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# **Security by Militia, but for Whom? Non-State Actors and Security Governance in Nigeria**

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Simons Papers in Security and Development

No. 9/2010 | December 2010

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The series is supported in part by The Simons Foundation.

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Merz, Sebastian, *Security by Militia, but for Whom? Non-State Actors and Security Governance in Nigeria*, Simons Papers in Security and Development, No. 9/2010, School for International Studies, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, December 2010.

ISSN 1922-5725

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## **Security by Militia, but for Whom? Non-State Actors and Security Governance in Nigeria**

Simons Papers in Security and Development,  
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### Abstract:

Vigilante groups and militias play a crucial role in dispensing force and controlling security in weak states. Acknowledging the significance of non-state actors is necessary to reconnect our understanding of security governance with empirical realities outside the OECD world. In principal, militias can be an alternative to state security forces, but in practice their impact on public safety is often ambivalent. The question is therefore whether and under which circumstances these groups can provide security as a public good and how they interact with other actors. Recent attempts to extend governance analysis to weak states can help us understand the complexity of civil militias and their behaviour. This paper develops an analytical framework to study security provision by non-state actors based on their security output and their interactions with society and the state, and applies it to two Nigerian militias—the Bakassi Boys and the Oodua People’s Congress. The cases illustrate how security providers can easily turn into security threats, and they shed light on the impact of non-state actors on security governance, not only in Nigeria, but in weak states including such high-profile cases like Iraq and Afghanistan.

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## **Security by Militia, but for Whom? Non-State Actors and Security Governance in Nigeria**

### **Introduction: Security beyond the State**

Non-state security actors have received greater attention from scholars and policy-makers in recent years as their prominence and persistence in many weak states have become increasingly acknowledged. Empirical realities force us to move beyond heavily state-centric approaches to security governance, since in many cases outside the OECD world the state is “not the only, not the historical and not the most likely form for the exercise of power.”<sup>1</sup> What Engel & Mehler assert for sub-Saharan Africa applies similarly to other weakly institutionalised states around the world.

It is uncontroversial to argue that state authority—even in the most developed states—is limited in many ways and varies from country to country, and from one policy area to another. This idea, however, is more easily embraced with regard to economic and social policy issues than with regard to security. Our understanding of the modern state rests so heavily on the Hobbesian idea of a monopoly of force, that, wherever it is missing, we tend to invoke notions of imminent state collapse. But separating security studies on ‘fully functioning’ states on the one hand and ‘failing states’ on the other hand, contradicts the fact that most real-world examples fall somewhere in the grey area between the Leviathan and the state of nature.<sup>2</sup> A complete absence of government authority can today only be observed in an extremely small number of cases; Somalia since the 1990s is the most frequently cited example, but even there, the lack of a central government has led to new forms of political order in parts of the country.<sup>3</sup>

To understand why and how most of the so-called failing states keep functioning in a weak condition, the analysis must extend beyond government institutions. This is of more than academic relevance as efforts to support economic development, peace and state building are

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<sup>1</sup> Engel & Mehler (2005): 87, 92.

<sup>2</sup> Boege, Volker et al. (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Hesse (2010): 71-83.

often confronted with the question of how to deal with compromised government control over the means of violence and with different types of non-state security actors. The idea of entrusting local militias with providing public security has recently been brought forward in places where once-heralded state-building projects have stalled. In Afghanistan, large parts of which have never been governed by a central state authority, the alternative that militias may provide seems all too attractive to governments and international actors who are eager to reduce their responsibility for public security.<sup>4</sup>

The question of which role non-state groups can play in providing security arises in many different settings, from Central Asia to Latin America. Yet, it is not surprising to find many examples in sub-Saharan Africa, a region for which students of politics and society have long stressed that power is more often than not established through informal means. The literature is rich with studies of stateless societies on the one hand, and has on the other hand developed an understanding of how formal state institutions are merged with informal power strategies.<sup>5</sup> Informal rule often incorporates non-state security actors, and the recent history of political transition that many African countries share can furthermore widen the scope for such actors. For many sub-Saharan African countries, as Chabal & Daloz observe, „it can be safely said that violence, in its most diverse forms, is the ever present backdrop of the present social ‘order’”.<sup>6</sup> Often this is not just the result of neglect, but of well-established power strategies evolving around the control over public goods—with the good of safety being a most powerful tool.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore “not surprising that ordinary men and women will seek to devise alternate strategies for coping with arbitrary force. As is the case in all disordered and poorly regulated societies, where crime is endemic, the very management of violence turns into a resource for some.”<sup>8</sup>

A recent strand of literature on political order in weak states argues that non-state security actors, such as militias and vigilantes, can be conceptualized as actors of security governance.<sup>9</sup> In fact, this change of perspective allows us to better understand the role of these groups in complex security contexts because it recognizes their ambivalence and multiple motivations and

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<sup>4</sup> “Afghanistan’s new militias’ self-defence. A victory of hope over experience?”, *The Economist*, 8 April 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/13446886>.

<sup>5</sup> Erdmann & Engel (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Chabal & Daloz (1999): 78.

<sup>7</sup> Reno (2000): 47.

<sup>8</sup> Chabal & Daloz (1999): 77.

<sup>9</sup> Risse & Lehmkuhl (2007b): 13-37.

incentives. At the same time, the governance lens allows us to look at formal as well as informal institutions and therefore keep in mind that non-state actors do not operate in a political vacuum and rarely in the complete absence of state structures.

There can be no doubt, however, that militias and vigilantes often pose a serious threat to the safety of people they claim to protect, to accountability for security provision, to human rights and to the rule of law. They are not a panacea for security problems in weak states, nor a ‘traditional’ alternative to state power, as sometimes romantically depicted. While criticizing the general scepticism toward security arrangements beyond the state, Stepputat et al. Observe remark accurately that “those who control the means of violence are always Janus-faced. [...] We are dealing with institutions and actors that have the potential to be—often are—[...] sources of security as well as insecurity.”<sup>10</sup> Non-state groups share their potential ambivalence with other dispensers of force, not least militaries and police forces in many instances. It is therefore necessary to study them as security actors and ask the following questions: In which way and under which circumstances do non-state actors produce security or insecurity? Which role do they play in a complex of security governance and what influence do they have on the state security sector?

This paper sets out to shed some light on the complex dynamics of non-state security provision and better understand the different roles non-state actors play. After reviewing existing approaches to the phenomenon, an analytical framework will be developed to identify motivations, interactions and the security output of non-state groups. The framework will then be applied to the prominent examples of two civil militias in Nigeria, the Bakassi Boys and the Odua People’s Congress. Nigeria provides a striking example of a situation in which the lack of security provision by state actors creates a market of violence and protection—within the borders of a state that is otherwise considered a major regional player. The two militias’ vigilante activities started out as initiatives to restore public safety from below. Their eventual failure to provide a viable alternative to a highly dysfunctional state sector can provide insights into the more general dynamics of non-state security provision and allows us to draw conclusions that are applicable to other contexts as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Stepputat et al. (2007): 11.

## Conceptualizing Militias as Non-State Security Actors

### *Rational actors in a market of protection*

Studying non-state groups as security actors must start from the basic assumption that they can in principal choose between providing security and exerting violence. Being able to make this choice puts individuals or groups in a position of power. So why would any actor in such a position choose to protect another party? Strong arguments for choosing security provision over violence are of course economic incentives and material gains, which are at the core of much of the literature on non-state security provision. The actors under scrutiny are often described as ‘warlords’, defined as an actor operating at the sub-state level and employing armed forces of some kind to gain control over economic and political resources.<sup>11</sup> Despite the implications of the words ‘war’ and ‘lord’, the term is applied to individual and collective actors alike, operating in conflict settings or merely in a context lacking a government monopoly of force.<sup>12</sup> What makes these different types of actors comparable is that they establish control over people, territory or other resources and that—for this end—they not only use force, but also provide security and stability. However, the analysis of their behaviour is often guided by a rather simple model: a free market situation with solely material incentives.

William Reno coined the term ‘warlord politics’ to describe a situation in which a warlord establishes a ‘shadow state’ through the control of markets and in some cases formalised relations to outside actors. Reno points to the similarities of such shadow states with informal or in the words of other scholars ‘neo-patrimonial’ power arrangements within formal state structures. However, like other authors analysing non-state security provision, Reno focuses virtually on economic incentives alone. The markets that the warlords control are economic; their interests are private and the goods they are after are material.<sup>13</sup> Other authors likewise view non-economic incentives as secondary factors. They would likely agree with Georg Elwert’s assertion that non-material resources and emotions are being used by these actors, but that they

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<sup>11</sup> For more detailed elements of a definition, see Giustozzi (2005): 5.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Biró, D. (2007): 19.

<sup>13</sup> See Reno (1999) and (2000): 43-68. The author has recently adjusted his concept to include the relationship between a warlord and the political system. But the conceptualization of his ‘context of authority’ remains somewhat vague. See Reno (2006b): 40 and (2006a): 26-28.

do not define the structure of markets of violence.<sup>14</sup> A heavy focus on economic incentives leads Olsen, for example, to conclude that security provided by warlords is rarely stable or dependable.<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, however, it is difficult to explain why alternative security arrangements sometimes exist for a long period of time and, what is more, in the absence of profitable shadow markets.

The economic focus can provide valuable insights, but its explanatory power is greatest when exploitable resources come into play, as in the classic cases of Afghanistan's drug trade or Sierra Leone's diamond trade. Not all non-state security actors, however, seek control over gems, timber or narco-dollars, and even if they do, their decision to guarantee security and stability is often driven by more complex motivations. Other authors therefore remind us that identity and other immaterial resources have an impact on the attitudes and behaviour of non-state armed groups. Bakonyi & Stuvøy, for instances, offer a sociological take on the issue. Reiterating the work of Norbert Elias, they argue that, like any other form of social order, a warlord system controlled by an armed group has to be symbolically legitimised through shared views, ideas or myths. In other words, even actors who seek to control markets have to be concerned about mobilizing followers and about creating support and loyalty.<sup>16</sup> In weakly governed spaces, fighting crime and providing security can be a powerful tool to legitimise a certain form of social order and the power position of the security provider. If this is true, however, resource exploitation does not have to be, as it is often assumed, the goal of creating a stable environment. Instead, an armed group's primary objective could be seen as shaping social order. The motivation to do so can vary as much as the role the security provider plays within the social order. The latter will be determined by the interactions between the armed group and their clients but also with their wider social environment.

Understood as a form of social order, markets of violence are not only about force and material resources; on these markets "the commodity really at stake is protection"<sup>17</sup>. And Mehler points out that when safety and protection become market goods 'oligopolies of violence' are often able to stabilize their position not only through force, but through their relationship with

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<sup>14</sup> Elwert (1997): 88. Other authors limiting the analysis largely to economic incentives include Riekenberg (1999); and Skaperdas & Konrad (2004).

<sup>15</sup> Olson (1993).

<sup>16</sup> Bakonyi & Stuvøy (2006): 38-40.

<sup>17</sup> Shah (2006): 299-300.

‘consumers’ for whom protection must mean a minimum of predictability and trust.<sup>18</sup> Interaction in such a market can be involuntary—for example, when money is being extorted in exchange for protection. Moreover, when security becomes more than a private good, this may simply be due to the oligopolist’s inability to limit security to his immediate clients and to prevent others to profit from it. Yet, to a varying degree, security actors remain embedded in society and are usually accountable to at least a segment of it.<sup>19</sup> From this we can conclude that the relationship between a non-state actor and potential recipients of protection as well as the wider public will also shape the incentives, expectations and behaviour of both sides.

Beyond economic opportunities and the interactions between security providers and their social environment, there is a third element that defines the space in which non-state security actors operate: the institutions of the state. This cannot be emphasised enough, since most of the literature dealing with non-state security actors explicitly or implicitly assumes the complete absence of state structures. But, as noted above, this is rarely the case.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the presence of state institutions—weak or relatively strong—sets incentives and shapes the expectations and the behaviour of non-state actors and vice versa. This is a little explored area, both in terms of empirical studies and conceptual thinking, but state and non-state actors do interact indirectly and directly and their presence and relationships arguably has an impact on their actions. Recent work building on governance literature attempts to cover this ground.

### *Security governance in a complex field of actors*

Political science concepts of governance can guide the analysis of alternative security arrangements beyond well-established dichotomies of state and state failure, of monopolies of force and anarchy, of the state as provider of protection and non-state actors as security threats. This is so because governance analysis—in contrast to the classic ‘government’ approach—is not limited to a functioning state with formal institutions. Governance can be defined as “the entirety of all co-existing modes of collectively regulating social matters”<sup>21</sup>. This analytical perspective tries to identify the various roles a state can play as regulator, but it furthermore accepts that a

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<sup>18</sup> Mehler (2006): 191.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 201-202.

<sup>20</sup> Siegelberg & Hensell (2006).

<sup>21</sup> Risse & Lehmkuhl (2006): 7.

variety of actors play a role the political process and produce policy outcomes in the form of public goods.<sup>22</sup>

The downside of a term as flexible as governance is that it tends to become an elusive catch-all (and nothing) concept.<sup>23</sup> This is particularly true for security governance beyond the state, which has only recently emerged as a field of research and is therefore conceptually underdeveloped. The well-defined and commonly used concept of security sector governance is, as Hänggi states, “essentially a state-centric concept”<sup>24</sup> and it is almost exclusively applied to the regulation of the formal security sector.<sup>25</sup> Since the governance perspective was initially developed to study government action through other means than formal legislation and through other structures than ministerial bureaucracy, applying it to security provision in weak states risks conceptual overstretch. Defining private action as governance, for example, if it leads to a level of security through spill-over effects, would certainly pose a challenge to the definition of governance.<sup>26</sup> Another problem arises because governance is sometimes understood as having a positive connotation: if governance is defined as regulation or provision of public goods, the application of the term to armed groups could lend credibility to these actors that they may not deserve.

The latter issue is easily resolved, because using ‘governance’ as an analytical lens does not mean to assume that all studied actors are providing public goods as ‘good governance’ actors. Similarly, a study of policing by state actors, for instance, does not make a priori assumptions about the crime-fighting record of a police force simply because most definitions of policing include this very element. More generally, governance analysis is not about giving something a label. It is about studying the process and mechanisms involved in providing public goods that exhibit different forms and qualities. The fact that security can be provided through private action or with little contribution from state actors should be no reason for excluding these processes from the analysis. Then, it is up to the observer to judge how much they resemble a

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<sup>22</sup> Benz (2004): 26-27.

<sup>23</sup> von Blumenthal (2005): 1150.

<sup>24</sup> Hänggi (2003): 8.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Ball & Fayemi (2004), who mention non-state security actors, but at the same time consider them ‘not amenable to regulation’ with the exception of private military and security contractors/companies. Other approaches to ‘security governance’ focus on international actors; see Krahmann (2003).

<sup>26</sup> Risse & Lehmkuhl (2007b, 20-25) have pointed out the difficulties of applying governance concepts to contexts of weak statehood.

form of governance.<sup>27</sup> The unique contribution of governance analysis is that it measures state and non-state actors by the same standards. And the perspective can be meaningfully and usefully applied, encompassing two crucial elements: first, the ‘security output’ of non-state actors, i.e. what kind of security they provide and for whom; and second, their interactions with other actors, such as the state and local communities.

Security provision in areas of weak statehood is distinguished by the kind of security offered by non-state actors. The quality of security provision has to be evaluated from the perspective of consumers. One central element is therefore the reach or inclusiveness of security, depicted graphically in Figure 1 below as ranging from very broad (left) to highly exclusive (right). Security can be provided as a public good to which virtually everyone has access or as a private good, reserved for paying clients. It can, however, also take the form of a mere collective good—also termed ‘club good’—if it is limited to a clearly defined group, such as ethnic kin or members of other social groups.<sup>28</sup> Compared to other public goods, the accessibility of security and protection is most precarious, since the very person that is able to protect can use the same means of force to remove protection and exert violence. This means that selective security provision can turn into or be accompanied by violence against certain targets.

Accessibility, however, is merely the most obvious dimension of protection. The quality of security provision is determined not only by the protection of clients from crime and violence, but also by the way force is exerted (lawful or not) during the course of security provision.<sup>29</sup> Security governance analysis therefore needs to ask whether the human rights of clients and alleged culprits alike are respected and how predictable and accountable the behaviour of non-state actors is.

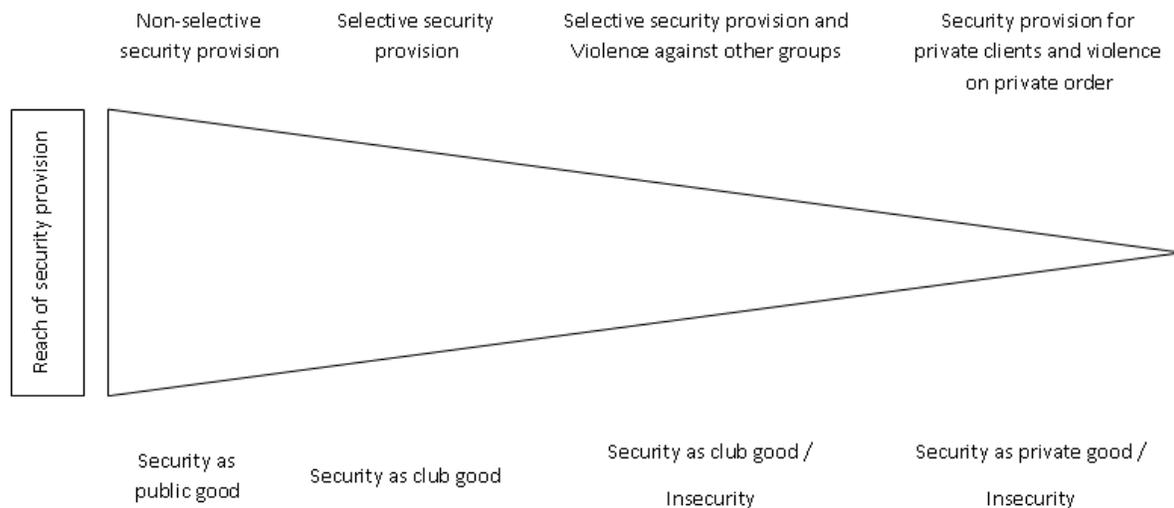
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<sup>27</sup> Risse & Lehmkuhl (2007a): 155-156.

<sup>28</sup> Chojnacki & Branović (2007):195; Mehler (2006): 201-202.

<sup>29</sup> Mehler touches upon this issue when he emphasizes the fragile nature of alternative security arrangements. What may initially be seen as legitimate crime-fighting can easily turn into a state of general insecurity and arbitrary violence (Mehler 2006, p. 198).

**Figure 1: The reach of security provision**



*Sebastian Merz*

Focusing exclusively on security outputs would mean omitting a central element of governance: interaction. Much of the literature on governance in fragile states overlooks interaction among non-state actors, between non-state and state actors and between the state, non-state actors and communities.<sup>30</sup> In fact, analysing relationships between different security actors in weak states may not seem very promising at first glance. One might expect that much of the interaction between government forces and non-state militias would be better understood as military and guerrilla tactics. Yet confrontation, negotiation and cooperation can in reality occur within the same actor constellation, because alternative security arrangements often exist in a ‘negotiated’ relationship with the state.<sup>31</sup> Negotiation, however, must be understood in a broader sense, beyond face-to-face brokering between actors. In essence, negotiation can in this respect mean that a set of actors tries to cope with their mutual interdependence. Actors may directly or

<sup>30</sup> For a purely functional application of governance see Biró (2007): 7–49.

<sup>31</sup> Mehler (2006, p. 193), Stepputat et al. (2007, p. 16) and Menkhaus (2007, p. 70) speak of ‘negotiated relationships’ and ‘mediated states’.

indirectly coordinate their behaviour, respond to, sanction or merely tolerate the other side's actions.<sup>32</sup>

A useful analytical framework to understand interactions between governance actors has been offered by Scharpf & Mayntz's 'actor centered institutionalism'. This concept "proposes to explain policy choices by focusing on the interactions among individual, collective, and corporate actors that are shaped by the institutional settings within which they take place."<sup>33</sup> Despite having been developed for very different constellations—such as labour relations—the framework can guide the analysis of non-state security actors. Actor centered institutionalism emphasizes the unique characteristics of collective actors, setting them apart from individuals. Scharpf argues that the behaviour of collective actors follows from a cost–benefit analysis that is "boundedly rational and socially constructed"<sup>34</sup>. With regard to the actors' preferences, Scharpf distinguishes between three dimensions: institutional self-interest, normative orientations and identity-related preferences.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Scharpf applies a broad definition of institutions as „system[s] of rules that structure the courses of actions that a set of actors may choose"<sup>36</sup>. Institutions are understood not only as formal rules and legislation, but also as social norms and expectations.<sup>37</sup>

Understanding the behaviour of non-state security actors as a result of boundedly rational decisions shaped by a variety of incentives is the key for enriching the analytical frameworks discussed above. In addition to economic incentives it allows us to consider, first, social norms and identities as well as incentives that follow from the organizational structure of collective actors; second, incentives set by political institutions such as the state; and third, incentives set by the modes of interactions between different actors.

### *Civil militias in relation to other actors*

The environment created by markets of protection and the structures of a weak state can generally be expected to offer the same incentives to non-state armed groups. But, as emphasized

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<sup>32</sup> This understanding of interaction borrows from Schimank (2007): 29-30.

<sup>33</sup> Scharpf, Fritz (1997): *Games Real Actors Play. Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research*, Boulder: Westview, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>37</sup> Mayntz & Scharpf (1995): 40, 43.

above, the behaviour of these actors is also determined by their relationship with consumers and state institutions. Before taking a closer look at individual cases, then, it is necessary to distinguish the actors under scrutiny; especially since the groups selected for the case study hardly fit any of the common categories of non-state security actors.

More widely studied types of actors include rebel groups, paramilitaries or private military and security companies.<sup>38</sup> The variety of non-state policing groups in Nigeria and other countries is huge, but they share characteristics that set them apart from other groups. The Bakassi Boys and the OPC are often referred to as ‘ethnic militias’, which places them somewhere between a political party and a rebel group.<sup>39</sup> But what is a more accurate description for the OPC, does not convey the nature of the Bakassi Boys, at least in their early years. A central characteristic, which the OPC, the Bakassi Boys and other non-state policing groups share, is the fact that at least part of their purpose is to combat crime and provide security. These activities can be described as vigilantism, defined as ‘incidents and processes in which ordinary folk have taken the law into their own hands to prevent theft and crime’<sup>40</sup>. For the larger vigilante groups that can be found in many African states and in other regions of the world (e.g. in Indonesia), Francis et al have suggested the term ‘civil militias’. These militias are organised by interested social groups and are usually not legalised by the state. They are termed ‘civil’ since their members are non-professionals with only rudimentary training who often maintain their original occupations.<sup>41</sup> Yet, civil militias are different from local vigilantes in the sense that their organisational structure is more advanced, their members are more specialized and their reach is more extensive—thus they are less embedded in local communities than smaller vigilante groups.<sup>42</sup>

Their goals and structure distinguish civil militias from other armed groups. Theoretically, they can be located along four different dimensions, namely their political orientation, the motives for providing security, their organisational proximity to the state and their links to local communities. Figure 2 depicts these four dimensions as continua and thereby

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<sup>38</sup> Schneckener (2006).

<sup>39</sup> Adesola (2007).

<sup>40</sup> Pratten & Sen (2007): 1.

<sup>41</sup> See Francis (2005): 1-29; Gani (2005): 31-32. Their methods may however be quite ‘uncivil’ and they will also not fit most definitions of ‘civil society’.

<sup>42</sup> Thorning (2005): 97.

emphasises that definitions of actor groups are based on ideal types whereas real types can vary significantly.

The political orientation of a non-state actor toward either change or status quo marks a clear distinction between paramilitaries private security companies (PSCs) on the one hand and rebel groups on the other hand.<sup>43</sup> Civil militias do not usually confront the political status quo directly, but rather coexist with state institutions as the representatives of this status quo, filling governance gaps and power vacuums. This situation has been described as ‘overlapping authority’, where the state’s monopoly of force is neither being deliberately delegated nor violently contested.<sup>44</sup> However, civil militias sometimes pursue limited reform agendas or criticise certain aspects of the status quo.

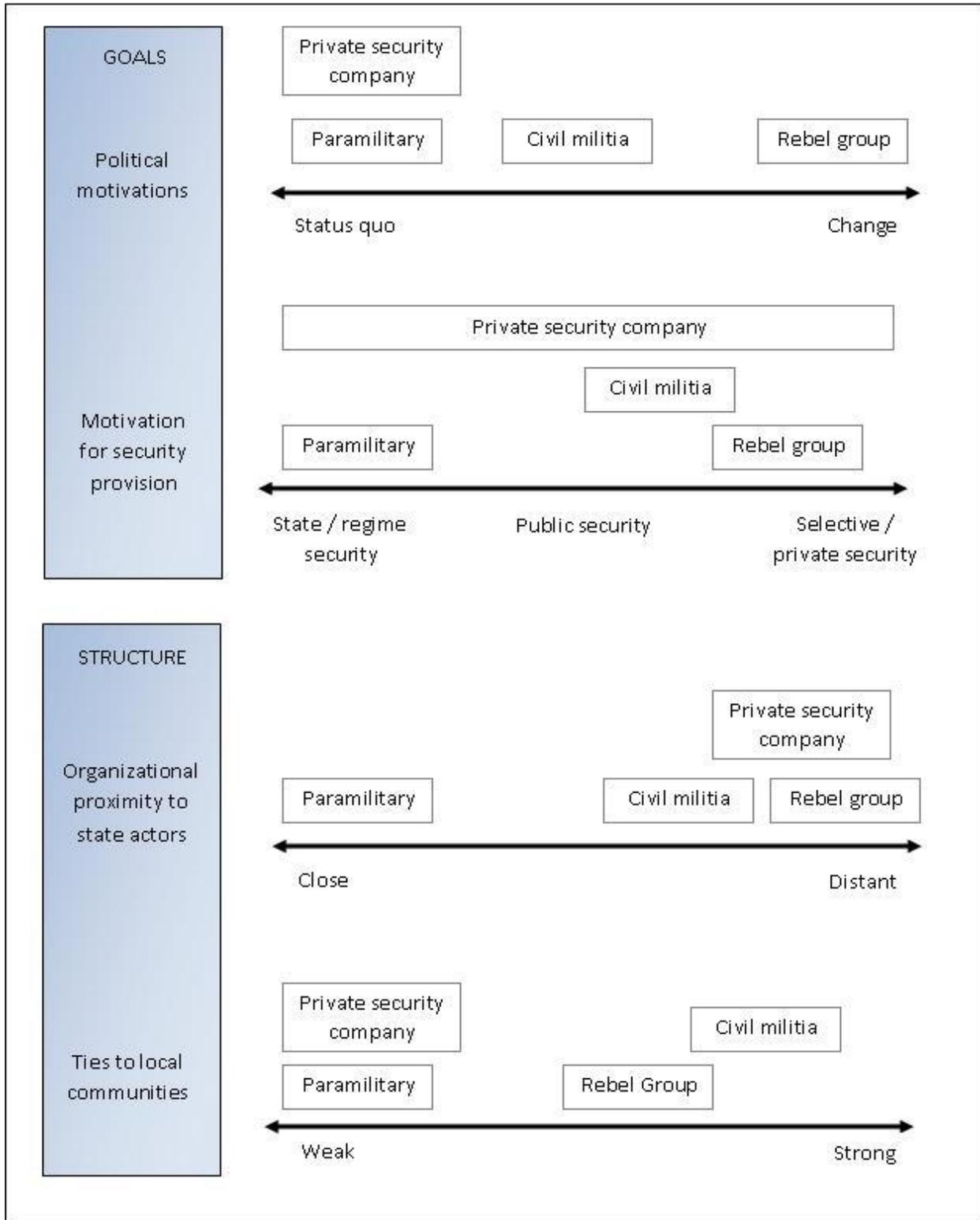
A civil militia’s motivation is not to provide security for state institutions—as is the case for formal security forces and many paramilitaries—but falls somewhere between public security and selective or private security. Civil militias are organised independently from the state, but their relationship with the state may be closer than that of completely private actors or, quite naturally, rebel groups. Their embeddedness in local contexts and their links to local communities on the other hand tend to be closer than those of other types of actors, except, as discussed, local vigilante groups.

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<sup>43</sup> Schneckener (2006): 28-30.

<sup>44</sup> Engel & Mehler (2005): 92-95.

Figure 2: Civil militias in relation to other non-state security actors



## **Nigeria's Security Policy Environment since the End of Military Rule**

### *Sources of violence and insecurity*

Challenges to security sector governance do not, as pointed out above, only arise from the unlimited power of military and police forces. The challenges arising from a dysfunctional and ineffective security sector are of particular relevance for countries undergoing political transition. Institutional change can create a power vacuum and manoeuvring space for various perpetrators of violence.<sup>45</sup>

At the end of military rule in 1999, the Nigerian state security forces were poorly positioned to ensure a stable political transition process. A number of contextual factors made this formidable task only the more difficult and promoted the emergence of non-state armed groups and security actors. First is the ethno-political fragmentation that has marked Nigeria's recent history. With hundreds of ethno-political communities and intense competition for control between the three largest groups, the northern Hausa and Fulani, the Yoruba and Igbo, Nigeria stands out even in a region where ethnic pluralism is the norm. Having led to coups d'état, counter-coups and even civil war in the past, ethnic and religious cleavages remain a powerful tool for political and sometimes violent mobilization today.<sup>46</sup> Second, the centralization of control under the Generals Babangida and Abacha and the accelerated decentralization that followed fostered tensions within the Nigerian federation. The shift of political power toward the states provided state governors with considerable leverage.<sup>47</sup> This source of tension is reflected in a third exacerbating factor: the struggle between the federal government and state governments over the reform of the constitution and the general legal framework.<sup>48</sup> By introducing Sharia law, governors of predominantly Muslim states have instrumentalized the widespread dissatisfaction with Nigeria's legal system in order to provide themselves with greater latitude against the federal government. This, however, has meant little change for average Nigerians, who still have very limited access to the services of the legal system after decades of systematic neglect and manipulation through the military rulers and due to

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<sup>45</sup> The link between regime transition and violence and conflict is a well-established finding of quantitative research. See, e.g., Hegre et al. (2001): 34.

<sup>46</sup> Peters (1997); Lewis (2007): 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> Suberu (2004): 65-70.

<sup>48</sup> Falola (1999): 188-190; and Lewis (1999): 142-147.

widespread corruption.<sup>49</sup> The lack of these and other basic public services, unequal distribution of resources as well as economic decline during the years of military rule have left many Nigerians with a feeling of marginalization and discrimination.<sup>50</sup> What is more, the experience of earlier political transition processes blocked and flawed by the ruling generals has undermined support for political reform, civil society and democratic institutions.<sup>51</sup>

As result, Nigeria has developed into a volatile political and social environment over the last two decades, regularly erupting in violence. This gravest threat to Nigeria's stability must be understood as both a cause and a consequence of the country's political crisis: Since the late 1990s, thousands of people have lost their lives to violence and insecurity. The forms of violence can be roughly divided into four categories, the boundaries of which naturally overlap: 1) insurgencies and conflicts over resources, mostly concentrated in the Niger delta; 2) communal violence between ethnic and other social groups; 3) political violence, mostly in the context of elections; and 4) violent crime and a dysfunctional security sector.

Armed conflict and communal clashes have made international headlines since the years under Abacha's reign and continue to do so until today. Most of the insurgencies are concentrated in the oil-rich Niger delta, where armed groups have taken on the government as well as foreign corporations. After the military regime had clamped down on the largely non-violent protest of Ogoni people over environmental devastation and the distribution of revenues, the crisis of the delta spread to neighbouring Ijaw communities. Militias such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) have become known for their sabotage acts against the oil industry's infrastructure as well as for their kidnapping practice.<sup>52</sup>

But the delta militias are not the only armed groups active in Nigeria. Other, so-called ethnic militias, claim to protect their kin's interests within or against the federal state. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) brought back fearful memories of Nigeria's 1960s civil war that pitted Igbo secessionists against central government forces. The Oodua People's Congress is another example of a well-established and

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<sup>49</sup> Harnischfeger (2006): 171-173; Lewis (1999): 10 (1); Fayemi (2003): 73.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis (2006).

<sup>51</sup> Reno (2004): 221-225.

<sup>52</sup> Maier (2002): 75-110; International Crisis Group (2006).

visible ethnic militia, in this case assuming the struggle for the interests of Yoruba but with limited secessionist ambitions. In addition to these high-profile groups, smaller armed militias have been involved in many incidents of violence between communities across the country; most prominent are the clashes that have repeatedly erupted around the city of Jos in Plateau state.<sup>53</sup> In general, elections are a time of elevated tension in Nigeria as in many other transitional societies, so it is not surprising that local militias have also engaged in attacks on political opponents, voters and ballot stations. Thugs and violent mobs aggravated the situation, organized by political parties, individual politicians as well as so-called godfathers—influential political figures who interfere in the political process by means of their resources, connections and not the least their ability to mobilize violence.<sup>54</sup>

#### *Violent crime and the state security sector*

Despite the fact that armed conflict and communal clashes receive more public attention, violent crime and the deficits of the state security sector are the most immediate source of insecurity for the majority of Nigerians. The prevailing perception of the crime situation in Nigeria is that of a steady rise in homicides and armed robbery since the 1990s.<sup>55</sup> Rooted in economic decline and the emergence of a vast and impoverished urban underclass, and fuelled by the proliferation of handguns and other weaponry, violent crime represents a tangible problem of everyday life and discourses.<sup>56</sup> It is generally interpreted in two ways: On the one hand, the term ‘armed robbers’ has been given a demonizing connotation. Criminals are referred to as ‘men of the underworld’ and are often seen as “malevolent, non-human ancestral spirit[s]”—with the expectable consequence that the rights of offenders and suspects alike are not always well-respected.<sup>57</sup> Crime is, on the other hand, also understood as a form of socio-economic marginalization. While better-off members of society seek protection by hiring private security personnel and retreating into enclosed neighbourhoods, the lower classes feel themselves particularly vulnerable to crime and they sometimes suspect the criminals to be the offspring of

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<sup>53</sup> Agbu (2004): 8.

<sup>54</sup> HRW (2007).

<sup>55</sup> Odekunle (2004): 22-24; and Hills (2000): 43.

<sup>56</sup> Measuring the extent of this crisis is made difficult by incomplete official statistics and there is evidence to suggest that public anxiety over crime is at least in part due to rumours and tends to be somewhat self-amplifying. See Bratton & Lewis (2007): 12; and Guichaoua (2007): 22.

<sup>57</sup> Pratten (2008a): 9; HRW (2005): 15.

rich families.<sup>58</sup> In many cases, however, it is the urban, young poor themselves who are involved in crime and in the formation street gangs known as ‘area boys’ to extort money from small business-owners and passers-by.<sup>59</sup>

At the heart of the problem of high crime levels in Nigeria are the deficiencies of the state police and security forces. The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) had been systematically neglected and its authority undermined by the military rulers who established parallel institutions to secure their grip on power. The result was an understaffed, underfunded and politicized police force.<sup>60</sup> During the 1990s, 130-140.000 NPF officers were to police a population of 140 million—less than half the minimum ratio recommended by the United Nations.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the NPF’s lack of funds and professionalism is manifest in practices such as the widespread roadblocks that police officers use to extort additional sources of income.<sup>62</sup>

The relationship between police and population has long been strained. After independence, Nigeria’s ruling Generals centralized control over the former colonial police force, with the Inspector General of the Police (IGP) at the helm taking orders directly from the president.<sup>63</sup> Due to a highly centralized structure and the policy of employing officers only outside their home region, the NPF was increasingly seen as an instrument to suppress local autonomy and self-determination.<sup>64</sup> What is more, the NPF became known for violating human rights and committing numerous atrocities, from the torture of detainees to extrajudicial killings. To this high level of arbitrary force, citizens have on their part responded with violence against the police.<sup>65</sup> Finally, the NPF’s reputation has become further compromised by the fact that officers are—not always unjustly—suspected of cooperating with criminals or releasing them in exchange for bribes.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Smith (2004): 434.

<sup>59</sup> Ibrahim (2005): 1; Agbu (2004): 14.

<sup>60</sup> Reno (2006a), 35; Hills (2000).

<sup>61</sup> Alemika & Chukwuma (2003): 16.

<sup>62</sup> Ojo (2006): 267.

<sup>63</sup> HRW (2005): 16-18.

<sup>64</sup> Harnischfeger (2003b): 29. Deployment of ‘indigenous’ police officers in the 1970s has however yielded mixed results, since they tended to identify themselves more with defending their own ethnic group than public safety. International IDEA (2000), 191-192; Baker (2002): 232.

<sup>65</sup> HRW (2005): 13; Alemika & Chukwuma (2000).

<sup>66</sup> Ukiwo (2002): 9-8; HRW (2003): 9.

Even though the NPF's strongly negative image may overshadow positive developments, it is safe to say that overall the police has failed to provide security in an effective and accountable way. A study concluded in 2000 that "the most common form of contact between the police and citizen is involuntary law enforcement encounter."<sup>67</sup> As a result, people have sought alternative ways of protection against crime and violence.

### *Vigilantism as tradition and strategy of adaptation*

As in many sub-Sahara African countries, vigilantism plays a prominent role as a concept and practice of security provision in Nigeria, having existed as local security arrangements for centuries.<sup>68</sup> Local vigilantes fulfil important functions of social regulation for their communities and are usually legitimized and controlled by village elders or other traditional institutions.<sup>69</sup> Some groups directly cooperate with state authorities, who have at times encouraged vigilante activities in rural areas that are beyond the reach of the police force.<sup>70</sup>

Vigilante groups are lightly armed and rarely carry firearms. For their efforts to combat crime, they mostly rely on deterrence through nightly patrols and provide information for police investigations or preventative measures.<sup>71</sup> Notwithstanding their limited equipment, vigilante groups can reveal the same ambivalence as other security actors. Traditional cults are therefore employed to hold them accountable. These rites lend the group members symbolic, supernatural skills, such as protection against bullets or the ability to detect lies, but they also bind them to a code of conduct and threaten to sanction violations.<sup>72</sup>

Very different types of groups that operate in Nigeria have been described as 'vigilantes' in the literature and media reports. These include the 'Hisba' groups that have emerged in the country's north as a type of Sharia police to monitor obedience to Islamic law. Their religious vigilantism is however quite distinct from the local anti-crime groups in other parts of the country, since their focus is not the prevention of theft and violent crime. Moreover, Hisba

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<sup>67</sup> Alemika & Chukwuma (2000): 8.

<sup>68</sup> Fourchard (2008): 17-19; Omeje (2005): 73.

<sup>69</sup> Pratten (2008b): 66-68.

<sup>70</sup> Nolte (2007): 218; Alemika & Chukwuma (2004a): 28.

<sup>71</sup> Pratten (2008b), 66f; Bergstresser (2002): 46.

<sup>72</sup> Pratten (2008b): 65.

groups are usually not referred to as ‘vigilantes’ by local sources.<sup>73</sup> Lastly, civil militias with a higher level of organization, such as the Bakassi Boys, the OPC or the Egbesu Boys in southeastern Nigeria are to be distinguished from smaller vigilante groups, even though they also engage in vigilante activities.<sup>74</sup>

The boundaries between different forms of vigilantism are, however, in flux. What unites the various vigilante groups is their purpose of providing everyday security for either the general public or a certain group of people. Building on long-established practices and providing an alternative to state institutions that are seen as discriminatory, vigilantism in general enjoys widespread support in Nigeria.<sup>75</sup>

## **OPC and Bakassi Boys as Security Actors**

### *The emergence of crime-fighting by OPC and Bakassi Boys*

While OPC and Bakassi Boys have both acted as vigilante groups, their organizational roots are distinct. The OPC emerged as a political opposition movement in the Southwest as a result of the blocked transition process of the early 1990s. After the Yoruba candidate Moshood Abiola won the presidential elections in 1993, ruling General Babangida refused to recognise the results and brought the reform process to halt.<sup>76</sup> The OPC grew during the following years and became militarised, partly in response to violent repression by the military regime.<sup>77</sup> It is difficult to say when the OPC first engaged in vigilantism. The organisation appears to have included armed members that revived local traditions of night-guarding at an early stage, but crime-fighting activities only became one of the OPC’s areas of focus toward the end of the 1990s.<sup>78</sup> The OPC thus reacted to a popular demand for protection from violent crime and saw this also as a chance to boost the support for the organisation and its legitimacy in a changing political environment.<sup>79</sup> Besides providing vigilante services, the OPC remained a political organisation after the end of military rule, with the goal of furthering Yoruba interests, but it also persisted as

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<sup>73</sup> Last (2008): 50-51.

<sup>74</sup> HRW/CLEEN (2002): 97.

<sup>75</sup> Smith (2004): 430.

<sup>76</sup> Agbu (2004): 16-17; Ajala (2006) 140.

<sup>77</sup> Guichaoua (2007): 15; Ajala (2006): 140-141.

<sup>78</sup> Ikelegbe, A. (2001): 15; Fourchard (2008): 34-35.

<sup>79</sup> HRW (2003): 8; Guichaoua (2006): 11.

a social organisation, offering economic networks and informal insurance mechanisms to its members.<sup>80</sup>

When the OPC's vigilantism became more prominent the Bakassi Boys were already well-known across Nigeria; their initial success and support may in fact have been what prompted the OPC to take up similar activities. Unlike the OPC, the Bakassi Boys formed with the sole purpose of fighting rampant violent crime in the city of Aba in southeastern Nigeria. At that time, gangs of armed robbers were, according to many sources, terrorising merchants and customers of the city's important markets in open daylight.<sup>81</sup> In late 1998, the Ariaria market's shoemakers decided to take up measures against the threat to their own and their businesses' safety. The shoemakers mainly consisted of young men from the majority Igbo community who were unable to establish private security arrangements. From the initial weeks-long confrontation between shoemakers and gangs, the Bakassi Boys emerged as a permanent vigilante group.<sup>82</sup> Within a few months, the militia had driven most armed robbers out of Aba, a success that earned them widespread acclaim and was followed by invitations from neighbouring states. By the year 2000 their operations had expanded to the cities of Onitsha and Owerri, which were suffering from similarly high crime rates.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, for both militias, the impulse to take on violent crime came from a sub-segment of local societies. In the case of the Bakassi Boys, it was a narrow, socio-economically defined group, whereas the OPC responded to the security needs of the greater Yoruba majority. Both militias did not, however, understand their security provision as merely a private or a group endeavour. The OPC saw their actions as policing services for the public and the underprivileged in particular.<sup>84</sup> In contrast, self-protection dominated the Bakassi Boys' agenda at the outset and appears to have been their primary motivation.<sup>85</sup> But in the course of territorial expansion the

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<sup>80</sup> Guichaoua (2007): 21-22; Nolte (2007): 223, 228-230.

<sup>81</sup> See for example Baker (2002): 225; or *The News*, 08.02.1999.

<sup>82</sup> Meagher (2007): 96.

<sup>83</sup> *The News*, 08.02.1999; HRW/CLEEN (2002): 9.

<sup>84</sup> Guichaoua (2007): 17-18. According to Ganiyu Adams, the leader of the OPC's most militarised faction, "The generality of the populace including the law enforcement agents agreed that crime eradication and prevention must not be left to the police alone to handle. [...] When the OPC [...] successfully dismantled the criminals' strongholds, the relieved residents jubilated and showered praises on the OPC for helping them out of their age-long ordeals and worries." (*The News*, 24.01.2000).

<sup>85</sup> A militia member, for instances, told a reporter: "We are traders and these robbers are after our money. So, there is no way we can fold our arms and allow them to come and take our money. [...] You see, traders have suffered so

militia soon broadened their focus as well as the group of intended beneficiaries.<sup>86</sup> They also linked their vigilante activities to a critique of the status quo, since they were eager to distinguish themselves from the allegedly corrupt, inefficient and discriminatory state security forces. One method to prove their fairness and incorruptibility was their common practice to destroy confiscated loot on the spot.<sup>87</sup> Infamously, the Bakassi Boys used their gruesome ‘instant’ or ‘juju justice’ as another way to demonstrate these virtues. These public executions, often after ‘establishing’ guilt with the help of magic charms and cutlasses, were portrayed as an alternative to the lengthy and discredited formal legal processes. They claimed to “deal with matters as fast as possible, unlike the courts.”<sup>88</sup>

The political motivations of both militias diverged, however, which had a significant impact on their motivation for providing security. While the criticism of inefficient and corrupt state institutions was for the longest time the only political aspect of the Bakassi Boys’ activities, the OPC was by nature an ethno-political organisation. The threat from violent crime in Lagos was thus not only interpreted socially but also ethnically, and the OPC accused police officers of being indifferent to protecting the Yoruba community.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the group’s leaders expressed ethnic chauvinism early on, directed mainly against the northern Hausa.<sup>90</sup> By contrast, the Bakassi Boys started without an ethno-political agenda and despite being mostly Igbos, they did not understand the militia as a means to further ethno-political goals. In fact, the shoemakers relied strongly on a functioning market and the safety of customers from all over Nigeria.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the Bakassi Boys had strong incentives to extend their security provision to outsiders while any ethnic polarization would have hurt their own commercial interests.

### *The militias’ interactions with local communities and the state*

One source of the militias’ competitive edge over state security forces was their roots in the local context, which ensured trust and access to information. Both groups therefore tried to

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much. [...] Whatever happens to affect our money, business or property, I think we have to react.” (*Vanguard*, 02.12.2000).

<sup>86</sup> Baker (2002): 234-235; Smith (2004): 438

<sup>87</sup> Ukiwo (2002): 4; Meagher (2007): 98-99.

<sup>88</sup> Cited by Reno (2006a): 35; see also Harnischfeger (2003b): 34, 40

<sup>89</sup> Nolte (2007): 224-225; *This Day*, 07.06.2002

<sup>90</sup> This includes even the OPC’s more moderate founder Frederick Fasehun, see Maier (2002): 231; *Vanguard*, 21.10.2000.

<sup>91</sup> Meagher (2007): 95; Sesay et al. (2003): 26; Adesola (2007): 2.

link their vigilantism to local traditions and belief systems. The OPC's militiamen called themselves 'eso' like the vigilante-type warriors of pre-colonial Yoruba societies, while the Bakassi Boys made similar references to traditions of vigilantism in Igbo culture.<sup>92</sup> Beyond these symbolic references, however, the two militias revealed different a relationship with local communities that can be explained to a large extent by their distinct origins. The OPC had always been closely connected to Yoruba communities in the Southwest and cooperated with their traditional authorities.<sup>93</sup> In addition to maintaining relationships with Yoruba elders, the OPC also interacted with local communities through their meetings, which were often open to the general—if mostly Yoruba—public.<sup>94</sup>

The Bakassi Boys, on the other hand, were linked to a much smaller social group of merchants whose members stemmed from various towns and villages around Aba. They therefore not only lacked connections to traditional authorities in the city, but as vigilantes they developed a higher degree of specialization. By abandoning their profession as shoemakers, they weakened their links to other groups of society.<sup>95</sup> The militia's expansion beyond Aba accelerated this trend, with the result that people in Onitsha expressed reservations against the militia and called for them to be replaced by a local vigilante group.<sup>96</sup> The Bakassi Boys emphasized their magic cults much more than the OPC, in part to compensate for their missing foundation in local traditions.<sup>97</sup> But what serves to ensure accountability and control for many small vigilante groups appears to have had the opposite effect for the Bakassi Boys, whose cults were not rooted in the local context. Their 'juju' rites turned the vigilantes into 'faceless' actors, virtually untouchable and unaccountable for any outsider.<sup>98</sup>

The interactions between militias and state actors were shaped by the difficult relationship between federal and state-level institutions. Due to the high degree of centralization

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<sup>92</sup> Ibrahim (2005): 8; Fourchard (2008): 34-35; *Newswatch*, 18.09.2000.

<sup>93</sup> *Tempo*, 11.03.1999; Reno (2007): 117; Ajala (2006): 140.

<sup>94</sup> Adebani (2005): 340; HRW (2003): 8.

<sup>95</sup> *Weekly Trust*, 06.08.2000; Baker (2007): 129; Akinyele (2001): 639.

<sup>96</sup> Ekeh (2002).

<sup>97</sup> Meagher (2007): 98-99; Harnischfeger (2003b): 34.

<sup>98</sup> HRW/CLEEN (2002): 39; Omeje (2005): 80-81.

of the Nigeria Police Force and the military, the vigilantism organized by OPC and Bakassi Boys represented a threat primarily to the federal government. Since Nigeria's security sector is controlled by the federal government, it was Abuja's security governance that the militias exposed as deficient and which they threatened to out-compete in some places. Furthermore, the federal government naturally saw the militias as a threat to national unity and a potential source of violent conflict.<sup>99</sup> At the same time, the Obasanjo government was well aware of the limited ability of the state forces to curb violent crime, which explains why police minister Jemibewon welcomed the Bakassi Boys' vigilante activities as measures of self-help in 2000.<sup>100</sup> What increased the challenge for the federal government was the fact that the militias represented a powerful tool in the hands of state governors. The governors of Lagos State, Anambra and Abia were among the most outspoken proponents of a police reform that would have introduced state-level police forces under the governors' control.<sup>101</sup> Aside from possible other motivations, it was the state governors who were directly confronted with high crime levels in their states without having any control over police forces. Therefore, the militias represented an alternative means of combating crime with the advantage that they would be free of any influence from Abuja.<sup>102</sup>

The federal government was confronted with three alternatives: 1) confronting the militias and trying to disband them; 2) cooperating and perhaps even integrating the vigilantes in the state security sector; or 3) passively tolerating their activities. The Obasanjo Government's response turned out to be a mix of toleration and confrontation and it was kept ambiguous for the longest possible time. With regard to the OPC, this ambiguity can be partly explained by the special challenge the militia presented to the president. Since the OPC was as an ethno-political opposition movement that had already been involved in violent confrontation with the government before 1999, the militia posed a serious threat to Obasanjo.<sup>103</sup> The president's standing in the Southwest complicated matters further: having been considered a 'northern' candidate because of his ties to the military, Obasanjo was unable to win a majority in 'Yoruba

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<sup>99</sup> *The Post Express*, 21 July 2000; *The News*, 19.06.2000

<sup>100</sup> *Vanguard*, 07.07.2000

<sup>101</sup> Ukiwo (2002): 11; Meagher (2007): 95

<sup>102</sup> Smith (2004): 445; Harnischfeger (2003b): 39.

<sup>103</sup> Guichaoua (2006): 10; Maier (2002): 228.

land', his own home region.<sup>104</sup> Thus, the president had a strong interest in diminishing the threat of armed opposition in the Southwest, while he could not afford to further alienate the many Yoruba politicians and leaders who supported the militia.

Local political strongmen did in fact attempt to cooperate with and gain control over both militias—with varying levels of success. Relations between the Bakassi Boys and state governors became closest in Anambra and Abia, where the militia was rebranded as State Vigilante Services. Governors Kalu and Mbadinuju formalised the cooperation through state legislation, but in practice established personal control over the vigilantes.<sup>105</sup> A chairman of the Bakassi Boys in Abia admitted that the governor had literally bought out the militia: „We always obey him because he who pays the piper dictates the tune.”<sup>106</sup> The OPC, by contrast, was never so strongly influenced by state-level politicians. Lagos State governor Tinubu chose not to push through his plans of official cooperation with OPC vigilantes against protest from Abuja. Clandestine cooperation with the OPC functioned instead, through relationships between local politicians, state employees and OPC members, but did not compare to the ties between the Bakassi Boys and their governors.<sup>107</sup>

The federal government's approach to the problem oscillated between confrontation and toleration, with few signs of cooperation, and in 2002 shifted toward serious measures to disband the militias. Obasanjo's so-called 'blanket ban' to abolish all militias in Nigeria in 1999 was supposed to demonstrate the new government's tough stance, but the ban was never turned into official legislation.<sup>108</sup> Violent clashes between the NPF and the OPC, however, started as early as 1999 and the president ordered the police to shoot armed OPC members on sight.<sup>109</sup> The confrontation continued through 2000, when the OPC was increasingly involved in the escalating violence between Yoruba and Hausa and Fulani in the Southwest.<sup>110</sup> In 2000, the government attempted to end the vigilante activities of the Bakassi Boys, but the initiative sparked public protests in the affected states and was even met with objections from within Obasanjo's cabinet,

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<sup>104</sup> *Africa Confidential*, 19.02.1999, 2; Ukiwo (2003): 123.

<sup>105</sup> HRW/CLEEN (2002): 12-13; Meagher (2007): 104-106; Smith (2004): 442.

<sup>106</sup> HRW/CLEEN (2002): 12.

<sup>107</sup> *This Day*, 15.06.2001; UN IRIN 21.06.2001; HRW (2003): 10, 47.

<sup>108</sup> Babawale (2001); *Vanguard*, 13.07.2000; HRW (2003): 45-46.

<sup>109</sup> *P.M. News*, 10.03.1999; HRW (2003): 38.; Bergstresser (2000): 151.

<sup>110</sup> *The News*, 28.07.2000; *Tempo*, 27.07.2000.

his party and not least the state governors.<sup>111</sup> The president was forced to revoke the ban and tolerated the militia for the next two years. Finally, following renewed violence in which the OPC, the Bakassi Boys and other armed groups were involved and as a result of rising domestic and international pressure, government policy shifted again and with the Certain Associations Act outlawed all non-state armed groups in Nigeria. The police started to disarm the militias and by the end of the year had significantly reduced their scope of action.<sup>112</sup> The relative success of this government clampdown can also, however, be attributed to the militias' and particularly the Bakassi Boys' declining popularity and political support.

### *Provision of security and insecurity*

OPC and Bakassi Boys were fundamentally faced with conflicting incentives to extend or to limit access to protection. On the one hand, both militias had a declared purpose of providing security as a public good. Their public support and group identities depended on the delivery of non-selective protection, even more so as they criticized the NPF's deficiencies and portrayed their actions as an antithesis to the discriminatory state security sector. On the other hand, the impulse for their vigilante activities came from distinct groups and created incentives to provide protection primarily and perhaps exclusively for these groups. The OPC's ethnic agenda and strong ties to local communities set strong incentives to define security as a 'club good' for Yoruba people only; but it encouraged the militia at the same time to prevent protection from becoming merely a private good. The Bakassi Boys generally had a greater interest than the OPC in keeping access to protection unrestricted, but their disconnection from local communities meant that there were fewer incentives against the privatization of security.

In the light of these incentives structures, the pattern in which each militia's security output developed is not surprising. The Bakassi Boys' initial popularity was based on their success in reducing crime rates, but also on the wide reach of the provided protection. It is impossible to measure the actual effect of the militia's vigilantism on crime rates in the states of Abia, Anambra and Imo because reliable data are lacking. Media reports and spreading rumours almost certainly exaggerated their success, but the Bakassi Boys arguably contributed to a

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<sup>111</sup> *Vanguard*, 29.07.2000; *Vanguard*, 18.07.2000; *Newswatch*, 18.09.2000; *Vanguard*, 25.07.2000.

<sup>112</sup> UN IRIN (18.01.2000); *Vanguard*, 05.04.2002; Alemika & Chukwuma (2004b): 11.

feeling of significantly improved security among the general public. Statements like “with Bakassi we sleep through the night”<sup>113</sup> were echoed by local residents and the vigilantes were even supported by people who originated from northern states. Others frequently described the militia as ‘fair’ and ‘honest’.<sup>114</sup>

Similarly, the OPC’s security provision was in principal not restricted to its members or to Yoruba in general. While reports about their crime-fighting activities are scarce compared to reports on the Bakassi Boys, there appears to have been a continuous presence of OPC vigilantes in Lagos between 1999 and 2003.<sup>115</sup> OPC vigilantes engaged in fierce clashes with gangs in the most crime-ridden areas of the city and earned recognition as a police for the poor and underprivileged.<sup>116</sup> Support for the OPC’s vigilantism extended at times beyond the Yoruba community, but there is evidence to suggest that especially Hausa and Igbo in the Southwest felt threatened by the militia’s activities.<sup>117</sup>

The records of both militias are gruesome with regard to the respect for human rights and very poor with respect to the predictability of protection. The aforementioned methods of ‘instant justice’ were central to their vigilante activities, especially in the case of the Bakassi Boys, but they resulted in horrific violations of the suspect’s rights to physical integrity and due process. In addition to public extrajudicial executions through the most inhumane measures—burning alleged criminals alive was common practice—people were brutalized, tortured and killed in custody.<sup>118</sup> Unfortunately, some incentives were aligned in favour of these methods: The militias aimed to distinguish themselves from the mistrusted police and legal systems and they were convinced that criminals, after being handed over to state institutions, would eventually get themselves released with the help of bribes and personal connections.<sup>119</sup> Another incentive was at least some level of popular support for their ‘instant justice’ and the widespread demonization of criminals mentioned above. This is, of course, no excuse for their behaviour and it is important to note that the support of local residents was not as unequivocal as has often been

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<sup>113</sup> Smith (2004): 439

<sup>114</sup> *Weekly Trust*, 06.08.2000; *Tempo*, 28.06.2001; Meagher (2007): 98-100.

<sup>115</sup> HRW (2003): 7-9.

<sup>116</sup> Fourchard (2008): 35; Guichaoua (2006): 13.

<sup>117</sup> HRW (2003), 8; Ibrahim (2005): 33

<sup>118</sup> HRW/CLEEN (2002): 16, 24-26.; HRW (2003): 24; Amnesty International (2002).

<sup>119</sup> Ukiwo (2002): 3.; Adebani (2005): 360; *The News*, 28.07.2000.

portrayed. Concerned citizens criticized the militias' brutality, arbitrary violence and lack of regulation. Many supporters seem to have approved of the militias despite rather than because of their methods.<sup>120</sup> This, did not, however, change the vigilantes' behaviour, but instead made them target the critics of their methods.<sup>121</sup>

The security provision of both militias became more selective over time, but the selectivity developed in different directions. After their early success and acclaim, the Bakassi Boys revealed a strong tendency toward the privatization of their services. The militia was not only financed through the shoemakers' association, but collected money from traders and other beneficiaries of their security provision. This opened the door for money extortion as well as for instrumentalization for private and political purposes,<sup>122</sup> including by state governors. This went so far that the Bakassi Boys started to perpetrate violence and kill on their orders.<sup>123</sup> It is alleged that Governor Kalu fostered the Bakassi Boys' involvement in inter-ethnic violence against northerners, when in early 2000 hundreds of Hausa were killed in the states of Abia, Imo and Akwa Ibom.<sup>124</sup>

The OPC engaged much more frequently than the Bakassi Boys in violent acts against other ethnic groups. Starting in 1999, OPC members repeatedly intervened in ongoing conflicts or were invited to do so by one of the conflict parties, which usually led to a significant escalation of violence. Hundreds of people, including many northerners, were killed in clashes with OPC involvement. In other riots, such as at Lagos' Mile 12 Market, economic interests seemed to have played a role. Nor was the OPC immune to manipulation by politicians and other individuals.<sup>125</sup>

In sum, the security output of both militias deteriorated significantly over time. Equally apparent are, however, the different paths that the militias took toward more selectiveness and the exertion of violence: The trend toward private instrumentalization was much more

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<sup>120</sup> Sesay et al. (2003): 74; Smith (2004): 447; *The News*, 30.05.2000; *This Day*, 20.10.2000; *This Day*, 26.07.2001.

<sup>121</sup> Smith (2004): 447; Amnesty International (2002).

<sup>122</sup> Baker (2002): 239; *Vanguard*, 17.03.2001; *Vanguard*, 04.11.2001.

<sup>123</sup> *Newswatch*, 18.09.2000; Ukiwo (2002): 16; Meagher (2007): 101-105

<sup>124</sup> *The News*, 21.03.2000; Harnischfeger (2003b): 44.

<sup>125</sup> Guichaoua (2006): 14; HRW (2003): 3.

pronounced in the Bakassi Boys' activities, while the OPC sought action in local conflicts and inter-ethnic violence.

## **Conclusions: Civil Militias and Their Effect on Security Governance**

In the light of the two militias' record of violence and human rights violations, to speak of them in connection with security governance may seem like a euphemism. It is the author's hope, however, to have demonstrated that the cases of these two militias are too complex and too central to the dynamics of security governance in Nigeria to exclude them from the discussion. Although the examples of the Bakassi Boys and the OPC show how quickly non-state security initiatives can get out of hand, their vigilante activities did start off as a locally inspired responses to a deficient state security sector and legal system. Their primary motivation was a mix of self-protection and public concern over rampant violent crime, whereas material incentives initially played a marginal role at best.

The analysis has shown that the deterioration in security output was due to and shaped by two main drivers: organizational characteristics, and interaction with the social environment. First, whether it was the militia's origins as a spontaneous self-help initiative by a socio-economically defined group as in the case of the Bakassi Boys, or as an ethno-political organisation as in the case of the OPC, these links to specific social groups laid the path toward selective security provision and unwarranted violence.

But privatisation of protection and exertion of violence may not have been inevitable from the start. Rather, interactions between the militias and their environment—the second driver—accelerated these trends. The OPC's strong ties to local communities could have been the basis for greater accountability, but instead encouraged them to intervene in conflicts and to escalate them. Manipulation by state-level politicians on the other hand, was to a large extent responsible for reducing the Bakassi Boys to a private militia. Instead of regulating their activities, the federal government's response alternated between confrontation and toleration, and furthermore became a secondary theatre of political power-struggles. In addition, Nigeria's dysfunctional and discredited security forces and judicial institutions set incentives not only for the militias to take up crime fighting, but also for their appalling methods of 'instant justice'.

Today the Bakassi Boys and the OPC have virtually disappeared as vigilante groups, but the challenge posed by the civil militia phenomenon will remain acute in Nigeria. If regulation of vigilante groups and especially better organised civil militias is at all possible, it has to go hand in hand with the reform of the state security sector and the judiciary system and with addressing the root causes of crime and violence. This appears to pose a fundamental problem: If, as these case studies seem to imply, a civilised and accountable state sector that delivers security to all is a necessary condition for the effective regulation of vigilantism, then this means that the patient has to get better before he can be treated. However, if both security sector reform and the regulation of vigilantism are understood as gradual, long-term processes, it should be possible to make progress on both fronts simultaneously—not just in Nigeria, but in other similar contexts of weak security provision. The reform of the state sector could eventually render non-state security arrangements superfluous, but the more likely immediate scenario is in most cases continued co-existence. State actors are therefore better advised to seek other strategies than confrontation and passive toleration.

The case studies strongly indicate that larger militias often have incentives to limit the reach of their security output and to become security threats themselves. Working with smaller, local vigilante groups may offer a better alternative, because they are usually more accountable to the affected population. This inference would however have to be tested in further research. What seems to be important for any type of militia group is that they work transparently and are accountable to their communities, and that these communities are not defined primarily along ethnic or religious lines. If governments and international actors intend to engage with non-state security groups, they will need to investigate thoroughly the incentives that each group may have to limit or widen the reach of their security, and then strengthen the incentives that reward a militia's commitment to respect human rights and provide security as a public good.

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