

Time is of the Essence: Preventing Election Violence in Rivers State

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Politics in the Niger Delta has often been characterized as high stakes issue and contest between personalities as much as it is between their platforms. Election cycles in Rivers State have recently been marred by violence, especially during gubernatorial and local contests. While there were some incidents of violence during the 2011 election cycle, Rivers experienced the most election violence incidents and fatalities of any Nigerian state during the 2015 contest, largely due to increasing competition between the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) in the state.

In the Niger Delta, Rivers State is politically significant due to its size, location, and natural resource wealth. According to the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, Rivers has the second largest GDP after Lagos and contains vast reserves of crude oil and natural gas. According to Armed Conflict Location Event Data (ACLED),

Rivers recorded the highest number of reported fatalities within the Niger Delta in 2015 and was sustained in 2016, with fatalities in the state finally decreasing in 2017.

As gubernatorial candidates vie for control of Rivers in 2019, ongoing grievances within each of the state's three senatorial districts -- Rivers South-East, Rivers West, and Rivers East -- will likely fuel violence. The senatorial zoning system has increased perceptions of group marginalization within certain communities, which could be a key driver of election violence.

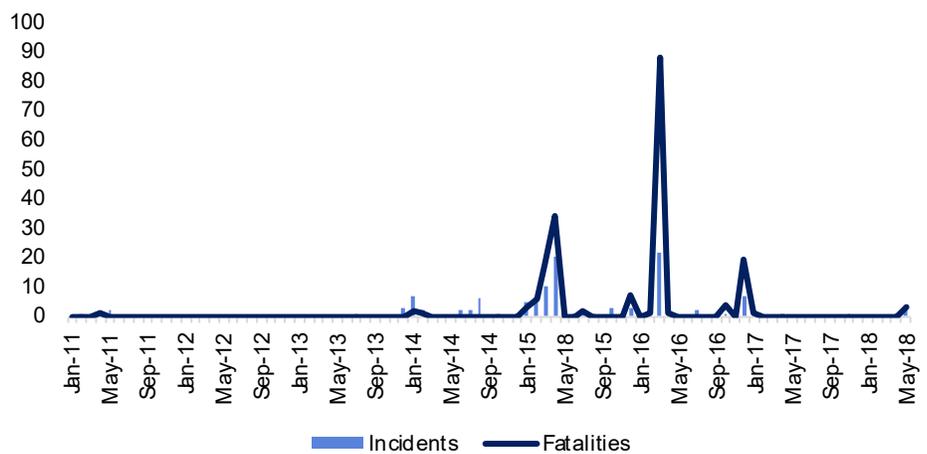
This report examines the senatorial zoning system in Rivers and outlines the challenges and drivers of

insecurity specific to each senatorial district going into 2019.

Rise of Political Violence in Rivers

Prior to the 2011 election cycle, Rivers had few reports of political violence. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was the only viable political party then and political competition was relatively low. In the intervening years leading up to the 2015 elections, support for the All Progressives Congress (APC) emerged, and it became a somewhat viable opposition to the PDP in the state. A spike in political and election-related violence during the 2015 elections was the outcome of this opposition.

Political Violence in Rivers State



The graph shows a significant spike in political violence in the lead-up to the 2015 elections and again during the 2016 re-run elections. Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org; ACLED www.acleddata.com uploaded to the P4P Peace Map



Trends in Political Violence

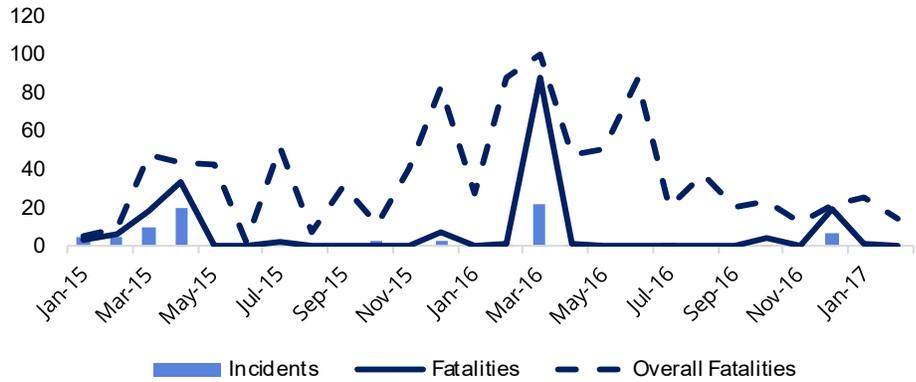
The personal rivalry between former Governor Rotimi Amaechi (APC) and current Governor Ezenwo Nyesom Wike (PDP) exacerbated divisions along party lines during the 2015 election period. Although Amaechi was a PDP stalwart and concluded his second term as governor in 2015, he had defected to the APC in 2013. With this leadership shift from the PDP to the APC, the APC gained foothold in Rivers politics for the first time and this elevated political tensions in the state. Ultimately, Wike (PDP) defeated the APC's candidate Dakuku Peterside, an Amaechi ally, in the 2015 gubernatorial election. Since then, Amaechi has served as Minister of Transportation, although the fierce personal and political competition between him and Wike has not abated.

Setting the Stage: 2015 and 2016 Elections

The main triggers of violence during the 2015 election period and the 2016 re-run elections included widespread accusations of vote buying by politicians and political parties, votes rigging, ballot-box snatching, and blocking roads to prevent voters from gaining access to polling stations. Politicians also reportedly used intimidation tactics, such as property destruction, harassment, kidnappings, and assassinations to garner political power. According to data uploaded to the P4P Peace Map, political violence in Rivers steadily increased beginning in January 2015, peaking in the lead-up and aftermath of the April gubernatorial elections. This was due, in large part, to outbreaks of political violence between leaders and supporters of the APC and the PDP.

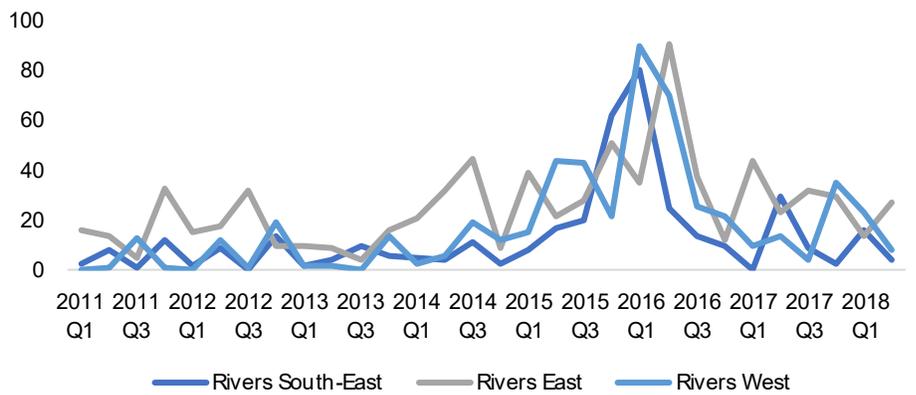
Violence in Rivers spiked sharply again in March 2016, when re-run legislative elections were held in the state. The rerun elections were held because 21 federal and state legislative elections conducted in Rivers during the 2015 general elections were invalidated. The 2016 legislative re-run elections saw significantly more fatalities

Impact of Political Tensions on Overall Insecurity in Rivers



Graph shows the correlation between spikes in incidents of broader insecurity in the state, such as shootings/killings and criminality, and incidents related to tension or violence between political groups. The highest levels of conflict in the state occurred during months of key political events. Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org; ACLED www.acleddata.com uploaded to the P4P Peace Map

Reported Conflict Fatalities by Senatorial District (Overall)



Graph depicts the reported levels of fatal violence in each senatorial district in Rivers State. Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org; ACLED www.acleddata.com uploaded to the P4P Peace Map

from political violence than the entire 2015 election cycle.

In addition to increased competition between the APC and PDP in Rivers, the challenge of managing stakeholders' expectations regarding senatorial zoning also fueled grievance when constituents feel passed over. Nigeria's political parties often 'zone' (rotate) positions among geographical groups. Though zoning is intended to help give minority groups access to political appointments, some respondents indicated that in practice those from minority groups or regions continue to be excluded as parties support popular candidates

from larger communities to increase their chances of winning. In 2015, the expectation of zoning was dashed altogether with the nomination of Wike, from Rivers East, as the gubernatorial candidate to succeed the incumbent who was also from there. There is also an Upland-Riverine split in all three senatorial districts. Upland Rivers is composed primarily of the Ikwerre and Ogoni ethnic groups, while the Riverine region holds a significant Ijaw population. Riverine communities are less accessible, harder to protect, and thus more vulnerable to election violence. According to Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted by PIND and the

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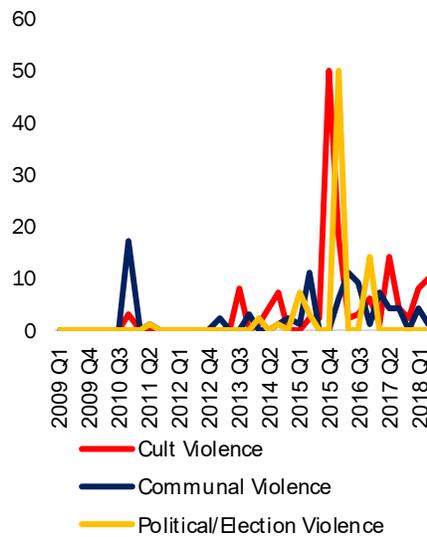
Fund for Peace (FFP) in mid-2018, there remain concerns that these communities are not informed or sensitized ahead of elections and that election materials do not reach them in a timely manner.

Rivers South-East

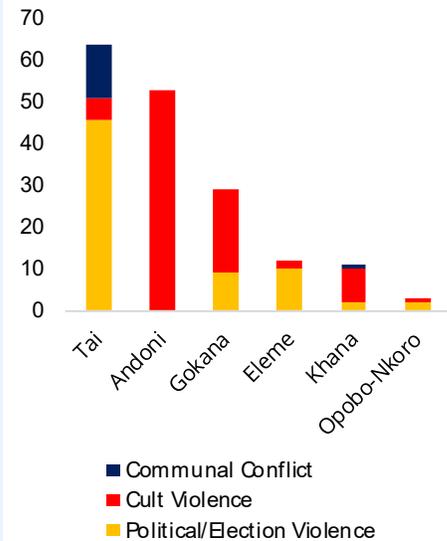
The Rivers South-East senatorial district is composed of seven Local Government Areas (LGAs): Andoni, Eleme, Gokana, Khana, Opobo-Nkoro, Oyigbo, and Tai. The district is currently represented by Senator Magnus Abe, a member of the APC, who won the December 2016 rerun elections. Rivers South-East is home to the Ogoni people who reside primarily in a region (“Ogoniland”) which extends across the LGAs of Khana, Gokana, Eleme and Tai. Historically, Rivers has never elected a governor from Rivers South-East, which has repeatedly irked the Ogoni people. During the 2016 re-run elections, Rivers South-East recorded the highest number of reported fatalities related to political violence in the state. Ahead of 2019, stakeholders from the region are concerned that the cycle of election violence will likely be repeat there.

Cultism, arms proliferation, communal conflict, youth unemployment, and political tension and violence are elevated in Ogoniland. The area is reportedly divided evenly between the APC and the PDP and has become highly polarized during elections both between and within parties. According to ACLED data, thousands of Ogoni youth protested in Eleme and Tai in November 2014 over the APC’s decision to nominate Dakuku Peterside as the party’s gubernatorial candidate, instead of the Ogoni contender, Magnus Abe. According to previous trends, the polarization and tension in the area contributes to spikes in political and cult violence during election periods, with politicians employing cult groups and youth to perpetrate violence in the form of intimidation, theft of election material and violence against opponents.

Fatalities: Rivers South-East



Levels of Violence by LGA



Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org ; ACLED www.acleddata.com uploaded to the P4P Peace Map

Environmental degradation and high unemployment rates are also underlying drivers of violence in Ogoniland. The region experienced severe environmental damage associated with oil exploration and production activities, leading to the formation of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990. MOSOP campaigned for economic and environmental justice, eventually leading to the cessation of oil production activities in the area in 1993. This historical background, compounded with present-day factors, provides important context for the high levels of political cult violence in the region. Looking to the 2019 election cycle, ongoing perceptions among the Ogoni people of marginalization by the current government continue to fuel political tension in the South-East senatorial district, and these dynamics will be important factors in upcoming elections. For example, in March 2016, youth in Ogoni protested alleged hate speech from the governor against the Ogoni people, stating that their demonstration was in pursuit of the Ogoni non-violent struggle.

Additionally, during the re-run elections in 2016, Rivers South-East saw the highest number of reported fatalities of the three senatorial districts, largely due to violence in Tai LGA. In March 2016, at least 40 people were killed while trying to resist the hijack of electoral materials meant for the federal and state re-run elections. The district also saw multiple incidents of violence on election day. For example, in Eleme LGA, four APC members were killed in election day violence.

In addition to the political dynamics in Ogoniland, cultism also drives violence in the senatorial district. Gokana LGA, one of the four LGAs that make up Ogoniland, has seen significant trends of cult violence over the previous election cycles. In February 2016, eighteen people were killed in Gokana during a clash between police and loyalists to an ex-militant leader. Cultists could be active in perpetrating violence in the coming elections. According to stakeholders, both political parties have begun approaching ex-militants and cultists in preparation for the 2019 elections. Outside of Ogoniland, other LGAs in the senatorial district are

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susceptible to political violence perpetrated by cult groups and militants. For example, before the March 2016 rerun elections, members of the Icelander cult group reportedly killed an APC member in Opobo-Nkoro LGA.

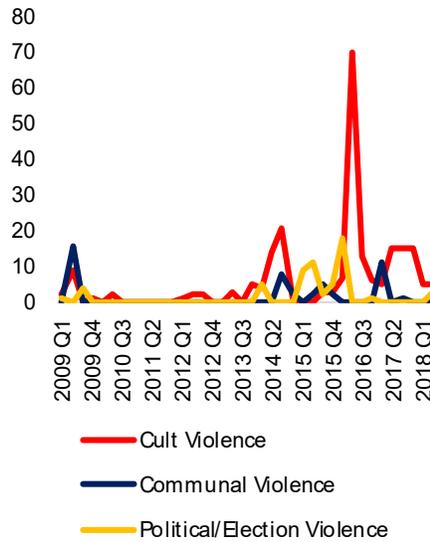
Rivers East

Rivers East senatorial district is composed of eight LGAs: Emohua, Etche, Ikwerre, Obio-Akpor, Ogu-Bolo, Okrika, Omuma, and Port Harcourt. The district is represented by senator Andrew Uchendu, who was a member of the PDP until he defected to the APC in 2014. The district is home to several ethnic groups, notably the Ikwerre people, who predominantly live in Ikwerre, Obio-Akpor, Port Harcourt, and Emohua LGAs. Governor Wike is from Obio-Akpor LGA and will be seeking re-election in 2019. Former governor Amaechi is also from Rivers East (Ikwerre LGA).

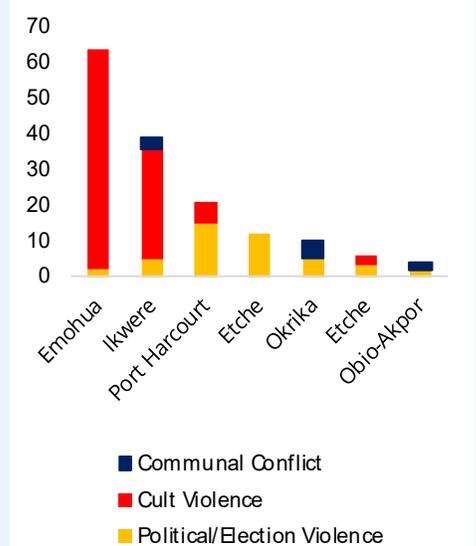
Rivers East experienced election violence during the 2015 elections and the 2016 re-run elections, but the most significant trend was the spike in reported cult violence in the second quarter of 2016. Cult violence and political violence are inextricably connected in Rivers, as cult groups often act as spoilers to efforts to mitigate political violence because they can profit from tension and violence between political actors. Furthermore, cult groups are powerful in Rivers, as they routinely have access to weapons and immunity from politicians. Cult violence is especially intense in key political centers, such as the state capital, Port Harcourt and LGA headquarters, where cult groups compete for supremacy.

The main cult groups driving violence in Rivers East are the Icelanders, Greenlanders, Degbam, and Dewell. During the second quarter of 2016, Rivers East saw supremacy battles intensify between the Icelanders and the Greenlanders, following the violent re-run elections in March 2016. According to incidents uploaded to the P4P Peace Map, the most violent clashes occurred in

Fatalities: Rivers East



Levels of Violence by LGA



Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org; ACLED www.acleddata.com uploaded to the P4P Peace Map

Emohua, Ikwerre, and Port Harcourt LGAs. In April 2016, at least six people were killed during a supremacy battle between the Degbam and Icelander cult groups. In May 2016, two private security guards were reportedly killed by cultists in Port Harcourt. Fatal violence sharply intensified in May and June as supremacy battles between the Icelanders and Greenlanders escalated. In June, a reprisal attack perpetrated by the Greenlanders against the Icelanders resulted in at least 28 fatalities, including a police officer. While the number decreased in the remainder of the year, supremacy battles, mostly between the Icelanders, Greenlanders, and Degbam cult groups, continued through 2016 and 2017.

In Rivers East, the highest levels of political violence were in Port Harcourt, Etche and Ikwerre. Port Harcourt saw high levels of political violence during both the 2015 elections and the 2016 re-run elections; and according to interviews with local stakeholders, it could also be a hotspot for violence during the 2019 elections as PDP and APC seek to compete for votes. Incident reports include descriptions of clashes between APC and

PDP supporters, attempted assassinations of prominent party members, political protests, clashes between security forces and party members, property destruction, and kidnappings.

Stakeholders interviewed in mid-2018 asserted that candidates' home LGAs can be particularly violent due to increased pressure on the local population to support the politician. This pressure can take the form of vote-buying, intimidation, or election rigging, all of which are triggers for further violence. Governor Wike is eligible for re-election in 2019 and will likely run, meaning that Obio-Akpor LGA could see higher levels of political tension and violence. Currently, an APC candidate has not been nominated, but given the political significance of Ikwerre LGA as the home of former governor Amaechi, it could see similar patterns of violence, which could be compounded by pressure from the federal level that an APC candidate win the gubernatorial election in Rivers or vice versa, if PDP seeks to suppress APC votes in the area. Finally, an additional complicating factor is that Amaechi is currently the Director of Buhari's campaign for re-election, further raising the stakes

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that a loss for Amaechi is also a loss for Buhari and the APC, writ large.

Rivers West

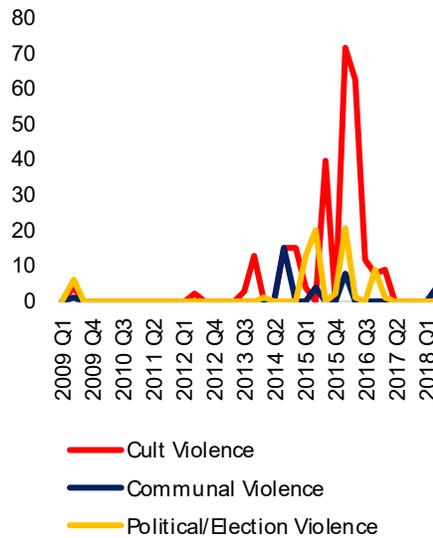
The Rivers West senatorial district encompasses eight LGAs: Abua-Odual, Ahoada East, Ahoada West, Akuku-Toru, Asari-Toru, Bonny, Degema and Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni. The district is represented by senator Osinakachukwu Ideozu, a member of the PDP.

Over the course of both the 2015 elections and the 2016 re-run elections, Rivers West experienced political violence and high levels of reported fatalities related to cultism. The same four cult groups mentioned in the Rivers East section are also active in Rivers West: Icelanders, Greenlanders, Dewell, and Degbam. As detailed above, cult violence is intertwined with political violence, as cult groups profit off the patronage of politicians.

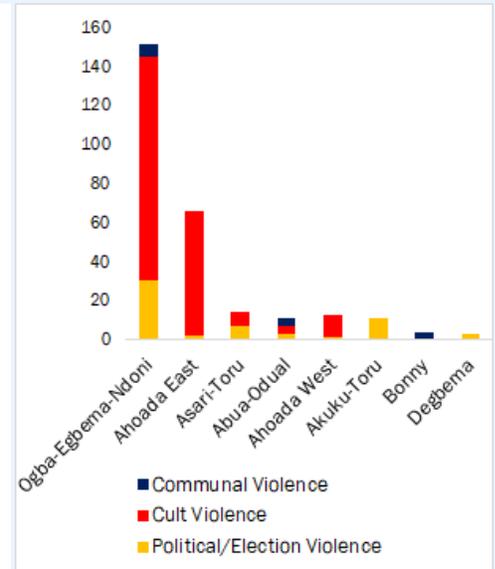
Rivers West saw an uptick in cult violence in the second quarter of 2015 and the first two quarters of 2016, coinciding with spikes in political violence. According to one incident report, in December 2016, cultists reportedly killed at least eight people in a suspected political attack in Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni LGA following the rerun election in the area. Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni also saw high levels of fatal violence in 2015 and 2016 due clashes between the Icelanders and Greenlanders and the Dewell and Degbam cult groups.

According to local stakeholders, election periods are opportunities for cult groups to demonstrate their power by bringing in the votes of an area or community. Violence is especially high in densely populated areas and areas where cult groups have maintained control. Election cycles also bring an increased flow of weapons into Rivers, with politicians reportedly reaching across state lines to recruit cultists and militants. The history of

Fatalities: Rivers West



Levels of Violence by LGA



Data source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org ; ACLED www.acleddata.com uploaded to the P4P Peace Map

cooperation between political parties and cult groups has created the perception that cult groups are above the law.

Youth are especially vulnerable to manipulation during election periods due to poverty, high youth unemployment, and the rise of hate speech in the social media. Cult groups and political parties pay youth to commit acts of election violence or fraud, promising them food or money. For example, during the 2015 elections, youth in Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni LGA snatched ballot boxes and two unidentified men were reportedly killed. As the role of cult groups continues to grow, youth continue to view joining cults as a potential source of livelihood, especially during elections and are pressured to join by their peers or to support their families.

Ogba-Egbema-Ndoni LGA saw the highest level of politically motivated fatal violence in Rivers West during the 2015 elections and the second highest level of fatal violence during the 2016 re-run elections. Incident reports included descriptions of assassinations of party leadership, politically

motivated cult violence, violent clashes between PDP and APC supporters, and theft of election materials. In Akuku-Toru LGA there was an incident involving the assassination of PDP party leaders. In March 2016, two chieftains of the PDP were killed outside their homes. Other incidents involved politically-motivated killings of PDP and APC members in the lead-up and aftermath of the March 2016 re-run elections.

The Way Forward: 2019 Elections

Conclusion and Recommendations

As illustrated in this report, a history of election, communal, and cult violence in the three senatorial districts suggests the need for vigilance and voter education and advocacy in 2019. As with previous elections, PDP and APC supporters may attempt to suppress each others' votes, intimidate candidates from contesting, and/or actively snatch ballot boxes from polling stations.

Rivers has historically been governed by the People's Democratic Party (PDP), but because the All People's Congress (APC) has had a foothold in the past, under former Governor Rotimi Amaechi, the party will strive to win the state back in the 2019 gubernatorial election. Federal elections will hold on February 16, 2019, and voters from Rivers will directly elect 16 representatives to the Nigerian National Assembly. On March 2, 2019, Rivers will hold gubernatorial elections, in which incumbent Governor Ezenwo Nyesom Wike of the PDP will likely run for re-election.

Early engagement will be essential to mitigating violence during the 2019 election cycle in Rivers. Civil society organizations (CSOs) can play an important role in improving political awareness by engaging citizens, especially youth, through voter education programs. CSOs and INEC can also prepare by engaging in early outreach to rural communities, engaging with women, and

maintaining an active media presence. While stakeholders from across the political spectrum reported that efforts by INEC and CSOs to reach more remote and hard-to-access communities has improved since 2015, it is still essential that these communities continued to be engaged through multi-pronged outreach strategies by CSOs, particularly vulnerable groups.

At the same time, all three senatorial districts have reported voter suppression in the past through various intimidation tactics, including blocking voter access to polling stations. To prevent this in 2019, it is essential that security forces are engaged early and thoroughly in cooperative efforts with other actors, including INEC staff and local CSOs from the region.

In the past, CSOs and other groupings of governmental and non-governmental coalitions have come together to persuade political party leadership, in particular the youth wings of the main parties, to sign pledges of non-violence around elections. When publicized within local communities, this can have the effect of holding individuals and parties accountable for intimidation and violence committed in their name.

Understanding what to look for and where to report irregularities during elections is key. Many stakeholders who were interviewed by PIND and FFP reported that a lack of knowledge of voter rights and election law often results in impunity for those responsible for intimidation and violence.

In the last election cycle, PIND and the P4P Network were active in training election monitors on early warning reporting and linking local civil society groups with authorities to report incidents of suppression and violence. This is particularly important in more isolated communities in LGAs that are known hotspots for violence and should be supported again in the run-up to the 2019 contest.

Finally, a resounding theme across stakeholder interviews, as well as in an examination of previous patterns and trends of election cycle violence, is that early engagement is key. From a resource and technical support standpoint, there is a practice of engaging a few months out from elections, as though that were sufficient. Both qualitative and quantitative data tells a different story. In states like Rivers, where a "winner takes all" mentality still reigns, spoilers become deeply entrenched early on, meaning that by the time efforts to counter their tactics are mounted, they are often too little, too late. With less than a year out, at the time of this writing, from both the federal and local contests, time is of the essence. Without a concerted effort that brings together local community members, security services, INEC officials, and CSOs with the experience and local trust to educate, train and also intervene, Rivers state, and its flashpoint LGAs within the three senatorial districts, may well be in for more violence in 2019.

Analysis for this report was provided by Nkasi Wodu, Afeno Super of PIND, and Nate Haken, Patricia Taft and Amanda Quinn from FFP