lethal targeted killings in Nigeria between 2000 and 2017. What emerges from our data collection is a telling portrait of power, politics and violence in democratic Nigeria. The prevalence of attacks on power brokers illustrates that governance and the exercise of authority are dangerous games across Nigeria. Meanwhile, attacks on journalists and witnesses to criminal acts suggest that those Nigerians brave enough to challenge the prevalent political system of corruption, criminality and violence may, themselves, become victims of that system's ruthlessness.

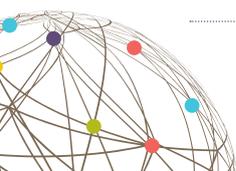
Our initial data collection seems to confirm previous work done that shows, within the context of low-intensity conflicts, that assassinations contribute to insecurity and prolonged conflict.¹³³ Initial findings also lend credence to theories that argue that 'the pernicious effects of an assassination are exacerbated in states that lack a regularized means of leadership succession and are muted by the presence of such institutions.'¹³⁴ Combining the observations of our dataset with work done on the vicious cycles that assassinations can engender, as well as the opaque and unaccountable machinations of godfatherism and political parties in Nigeria, one can make a credible argument that the political culture in Nigeria makes targeted killings more likely, more destabilizing, and prone to aggravating and prolonging low-intensity conflicts.

Although all of Nigeria is impacted by these dynamics, certain regions appear to be more affected by them. The country's South South and South West, in particular, accounted for the lion's share of observations in our dataset. It is perhaps surprising that though North East is the epicentre of violence generally over the time period under study, driven by the Boko Haram insurgency, the region does not lead the way in instances of targeted killings. The patterns of violence exhibited regionally in Nigeria suggest that the logic underlying mass violence and that underlying targeted killings differ. This dynamic is worthy of further research and analysis, both in Nigeria and elsewhere.

What can account for this profound subnational variability? A review of Nigeria's history suggests that colonial and pre-colonial structures and governance patterns continue to shape the way in which authority is exerted and contested across regions. The development of the criminal networks, cults and secret societies, whose interaction with the country's political arena contributes to the prevalence of targeted killings, can be traced to the incentives and opportunities presented to communities in the face of successive predatory governments, boom and bust economic cycles, and limited capacity for non-criminal socio-economic advancement.

This dataset clearly illustrates the breadth of targeted killings within Nigeria – from the country's foremost politicians and activists to those relatively unknown beyond their local communities, we have observed diverse instances of targeted killings. This dynamic is self-perpetuating: targeted killings can beget reprisal attacks, driving entire communities into violence. In some instances, this can catalyze wider social violence, especially if cults, political thugs, union affiliates or criminal networks are brought into the fold. Breaking this cycle will require political commitment and credible enforcement mechanisms. Given the prominence of Nigeria within the Sahel and West Africa, bringing to heel the criminal elements within the country could have stabilizing effects in the region more generally.

What emerges from our data collection is a telling portrait of power, politics and violence in democratic Nigeria.



Although path dependency is a powerful force driving the institutionalization of many of these patterns, it is not an insurmountable obstacle to reform. Changes can be made now to disincentivize participation in targeted killings, reduce impunity for the acts committed and help untangle criminal interests from the echelons of influence in Nigeria.

Policy recommendations

Feasible policy reforms are needed to address targeted killings. From our dataset, it is clear that there are specific states and regions that are the most affected by this criminal phenomenon in Nigeria. If reducing targeted killings is to become a policy objective, these interventions should be applied primarily in these areas.

Depoliticizing civil servants

A startling number of civil servants are targeted in Nigeria. Election officials, in particular, seemed susceptible to violence and the threat of violence. These threats come both from political parties/politicians and criminal entities. Reducing overall levels of criminality in Nigeria would have a number of obvious benefits and should be pursued. Reducing the levels of organized crime in the country would not, however, eliminate the threats that bureaucrats face. The politicization of bureaucracy in Nigeria is undoubtedly a driver of violence against civil servants. The influence of political parties, particularly at the state level, over the appointment of bureaucrats, should be limited. Preserving the integrity of apolitical bureaucratic positions is a difficult endeavour in a polarized and politically charged environment. Public pacts between political parties and mutually acceptable electoral officials would help catalyze norm change towards an apolitical bureaucracy.

Professionalization of the police force, judicial system and enforcement regimes

The professionalization of the police force and judicial system in Nigeria is integral to reducing the levels of targeted killing in the country. Impunity for the sorts of crimes detailed in this report is the order of the day, in large part because of the underdeveloped forensic, investigative and judicial features of the country's justice system. Professionalization needs to be a two-pronged endeavour, with the development of new guidance and implementation of new policies and training, as well as greater enforcement of existing regulations and best practices. Concerning the former, better training on forensic best practices (replete with an expansion of forensic labs and equipment), as well as greater cooperation between the police and the justice system are critical. The country's first DNA forensics lab was opened in Lagos in 2017 and marks an investment in technological advancement that should be matched by other states and paired with personnel professionalization.¹³⁵

Related to the latter, reducing the levels of corruption within the Nigerian police force is critical. Emmanuel C Onyeozili has characterized police corruption as 'another gangrene, which has eaten deep into the fabrics of law enforcement apparatus in Nigeria'. This corruption is endemic to the force, ranging from the demands for bribes at checkpoints to embezzlement and malpractice among inspector generals and other high-ranking officials.¹³⁶

The regulation of university cult activities

Our data illustrates that university cults often play a critical role in the perpetration of targeted killings throughout the country. The frequency with which cults are drawn into organized crime, political thuggery and other forms of social violence suggests that universities should strictly regulate these groups' activities on campus. In addition, greater cooperation between universities with a significant cult presence and the security authorities would be useful to draw down levels of violence. Such cooperation might not only prevent retaliatory violence from escalating, but also deter involvement in criminal activities to begin with.



Regulation of and enforcement of restrictions on firearms

The prevalence of targeted killing in the country is sustained by the availability of firearms, suggesting that better gun-control measures within the country and stricter regulations of firearms crossing Nigeria's borders could stem some of the violence. More effective regulation of weapons within the country may also reduce the levels of targeted killing. Although Nigeria has a number of regulations on weapons within the country, enforcement of the legislation and regulation are lacking. A number of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, and amnesty, collection and destruction efforts have resulted in the surrendering of thousands of weapons.¹³⁷ In April 2017, the Presidency asked the Nigerian state governments to increase their efforts to regulate weapons. Nevertheless, the influence of state authorities in this arena is likely to be limited, as there is no state-level security agency.¹³⁸

Reform of the security vote

Linked to the issue of state-level security is the role of the security vote in Nigerian politics. The security vote is a generally secretive sum of money distributed to provide security at the state level, which gives politicians leeway and resources to hire political thugs, undermining the credibility of elections in Nigeria and raising the incidence of both targeted and general political violence.

The role of the security vote funds in recruiting and retaining political thugs and politicians' militias is a frequent subject of speculation. Egbo et al note that 'the abuse and (mis)use of security votes in Nigeria [have] grown at an alarming rate despite the country's transition to democratic rule in 1999'.¹³⁹ They argue that 'the current multi-party dispensation has contributed to the greater use and abuse of security votes across the three tiers of government (federal, state, and local)'.¹⁴⁰ It is generally agreed upon (and demonstrated in the data used in this research) that state governments and state-level politicians are often responsible for insecurity and violence. Reforming or eliminating the security vote in Nigeria, in conjunction with the regulation of cults and other campus organizations, could help reduce levels of violence by making it difficult for politicians to recruit and reward violent partisans.

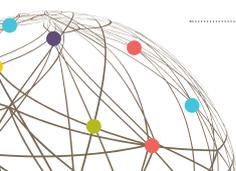
Finding the political will to enact reforms

A significant hurdle when it comes to reducing targeted killing is lack of political will. As the attempted criminalization of cults in Rivers State in 2004 illustrates, in the absence of political will to enforce statutes, politics and organized crime will remain intertwined in the country – and violence will continue to be a significant feature of Nigerian political life.

Furthermore, as long as godfatherism and the fragmentation of authority in Nigeria serve to concentrate and personalize power in the hands of the few, targeted killing will be an attractive option to those seeking to disrupt the status quo. How to generate the political will to reduce the political system's dependence on godfathers and criminality is the question that needs to be answered. Calls by citizens and civil society for more democratically accountable, less criminal and more transparent political parties may be one way to help harness the incentives of democratization to achieve peaceful ends.

About the author

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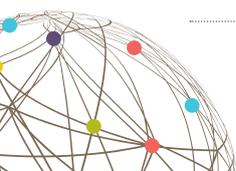


Notes

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- 9 In practice, this means that an event involving a gunman who, say, entered a community in Jos and shot indiscriminately at people he believed to be members of the Tiv ethnic group would not be included in the dataset. If, however, he were to go to a specific individual's house and, in the course of attempting to murder the target, killed his wife, the attempt on the target would be included in the dataset and his wife's death recorded.
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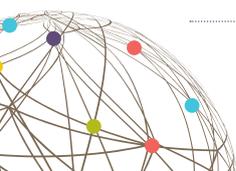
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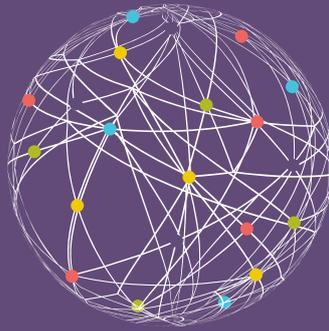


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- 95 Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime*. London: Oxford University Press, 2016, p 18.
- 96 Ibid. Ellis notes that in Benin City, now a part of the country's South South region, 'the cult of Ayelala is so popular that it has become an alternative to the official state system of justice'; see p 196.
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- 113 Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime*. London: Oxford University Press, 2016, p 83. The first such organization, the National Association of Seadogs (also known as the Pyrates Confraternity), was co-founded by Nigerian luminary Wole Soyinka and six of his fellow activists on the campus of University College, Ibadan. The organization was founded 'to combat societal ills and conformist degradation, which were being exhibited not only by students, but by society at large.' Ellis notes that these groups were 'harmless fun to begin with'.
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- 116 The situation evolved so quickly and reached such levels of violence that Soyinka tried, unsuccessfully, in the 1980s, to 'disband his former creation' but it was too late; see Cults of violence, *The Economist*, 31 July 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/11849078>.
- 117 Ibid.
- 118 Stephen Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime*. London: Oxford University Press, 2016, p 143. Before long, rivalries between cults at the Obafemi Awolowo University had reached levels that were tantamount to gang warfare.
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