

POLICY BRIEF



Identity, Violence, and Politics: Understanding Violence in Political Marketplaces

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of EDINBURGH



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This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK International Development from the UK government. However, the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

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Overview

This policy brief presents findings and recommendations for policymakers on how negotiations over political authority play out in 'real' transactional politics across multiple levels of government under conditions of competitive rentierism using Nigeria as a case study. It addresses how identity is intentionally and unintentionally activated and exploited in the pursuit of power. In doing so, the brief seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how political competition in rentier political marketplaces can drive local level violence, and the implications this has for understanding how to build peace in these environments. The brief outlines key findings and recommendations for policymakers on how to better analyse the intersection of identity, violence, and politics in similar contexts. This is the second in a series of policy briefs and research papers that examine the nature of violent conflict within political marketplace countries and efforts to build lasting peace.

Executive Summary

This policy brief presents findings and key considerations for policymakers on how elite and non-elite actors negotiate political authority using violence and political tools in contexts of competitive rentierism. It addresses the ways in which identity is intentionally and unintentionally activated and exploited in the pursuit of power. In doing so, the brief seeks to help policymakers better understand how political competition in rentier political marketplaces can drive local level violence, and the implications this has for understanding how to build peace in these environments. It is based on an in-depth research report focused on political competition and violent conflict in Jos, Nigeria between 1991–2008.ⁱ

Jos, the capital of Plateau State, was historically known for being the “home of peace and tourism.” However, in 2001, the city erupted in violence that raised tensions across the country. From 2001 to 2008, more than 7,000 people were killed and more than 250,000 were displaced.¹ On the surface, the conflict appeared to be an identity-based conflict, but as this policy brief will show, the violence was the result of how conflicts over resources became intermeshed with the transactional logic of the political marketplace.

This policy brief is part of a series of research papers and policy briefs that examine the nature of violent conflict within political marketplace contexts and the impact of efforts to build lasting peace. The key findings and policy takeaways offered in this policy brief focus on how to analyse and differentiate the latent and proximate causes of violent conflict as well as the manifestations of it. These findings are relevant for policymakers and political analysts seeking to understand how political competition, violence, and identity become intertwined in fragile and conflict-affected states.

ⁱ This policy brief is based on the in-depth research report, Jared Miller, “Governing for Whom? The Intersection of Identity, Violence, and Political Competition in Political Marketplaces” (PeaceRep: Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, World Peace Foundation, 2024).

Key Findings

1. Transactional political decisions can spark local-level violent conflict.

The 1991 decision to create new local government areas (LGAs), notably Jos North in Plateau State, was an attempt to solidify the military head of state Ibrahim Babangida's hold on national-level power by meeting the demands of local-level elite. On the surface, this appeared to answer calls for more inclusive, democratic, locally-controlled governance. In practice, it simply localized competition over government resources, leaving many aspects of the competition undefined and subject to manipulation. Specifically, two intertwined questions were left unanswered: who would control these governments and who should benefit from the resources flowing through them? In other words, the decentralization process created a new site of competition, not a framework to manage it. This, combined with existing disagreements over which groups should control territory, laid the foundation for the violence that would emerge in 2001 and transform the city over the next decade.

2. Violence broke out after officeholders systematically excluded ethnic groups from local office and access to public resources.

Historically, Jos was a peaceful city. Jos, and Plateau State more broadly, is home to more than 50 different ethnic groups, none of which constituted a majority of the population. It is part of the Middle Belt region where the largely Christian south meets the predominantly Muslim north. This peaceful reality changed after 1999 when local government offices in Jos North sought to specifically exclude the Hausa-Fulani from certain benefits and opportunities offered by the local government. Political leaders fostered a zero-sum political logic in which one group's gain was at the cost of another—creating tensions between the group that continued to rise until an everyday incident sparked a widespread communal violence.

3. The causes of the violence in Jos and its manifestations were different, but related.

The violence in Jos is often first described either in ethnic or religious terms based on the divided groups that can be clearly identified. However, this attributes a salience and division to the ethnic identities that did not always exist. Historically, while there were disagreements and competition for political power between the groups, these did not lead to violent clashes. In fact, the groups have a longer history of peaceful coexistence than of violent conflict. Identity-based grievances were fostered as officeholders at the national, state, and local levels began to operationalize and exploit indigene-settler distinctions to maintain their own political power and serve their own agendas. In sum, the causes of the violence in Jos were related, but different from how it manifested and evolved over time.

4. The manifestations of the violence develop their own legacy.

While the ways in which the conflict manifested in Jos were different from the original causes, they developed their own legacy over time. Neighbourhoods, businesses, religious worship centres, and places of social interaction became ethnically segregated. "No-go" areas for each religious and ethnic group emerged across the city. Moreover, young people were growing up only knowing identity-based violent conflict. This contributed to a situation where incidents not related to ethnicity, religion or indigene/settler status quickly escalated along identity lines. Consistent with broader research on political marketplaces, ethnic identity under these circumstances became entrenched.

Recommendations for Analysis

1. Recognize the interplay and differences between transactional, identity, and civic logics and identify which one is dominant.

On the surface, the background and evolution of violent conflict in Jos is subject to different interpretations. It is often framed as an identity-based conflict, when upon closer analysis, the key factors stem from the transactional logic of the political marketplace. Similarly, Babangida's 1991 decision to decentralize government appears to serve democratic aims, when in fact, it was a strategic decision in an attempt to maintain his own power. Recognizing the interplay between these different logics and identifying which one is dominant is key for an accurate analysis of the conflict and has key implications for the focus of peacemaking and peacebuilding processes. The political marketplace framework provides an analytic lens to separate the 'real politics' from civic or identity politics that may be operationalized to serve a transactional calculus.

2. Separate the causes of the conflict from the manifestations.

As described above, the causes of the conflict may be different from its manifestations, but both need to be understood in order to design appropriate responses. Many of the attempts to end the violence between 1991 and 2008 focused on addressing the manifestations of the conflict without also addressing the structural issues stemming from the rules of the political marketplace. This resulted in what was consistently described as "fragile peace."

3. Identify the multiple levels of the marketplace and how they interact.

The structure of Nigeria's political marketplace is shaped by its political economy of oil. The rents are collected by and distributed from the federal government to the state and local levels creating an outsized dependence on the centre. At the same time, however, there are different competitions for political power playing out across the multiple levels and regions which shape and are shaped by competition elsewhere. This has important implications for how local-level violence is sparked, as well as what it means for peacemaking and peacebuilding processes.

Introduction

In weakly institutionalized political systems characterized by violence – commonly referred to in policy circles as “fragile and conflict-affected states” – competition for political power often intersects with violent conflict, corruption, and identity politics. This competition plays out across political geographies, levels of governance, and in negotiations among elite political actors and between these actors and segments of the population. Violence in these environments can be sparked by elite competition over power, but take on its own trajectory, making it difficult to identify and separate the underlying causes from the manifestations of conflict. Yet doing so is critically important for the success of peacemaking and peacebuilding processes. This policy brief interrogates these processes by tracing how competition for political power at multiple levels of government sparked local-level violent conflict using Nigeria as a case study.

Nigeria's politics are kleptocratic, rent-seeking, and allegedly democratic, suffuse with violence, criminality, and identity politics—making them especially complex, dynamic yet remarkably consistent, and often defying institution-focused analyses. Nigeria is often categorized as a fragile, conflict-affected state, though this describes the conditions of violence and poor governance and provides policymakers little insight into how the political system actually functions. Here, the political marketplace framework (PMF) provides an analytic lens to better understand how the political system operates, as well as how it intersects with violence and identity.

A political marketplace (PM) is a country where transactional politics, meaning bargains and competition, dominate formal institutions and processes.² Instead of focusing on the interplay of the institutions and how they allegedly function, it focuses on the logic which underpins actors' decision-making, the political economy of the state, and the organisation of elite actors. In doing so, it provides a tool to explain why the practice of politics diverges from its formal institutions and practices.

In PMs, negotiations over political power are continuous, simultaneously happening at every level of government and society, often leading to fragile deals that break down when a better offer emerges. Political power is treated as a commodity that is bought and sold as if one is in a marketplace. Those without the money to buy power may attempt to claim it through violence.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Syria, and South Sudan are paradigmatic political marketplaces, but even weakly institutionalized countries such as Mexico or Indonesia also exhibit the PM's transactional logic.³ Countries such as Iraq, Nigeria, and Sudan are rentier political marketplaces, meaning state resources are a key source of funds used to buy and sell political power as well as fund patronage networks used to control the broader population.⁴

In the 1990s, Nigeria was a rentier political marketplace operating under conditions of austerity and economic precarity.⁵ Political budgets of elite national actors were constrained and facing increasing demands from the Nigerian people to allow free competition in the form of democratic elections. Yet actors who had benefitted from their hold on power were reluctant to submit to the will of the population. In this context, leaders at the national level turned to decentralization as a way to shore up support from local level elites around the country as a means to maintain their own power. In some ways, this had the appearance of meeting demands for more inclusive, locally defined governance. However, in practice, the decentralization process localized competition over access to the resources flowing from the federal government but left many aspects of this competition undefined and subject to manipulation. Two intertwined questions were left unanswered: who would control these governments and who should benefit from the resources flowing through them? In other words, the decentralization process created a new site of competition, not a framework to manage it. This policy brief summarizes how these negotiations over political authority played out in 'real' transactional politics across multiple levels of government under conditions of competitive rentierism. It addresses the ways in which identity is intentionally and unintentionally activated and exploited in the pursuit of power. In doing so, the brief seeks to help policymakers better understand how political competition in rentier political marketplaces can drive local-level violence, and the implications this has for understanding how to build peace within these environments.

This brief is based on an in-depth research report of the conflict dynamics in Jos, Nigeria between 1991 through 2008.ⁱⁱ Its evidence comes from primary research (in Nigeria and remote) between 2021 and 2023, existing secondary literature and government reports, and is informed by the author's previous experience living in Jos and working on conflict issues between 2015 and 2017.

Nigeria and Jos in particular, offers an important case to explore these dynamics for several reasons. First, Jos is seen as a microcosm of Nigeria—with its risk of identity-based violence and its attempts to make peace—as emblematic for the entire country. Additionally, Jos exemplifies the complex reality of how decentralization processes play out in a context of competitive rentierism—a dynamic also experienced across the country. Third, these dynamics are playing out in Nigeria, one of the most diverse and populous countries in the world. It has and continues to also experience ethnoreligious and resource-based conflict among farmers and pastoralists, violent extremism, and a range of criminality that thrives in the insecure atmosphere. Each of these types of conflict intersect and shape each other. Understanding how these dynamics happen within Nigeria – and more importantly the impact of peacebuilding efforts on them – has critical implications not only for the future of the country, implications likely also relevant to other political marketplace countries.

Policy Brief Structure

The policy brief begins with a more detailed explanation of the political marketplace framework before turning to a closer analysis of how competition in these environments intersects with identity politics and competition for political authority. The brief then introduces the Nigerian political marketplace before turning to a summary of the evolution of the violence in Jos between 1991 and 2008. A more detailed analysis of the violence is available in the full research report on which this brief is based.⁶ The policy brief then concludes with a discussion of the main findings. The key findings and policy recommendations are included at the beginning of this brief.

ⁱⁱ This policy brief is based on the in-depth research report, Jared Miller, "Governing for Whom? The Intersection of Identity, Violence, and Political Competition in Political Marketplaces" (PeaceRep: Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, World Peace Foundation, 2024).

The Political Marketplace Framework

The political marketplace framework (PMF) is a theory of politics used to describe and analyse states in which transactional politics, meaning elite bargains and competition, dominate formal institutions.⁷ In this policy brief and the research it is based on, the PMF serves as the analytic lens used to understand competition for political power and the evolution of violent conflict in Jos.ⁱⁱⁱ

The PMF was developed from a close study of politics in the Horn of Africa—Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Somaliland, South Sudan, and Eritrea.⁸ It described these states in market terms because that was “the vernacular of everyday politics in Sudan”, a language that has also provided insight to other countries in the Horn of Africa.⁹ It has since been used as an analytic lens to better understand politics in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Liberia, Nigeria, Syria, and Yemen among other weakly institutionalized political systems. It has also been used as a lens to analyze thematic issues such as starvation and humanitarian response, decarbonization, mediation, and political topography.¹⁰

There are four core conditions of PMF countries.¹¹ First, that political finance, meaning the funds that political actors to buy loyalty or political services, are in the hands of individuals who have political, military, or economic interests distinct from the state. Second, that control over the means of coercion is dispersed or contested. For example, there are competing armed factions outside state control. Third, political disputes are not resolved by formal institutions and procedures. Lastly, that PMF countries are integrated into the global order in a subordinate position.

The PMF introduces two key tools used throughout the brief. The first is the concept of the political budget, meaning the funds that political actors use to buy loyalty or political services.¹² This can range from paying off powerbrokers or key officials to support you to hiring thugs to stoke violence or intimidate a rival.

ⁱⁱⁱ A “process toolkit” on how policymakers can use the PMF as an analytic framework is available in: Ben Spatz, Aditya Sarkar, and Alex de Waal, “The Political Marketplace: A Framework and Toolkit for Analyzing Transactional Politics in Conflict-Affected Countries” (London and Medford, MA: Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and World Peace Foundation, 2021), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/111009/>.

Political finance is the overall amount of funds flowing through the political system to facilitate deals, fund patronage networks, and purchase these political services. In a rentier system like Nigeria, the state is one of the key sources of political budgets—whether through outright embezzlement, cronyism, patronage, or another budgetary scheme.¹³ This corruption is not primarily about self-enrichment, but about accumulating enough resources to be able to compete within the marketplace.¹⁴ However, corruption as a means of self-enrichment often happens in parallel.

The second tool is the analytic focus on the transactional logic as it intersects with competing political ideologies defined by civic ideals, ethnoreligious identity, competition over scarce resources, and violence. PMF research has shown that these logics are often intertwined, opportunistically employed by political entrepreneurs in the pursuit of power, but it is the transactional logic that often dominates.¹⁵ The PMF provides a framework to identify and separate them.

Political marketplaces can have a variety of overall structures and configurations of key actors, parties, or coalitions, but are similar in their dominance of the forementioned transactional political logic. The three “ideal types” of marketplaces are described below. However, in practice, these ideal types are dynamic, and can vary across levels of the marketplace.

Table 1: "Ideal types" of political market organisation ^{16, 20}

Type	Description	Examples
Centralized/ Authoritarian Kleptocracy	An authoritarian system controlled by a single actor (or small group of actors) who has control over the structure and rules of the marketplace. They are akin to a monopoly. They maintain high barriers to entry for actors attempting to compete for power in the marketplace.	• Syria under Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000)¹⁷ • Sudan under Omar al-Bashir (1999-2011)¹⁸ • Nigeria under Sani Abacha (1993-1998)¹⁹
Collusive Oligopoly	The market is dominated by a limited number of political entities that have agreed to <i>collaborate</i> in order to maintain their own political power and prevent new actors from entering the marketplace. A well-functioning collusive oligopoly can look like a centralized/ authoritarian kleptocracy.	• Nigeria during the Obasanjo Administration (1999-2003)²¹

Type	Description	Examples
Competitive Oligopoly	The market is dominated by a limited number of political entities that are in <i>competition</i> with each other. These entities may compete with each other using violence or extreme manipulation of political institutions, or in more subtle ways. While dominant actors may be in competition with each other, they collectively attempt to keep new actors from entering the market.	Nigeria during APC-PDP competition post-2015 (2015-2019)²²
Free Market	Free markets have low barriers to entry and have many different actors buying and selling political services without any one actor dominating the market. These are essentially, unregulated, competitive market systems. Free markets often emerge in the midst of war as dominant firms lose control of the market.	- Somalia (1992-1998)²³ - Sudan (1988-1989)²⁴

Negotiating Authority, Violence, & Identity in Political Markets

One of the key questions is how actors in the marketplace operate and interact across the different levels of the marketplace. Put differently, this is the question of how national-level actors relate and negotiate power with those at other levels of the marketplace (i.e. centre-periphery relations). Existing research points to four types of categories of centre-periphery relations and the balance of power between them: power-sharing, usurpation, non-incorporation, and administrative occupation – each defined by the degree of concentration of institutional structures and authority (shown in Table 2 below).

Table 2: Categories of Center-Elite Relations & Institutional Strategies ²⁵

		Who wields authority at the local level?	
		Rural Elites (Devolved Authority)	State Agents (Centralized Authority)
Spatial Configuration of State Apparatus	State institutions created at village level (De-concentration)	Power-sharing	Usurpation
	State institutions "suspended above" localities (Concentration)	Non-incorporation	Administrative Occupation

Research suggests that the type of centre-periphery relationship is shaped by the degree of economic autonomy and social hierarchy of the rural elites.²⁶ Those with high levels of economic autonomy and hierarchy are likely to be strong rivals to elites at the centre and therefore capable of negotiating favourable centre-periphery relations and institutional frameworks. However, in a rentier system, this becomes not only a question of power, but also of wealth flowing from the state and who has access to it – a question that becomes critical in conditions of sustained poverty.

In essence, competition plays out across multiple levels across geographies, but also in two predominant categories: elite competition to hold political power (playing out at multiple levels of government offices among elite actors); and the population's competition for access and control of the resources flowing from the rentier state and its patronage networks (largely playing out on the local level). These categories are interrelated and shape the reality of the other.

Research on political marketplaces has shown that these negotiations between the centre and the periphery also intersect with the transactional logic of the marketplace.²⁷ Decentralization processes simultaneously serve a democratic and a political marketplace goal. The reality of these processes is that expanding local governance can be an opportunity to redesign patronage networks and satisfy demands of local elite, all the while fulfilling a democratic demand from the people for greater local representation in government. These processes, however, do not play out in a vacuum, but amidst complex histories and relations between sub-groups within the population leading these competitions to frequently bear the markers of identity-based conflict.

In addition, political marketplaces provide a new context in which identity politics and political institutions are reinvented and negotiated, often leading to exclusivist forms of both identity and governance.²⁸ Yet at the same time, there is evidence that elite actors at different levels operate on a more "individualized, opportunistic calculus" that is agnostic to identity as one would expect in a perfectly competitive political market.²⁹ These are competing logics that privilege different means and end-goals, but can be found intertwined in the political marketplace. Nigeria epitomizes the ways in which this happens.

Nigeria's Multi-tiered, Rentier Marketplace

Nigeria officially operates as a federal republic, but the real contemporary politics are transactional, rent-based politics often cloaked in ethno-religious rhetoric.³⁰ Elections are the official way that leaders are chosen, but it is the deals struck among the elite that determine who holds and can exercise political power.³¹ This plays out within, in the guise of, and outside of formal institutions, across the three levels of government – federal, state, and local – and in deals brokered with the public. In sum, Nigeria is an exemplary multi-level, rentier political marketplace.

Two of the defining features of Nigeria's political marketplace are its rentier structure and the oil rents that flow through it. Since the oil boom of the 1970s, oil has usually accounted for 65-85% of government revenues collected and distributed by the federal government. Over time, the growth of oil rents has transformed the political economy of the state, making the political system dependent on them.³² Oil rents have enabled massive government spending, and have been a key source of political budgets, the money that actors use to buy political loyalty and services.³³ The flow of oil rents has also made the state a key source of wealth for enterprising politicians and those connected to them.³⁴

Due to its federal structure, Nigeria operates as a multi-tiered, hierarchical political marketplace. In part because of its control over oil rents as well as the military and police, the marketplace is dominated by the federal government, but the market is also fractured. No single actor or entity has a monopoly on political power or violence, and the market types vary across level and region. While the three branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—are meant to be equal and maintain checks and balances on each other, in practice, the executive branch maintains an outsized share of power with the legislature often unable to limit executive power, and the judiciary as something that seeks justice, but is prone to manipulation and to rubber stamp the decisions of those in power.

Some of the most prized positions within the government are executive offices (e.g. president, vice president, governors, deputy governors, local government chairmen and deputy chairmen). Executive positions have control over government budgets, and the federal and state-level executives each have immunity while in office.³⁵ Executive offices can be lucrative positions, even at the local government level, and they can be effective positions from which to direct patronage to supporters.³⁶ This becomes especially important during elections when politicians need to “share money around.”

Executives are limited to two terms in office – one of the few agreed upon rules of the marketplace – but as is common in similar contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa, there is a circulation of elites across other positions within the government.³⁷ For example, many governors go on to (or “retire to”) the National Senate after their terms as governors expire.

The Nigerian marketplace is complex in its differing configurations. At the national level, the marketplace often resembles a rivalrous oligopoly with the two major parties—All Progressives Party (APC) and People’s Democratic Party (PDP)—battling for control over power and their piece of the national cake. States, however, are more often dominated by a single party, often the governor’s, making their structure closer to a collusive oligopoly if not a centralized, authoritarian market. However, the marketplaces at each level shift during election cycles. While the markets do not move towards free competition entirely, competition is more common. In a sense, elections are the equivalent of market days. Major vendors may still dominate market days and try and raise barriers to new vendors, but the existence of elections demarcates an opportunity to compete.

Because it has embraced the African Union Charter provision that democratic elections are the only legitimate transfer of power, elections are one of the few periods when open competition is permitted.³⁸ This is also when political actors put themselves back on the market to see how much actors are willing to pay for their political support. High-level actors attempt to maintain high barriers to entry by keeping the cost to enter extremely high and maintaining tight control over the political parties. In between elections, the systems return to their previous structures in which high-level officeholders may be in competition with each other, but do not have the same level of risk of losing their position.

Given these dynamics, elections are the most competitive time periods in Nigeria's political marketplace. They are also the most expensive. Aspiring candidates need deep pockets to be able to contest for office or be backed by someone who does. While they may be able to ideologically draw some support, to date, money remains one of the surest ways to guarantee that one will win a party primary and in the general election. Where money falls short, strategic uses of paid violence (i.e. political thuggery)—to intimidate opponents, mobilize voters, suppress votes, or outright disrupt voting—can elevate one's competitiveness. In essence, political competition can be described as money politics mixed with violence or as one interviewee put it, "criminal politics."³⁹ Some of the most influential actors within this competition are Nigeria's infamous "godfathers." Godfathers are individuals who can use their wealth and influence to back candidates and work to ensure their success at every step of the electoral process and once they take office.⁴⁰ With their candidate in office, the power of the sponsoring godfather grows because they have "a piece of the state in their pocket" that they can lean on for government contracts and favours.⁴¹ Once in office, officeholders exercise the authority and benefits of the office as their personal property—not just a perceived opportunity to do so, but as a perceived right (i.e. prebendalism).⁴² The relationship between the godfathers and their chosen candidates is a type of patron-client relationship. Like other types of patron-client relationships, these can be reinforced by genuine ideological support, as well as ties such as kinship, ethnicity, religion, and regional origin.⁴³ They can also break down and need constant renegotiation to keep parties invested in the relationship.

During boom times, money flows easily within the marketplace. During bust times, political budgets become constrained—though the price of competition does not necessarily decrease at the same rate.⁴⁴ For actors who want to hold onto power, this means trying to strategically spend one's political budget where they may have the greatest returns or have the greatest commitments, and relying on other types of ties—such as ethnicity or religion—to whip up support that they are not able to buy.

One of the complex aspects of Nigeria's political marketplace is that while transactional politics is the dominant political logic – with the elite often treating ethnicity agnostically or opportunistically – it is interwoven with and may exploit ethnicity, religion, and regional rivalries in the pursuit of power. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the use of ethnic identity as a political resource has been called using "ethnic capital."⁴⁵ These logics also exist alongside and in competition with democratic ideals, what Kaldor and Radice have termed "civicness."⁴⁶ In practice, it can be extremely difficult to discern the politician who argues that they are fighting for the rights of their group from the politician who recognizes that ethnic fear is an effective way to whip up votes. The reality is that each can be operationalized at different times to mobilize different types of support. This is especially true in times of economic hardship or violence in which ethnoreligious divisions are heightened and connections to the state become even more important.

Plateau State epitomizes these dynamics. It embodies the ethnic and religious diversity of Nigeria, and violence emerged only in the 1990s when the political marketplace became less centralized and more competitive.

Plateau State: A State-level Marketplace

Plateau State is seen both as a microcosm of Nigeria and as a bellwether for Nigeria's ability to function as a peaceful, democratic state.⁴⁷ This is the view that if Plateau can manage its ethnic and religious diversity, perhaps there is hope for the rest of the country. This also cuts the other way. Violence within Plateau has shown the potential to spark broader conflict across the region and stoke divisions felt across the country—especially as it takes on a north-south or Christian vs. Muslim dimension. Plateau State epitomizes the interplay between ethnoreligious identity, political competition, and violence that play out in different forms across the country. This makes it especially useful as a case study in that it offers close examination of these dynamics in a way that likely speaks to other parts of the country.

Plateau is located in heart of the Middle Belt region of Nigeria – a section of 14 states and the federal capital territory that cuts across the centre of the country. This is the region where the predominantly Christian south meets the predominantly Muslim north. Plateau State has more than 50 different ethnic groups, none of which constitute a majority of the population. The largest groups are the Berom, Anaguta, Afizere (often referred to as the BAA), who are predominantly Christian, and the Hausa and Fulani, who are predominantly Muslim.^{iv} The Hausa-Fulani who have lived for generations within Jos are known as the Jasawa. They share some customs and ethnic ties with the broader Hausa-Fulani communities but see themselves as distinct.⁴⁸

Historically, Plateau State was known as “the home of peace and tourism.” Named for its geological terrain, Plateau State was a tin mining bonanza in the early 1900s, and a historic international tourism hub due to its natural resources, temperate climate, and beautifully rocky terrain.⁴⁹ Its ethnic diversity was not a source of violent conflict and conflicts that did arise prior to the 1990s were not framed in religious terms.⁵⁰ Yet, this image was been eclipsed by cycles of violence in the early 2000s rising to what some described as a “communal war,” which claimed thousands of lives, drove hundreds of thousands to flee, and sent shock waves across the country.⁵¹

Settlers and Indigenes: Contested Sons of the Soil

One of the fault lines in Nigeria is the question of who is considered an indigene, and who is considered a settler. While there is no official legal definition of indigene, federal guidance stipulates that an indigene of a local government is one whose parents or grandparents was or is indigenous to that local government, or someone who has been accepted as an indigene by that local government.⁵² However, proving one’s historical lineage can be extremely difficult, and subject to the dealmaking politics of the marketplace with local officials selling indigene certificates to wealthy individuals, or awarding (or denying) them solely based on perceived ethnic identity.⁵³

^{iv} The Hausa and Fulani are sometimes referred to as Hausa-Fulani, but members of these groups define themselves differently based on their geographic location and specific customs. For a more detailed discussion, see Philip Ostien, “Jonah Jan and the Jasawa: Ethno-Religious Conflict in Jos, Nigeria,” *Muslim-Christian Relations in Africa*, August 19, 2009, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1456372>.

In the contemporary setting, the question of indigeneity is salient because it is used to grant indigenes preferential access to land, education, and government services and as a tool to determine who is eligible for certain chieftaincy titles and government positions.⁵⁴ In practice, however, it has become a tool to more broadly shape patterns of development and politics, and a tool that has frequently been manipulated by political elite for their own benefit.⁵⁵

These questions of—who is an indigene, who is a settler, and therefore what rights and privileges does each have? —are at the heart of the conflict in Plateau. The Hausa-Fulani have argued that they are the rightful indigenes because Jos was originally built on land owned by the Hausa-Fulani and that they historically ruled the town since 1902.⁵⁶ Yet, this claim, and facts supporting it, are contested by the BAA, who argue the Hausa-Fulani first came to Jos in the early 1900s as settlers to work in the tin mines. Four of the most influential commissions of inquiry – the 1994 Fiberesima Report, 2001/2002 Niki Tobi Report, 2004 Plateau Peace Conference (Plateau Resolves), and 2008/2009 Ajbola Report – all stated that they believed the BAA to be indigenes, and the Hausa-Fulani to be settlers.⁵⁷ However, this finding has continued to be rejected by the Hausa-Fulani community. As Higazi argued, “the potency of indigeneity in Plateau is reinforced by its frequent conflation with religion” with most Muslims being categorized as settlers, and most Christians being categorized as indigenes.⁵⁸ Thus, the question of indigeneity also took on a religious connotation of which groups were legitimate constituents, and which were not.

The Evolution of Conflict Dynamics: Proximate Triggers and Fundamental Issues

In the early 2000s, Plateau State and specifically Jos, went from being known as “the home of peace and tourism” to being known as an epicentre of horrific violence that raised tensions around the country. This section summarizes the evolution and intersection of political marketplace competition and conflict dynamics in Plateau State from 1991 to 2008, a period that claimed more than 7,000 lives and displaced more than 250,000.⁵⁹

The 1990s were a tumultuous time in Nigeria. On the national level—then military head of state, Ibrahim Babangida, was trying to hold onto power and delay elections by manipulating existing and creating new patronage lines—some of them coming from criminal enterprises.⁶⁰ This came after a period of self-imposed Structural Adjustment Programmes intended to address the country’s fiscal problems, but which caused inflation and the level of poverty to soar, and “all but destroy[ed] the middle class” in Jos.⁶¹ While scaled down, the state—through patronage networks, contracts, or cronyism—was still one of the few viable paths to wealth or even stable employment.⁶² Yet at the same time, the state was not flush with oil rents, and they were concentrated among the elite. Essentially, the marketplace was operating in conditions of austerity, and the frustrated population was demanding a shift to free market competition.

One of the tactics that Babangida turned to at this point was the creation of new states and new LGAs—the decentralization of political authority and patronage. In market terms, this is akin to breaking existing markets into smaller pieces, an act which benefitted some actors, and disadvantaged others. Minority groups across the country had been demanding that the government create new states and LGAs for decades. Babangida’s own administration had studied these demands and provided a range of proposals on how to respond.⁶³ Historically, the creation of new states was a policy decision that could arguably meet demands for more locally accountable government, demarcate and guarantee a group’s control over federal resources, while simultaneously acting as a bargain chip between elites at the federal level (centre) and those at the state and local levels (periphery). Given that the resources flowed from the federal government to states and localities, it also created dependency of newly established states and localities on the federal government – akin to a Boone’s “power-sharing” (decentralized institutional structure and devolved authority).⁶⁴

The redrawing of state and local political boundaries also reshaped which elites were connected to the resources of the state, a way to reorganise which local allies and opponents controlled a territory – Boone's "usurpation."⁶⁵ While serving extremely different purposes and logics—decentralization was the common mechanism.

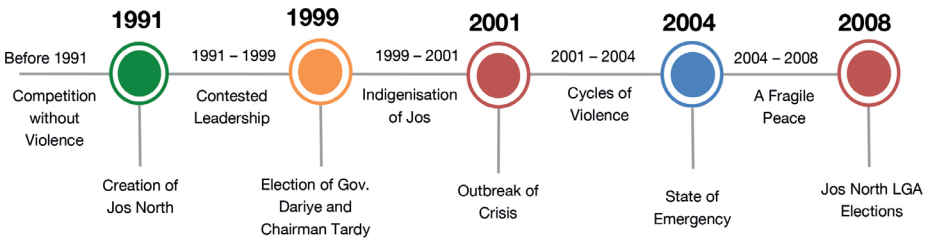
In 1991, in response to significant pressure from minority groups across the country and his increasingly tenuous hold on national power, Babangida established nine new states and a total of 140 new LGAs. These would prove to be the most contentious redrawing of political lines in Nigeria's post-colonial history.⁶⁶ While previous decentralization processes had guidelines for the new political units to be created, the 1991 reforms stood out for "their arbitrariness, contentiousness, and inconclusiveness."⁶⁷ While this could be seen through the lens of Babangida bowing to the demands for more local governance – seemingly aligning with a restructuring of power away from the centre, a political marketplace analysis suggests an alternate analysis.

One of the only overriding logics to the 1991 local government reorganisations was that they were drawn to favour the administration's key supporters, members, and local elites.⁶⁸ This transformed minority groups into majority groups within local political units. The creation of new states and LGAs triggered required public spending to build government buildings, hire personnel, and invest in public services – a seeming loophole around the public hiring freeze.⁶⁹ As Bach argued, "the division of a state, far from victimizing its elites, increases their resources and local capacity for accumulation, while improving their positions and guarantees of representation at the federal level."⁷⁰ Babangida created these new states and LGAs at a time when he was also working to institute a series of reforms that would give local governments greater autonomy over their federal allocations and remove some of the states' ability to intervene in their affairs or divert their budget allocations—making new local governments especially attractive to local elites.⁷¹

The cumulative effect was that formerly minority groups were now majority groups in certain LGAs and states, giving them increased say in political processes, mandated representation in each level of government, and most notably, a statutory budget allocation from the federally-controlled oil rents. Babangida's decentralization process addressed the grievances of those who had been advocating for greater local autonomy and federal recognition and did so through resources he could justify spending even in a time of austerity. However, while this may have been prudent as a tactic to maintain power at the national level, it created new geographies of competition over political authority and access to the decentralized oil rents at the local level. The establishment of these new political units—especially the new LGAs—sparked violence across the country. One of the most striking examples of this occurred in the newly created Jos North LGA in the capital of Plateau State.

Over the next three decades, Jos North would be a flashpoint for violence and the centre of competition over political authority within a context of competitive rentierism. These processes would take on an ethnoreligious framing as the competition activated and manipulated ethnic and religious identities and historical grievances. The outbreaks of violence can be summarized as the interaction between political crisis caused by the monied politics of the political marketplace and competition among the population for access to resources—all of which played out against a complex history of oppression, poverty, and kleptocratic politics.⁷²

Figure 1: Timeline of Critical Junctures in the Conflict (1991 – 2008)



Violent conflict from 1991 through 2008 reshaped the city and the relationship of groups to each other.⁷³ Major flashpoints of violence (shown in Figure 1 above), would set off cycles of attacks and reprisal attacks. In-depth discussion of these periods is available in the full research report.⁷⁴ Neighbourhoods and business districts that were once integrated became segregated. Parts of the city became "no-go" areas depending on one's religion or ethnic group.⁷⁵ Moreover, a generation was growing up in the midst of violence that they only understood as violence that the Christians or Muslims had done to them. For them, an identity-based conflict was all they had ever known.

What started out as a competition over resources and representation in government became something else altogether. With it, came changes in the social fabric of the communities, the shape of the political institutions and most importantly – the tactics used to stake one's claim within the political marketplace.

Conclusion

The creation of Jos North LGA and the decentralization of government (and revenues) did not lead to the more inclusive democratic politics for which citizens hoped. Instead, it defined a new political unit originally intended to appease Hausa elites but did so in a way that left the question of who a legitimate constituency was, and therefore had claim to the oil rents, unanswered and subject to manipulation. Jos North became a new political topography and site of competition without an effective mechanism to regulate it. As actors obtained elected (and appointed) offices instituting their own answers to the questions of who should control and benefit from the oil rents, those who disagreed were increasingly marginalized by the government. Eventually, the powder keg of pent-up frustrations caught fire and erupted in violence that engulfed Jos North and rippled across the region. A political battle turned violent that was increasingly drawn along ethnoreligious lines.

This policy brief has presented a focused analysis of conflict dynamics within Jos North as they intersected with competition for power at multiple levels of Nigeria's political marketplace. It has sought to demonstrate how violence in the streets of Jos North related to competition over who would control power and therefore Nigeria's oil rents at the national level. These dynamics were shaped by the rentier structure of the political system, the conditions of poverty and sustained insecurity, and Nigeria's complex history and ethnoreligious composition.

The hope is that by offering detailed cases like that of Plateau State, the fragmented and exclusivist forms of identity politics that emerge in political marketplace countries can be better understood so that violent conflict can be resolved and prevented. Attempts to address these dynamics, specifically the impact of local level peacebuilding efforts on them—will be the focus of the next research paper in this series.

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PeaceRep is funded by UK International Development from the UK government.