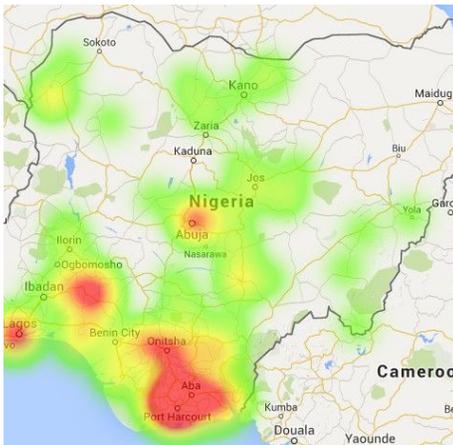


Conflict Prevention in Rivers State in the Aftermath of Election Violence

Briefing — August 2015



The Nigerian Presidential and National Assembly elections of March 2015 were widely praised by international observers as free and fair, with relatively peaceful outcomes across most states. However, among those states with elevated levels of political conflict was Rivers, where tension has cascaded with subsequent state and local elections in April and May. This briefing provides context to the local government dynamics surrounding the administration of incumbent All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate Governor Amaechi, and the succeeding Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) candidate Governor Wike, elected in April. As a series of judicial challenges unfold in the aftermath of the local elections, and tensions continue between the PDP and APC parties, close monitoring of the political situation is required for early warning and conflict mitigation.

Background

According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and corroborated by data from the P4P Peace Map, Rivers State experienced the country's highest levels of violence during the 2015 gubernatorial elections, resulting in the deaths of political party rivals, their hired security agents and police officers.

The current political dynamics in Rivers pre-date the April 2015 gubernatorial elections. There has been heightened tension in the state since 2013, when Governor Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi defected from the ruling PDP to the APC after having a falling out within his party. Officials across the governing political apparatus picked sides and a series of manoeuvrings ensued, including the removal and replacement of a former PDP Chairman by the Federal High Court and the impeachment of the Speaker of the Rivers State House of Assembly by a group of five legislators. Other controversial events that gave rise to tensions in the state included the deployment of a new Commissioner of Police to the state and protests by a group of ex-militants against the Governor.

The 2015 state elections were hotly contested between the PDP candidate Chief Ezebunwo Nyesom Wike, former Education Minister, and Dr. Dakuku Peterside of the APC.

The period during the gubernatorial campaigns in the state was characterised by violent clashes between the APC and PDP with reported conflict incidents including the deaths of party loyalists from both sides, the bombing of party secretariats, and the kidnapping and intimidation of political opponents. As illustrated in the graph below, drawing from Peace Map data, the State experienced a major spike in both political conflict-related incidents and fatalities in the first part of the year, peaking around the time of the gubernatorial elections in April.

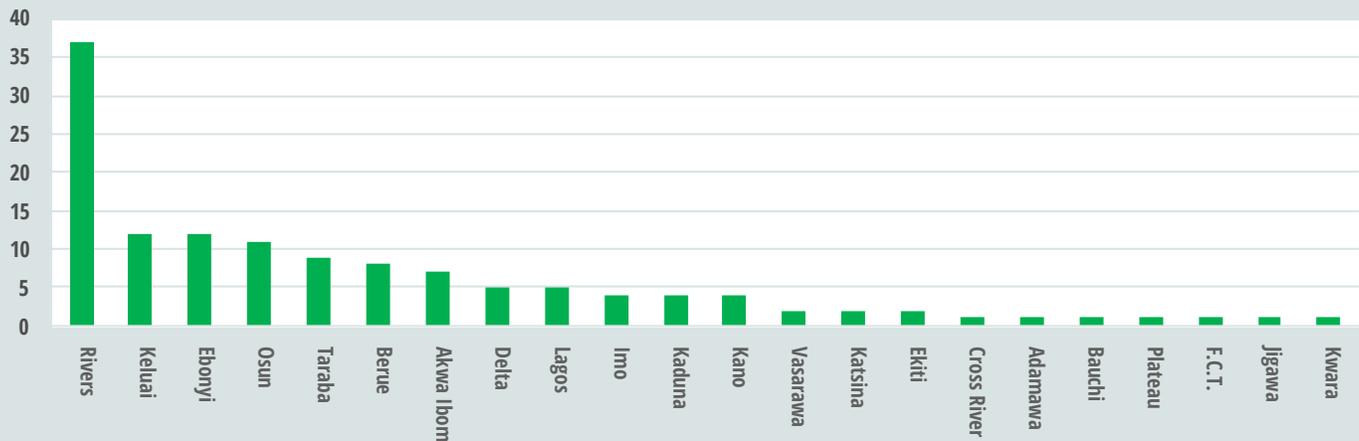
In the midst of the pre-election instability, the APC opted to boycott the elections after appeals to INEC to cancel the elections were unsuccessful. Polls proceeded and PDP was delivered a landslide victory in the State House Assembly, and Chief Wike was declared the winner of the gubernatorial election.

The APC rejected the election results and sought redress in the state election petition tribunal, which was relocated to Abuja amidst security concerns. Led by APC candidate Dr. Peterside, they alleged that the results were rigged in favour of the PDP and claimed the party conspired with security forces and armed thugs to intimidate their supporters and prevent them from voting.

The announcement by the outgoing APC administration that the Rivers State

The graphic above is a Heat Map of incidents of heightened political tension reported during April 2015 showing Rivers State as the highest risk - <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/>

Election-Related Fatalities Reported by State: April Gubernatorial Elections



Peace Map Data shows Rivers State as the most lethal in regards to election-related violence during the Gubernatorial Election period. This chart draws on Nigeria Watch (www.nigeriawatch.org) and ACLED (www.acleddata.com) data formatted and uploaded to the P4P Peace Map (www.p4p-nigerdelta.org).

Independent Election Committee (RSIEC) would stage local elections on 23 May (6 days before the end of their administration) had the effect of continuing tensions, though violence was much reduced. The PDP sought an injunction from the Federal High Court in Port Harcourt to prevent the RSIEC elections from proceeding. Nonetheless, the local elections were held on 23 May and boycotted by the PDP. The outcome of the elections was a victory to the APC, who won 22 out of the 23 chairmanship seats.

With the PDP's Chief Wike inaugurated as the Governor six days later on 29 May, political manoeuvring continued. The Federal Court in Port Harcourt reached a decision on the legitimacy of the 23 May elections staged by the outgoing Governor Amaechi, ruling that the election of the 22 APC chairmen be nullified. A bomb blast was reported outside the court during proceedings, although no casualties were reported. Implementing the court ruling, Governor Wike moved to sack the 22 new APC chairmen and immediately inaugurated and swore in 23 Caretaker Committee Chairmen to take over temporary administration of the Local Government Councils. Soon after the decision of the

court was given, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) ordered his men to occupy all the 23 LGA councils and to deny access to the APC. Although this decision has been rescinded, it was a source of much controversy in the state. Then on 13 July, the National Industrial Court, which presides over civil and labour-related cases, ordered the reinstatement of the APC chairmen, adding a new twist to the uncertainty.

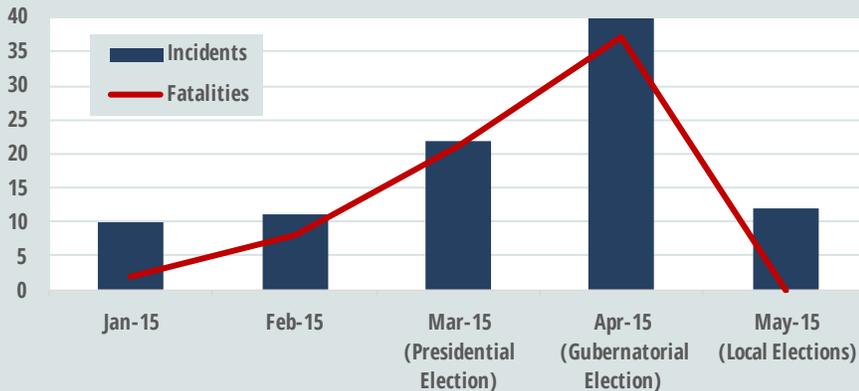
Political tensions going back to 2014 have paralysed the judiciary, stemming from a showdown between then-Governor Amaechi and the National Judicial Council over the appointment of a Chief Judge (CJ) for the state. In the absence of a CJ to assign cases, a backlog developed over a period of months. As tensions escalated, judicial workers went on strike, citing insecurity. Finally, in June of this year, the newly elected Governor Wike swore in Justice Daisy Okocha as CJ, and courts resumed. But to the extent that there is perception of or precedent for politicization of the judiciary, this could undermine the effectiveness of the courts as they work to resolve disputes in the state.

Implications for Rivers State Peace and Security

The recent contentions surrounding the local political process in Rivers State is by no means a new or unique phenomenon. However, the heightened levels of violence reported in the lead up to the 2015 local elections, and the immediate aftermath, are cause for close monitoring of the situation. The explosion reported outside the Federal Court during the 9 July ruling suggests the levels of tension are still simmering between party lines. Nonetheless, reported fatalities and incidents for June 2015 dropped significantly from the previous three months, which may suggest signs of conflict subsiding.

However, given the realignment of political interests following the gubernatorial election (PDP at the state level and APC at the federal level), some ex-militants and cultists in Rivers who previously may have contented themselves with patronage or criminality may now be incentivized to take a more militant stance. This will be particularly salient surrounding the planned phase out of the Amnesty Programme, which currently pays stipends to ex-

Election-Related Incidents and Fatalities in Rivers State



militants. This, in addition to ongoing communal tensions, requires continued vigilance for early warning and conflict mitigation.

Recommendations

Nigerian Police: In the face of heightened tension in the state since 2013 and considering perceptions of the politicization of the security services in the past, this is the time for the police hierarchy to start with a clean slate and ensure that they maintain peace and order without being partisan and with utmost professionalism. Safeguarding the lives of citizens regardless of party affiliation and restoring law and order should be the primary objective at this time.

The Judiciary: It is critical that the judiciary remain transparent and seen to be independent in handling judicial processes and in settling the issues brought before it. The judiciary is said to be the final arbiter for dispute resolution and the judges should reflect this dictum, knowing also that any vagueness in its pronouncements could aggravate tensions and violence in the state. This is especially important now, as the courts have resumed their work after a period of uncertainty and political tensions.

Politicians and Political Parties: The political parties and their protagonists should restrain their supporters from

engaging in violence. Violence begets violence and would only serve to throw the state into further confusion and mayhem. This does not forward the interests of the people they claim to serve or want to serve. It is important for all issues to be settled through the courts or in a fully transparent and participative process.

The Media: Heated rhetoric and biased reporting has the effect of exacerbating tensions. To maintain calm and peace in the state it is imperative for the various media outlets to show professionalism and neutrality in all news reportage of events and analysis of those events. Realizing that the wrong emphasis or the smallest unconfirmed detail can lead to suspicion and violent conflict between party supporters, it is important that conflict sensitivity be applied in all news reporting.

Civil Society: While every individual is entitled to his or her own opinion and political preference, traditional rulers, women’s leaders, youth leaders, development and governance professionals, and all others with a stake in peace must keep the public good in mind. They should focus on ensuring accountability and good governance and advocate for their interests using only peaceful and transparent means. One way to actively promote peace is to participate in coalitions and initiatives such as the Partners for Peace Network, or other similar efforts.

2015 Timeline

April 2015

- INEC holds Rivers Gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections
- PDP wins majority in House and their candidate Chief Wike is elected Governor over APC’s Dr. Peterside
- APC states it will contest the results of the Rivers gubernatorial elections at the tribunal

May 2015

- RSIEC stage new local elections under purview of outgoing APC administration of Governor Amaechi
- PDP seeks injunction to prevent RSIEC’s elections
- PDP boycotts elections
- APC wins 22 of 23 chairmanship seats in local elections
- The PDP’s Chief Wike is inaugurated as the new Governor

June 2015

- Governor Wike appoints Justice Okocha as CJ, ending stalemate; Courts resume

July 2015

- Federal Court in PHC nullifies the May 23 elections staged by RSIEC which elected 22 APC chairman
- Bomb blast reported outside the Federal Court during ruling
- Governor Wike sacks the 22 new APC chairman and inaugurates 23 Caretaker Committee Chairmen
- Inspector General of Police orders barricading of all LG Councils
- National Industrial Court adjourns case seeking to nullify decision of the Federal High Court
- Inspector General withdraws men from the LG councils