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Weaponisation of Non-State Armed Groups in African Politics: The Impact of State-Sponsored Goons on Electoral Integrity and Human Security in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya

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Abstract

Democratic consolidation in Africa continues to face significant challenges from the informalisation of political violence and the emergence of non-state armed actors operating within electoral environments. This article examines the alleged weaponisation of non-state armed groups by political elites and state actors to intimidate opposition parties, suppress dissent, manipulate electoral competition, and weaken democratic accountability in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. While existing literature has extensively examined electoral violence, authoritarian resilience, and state repression, less attention has been paid to the intersection between informal coercive networks, electoral processes, and human security outcomes. Using a comparative qualitative approach, the study investigates how political actors deploy or tolerate armed vigilante groups, party-linked militias, youth gangs, and informal security networks as instruments of political control. Drawing on theories of state violence, political instrumentalisation of coercion, and human security, the article argues that the outsourcing of coercive functions to non-state actors creates hybrid systems of political repression that undermine electoral credibility and weaken citizens' trust in democratic institutions. The analysis demonstrates that such groups operate through intimidation, surveillance, physical violence, voter suppression, and disruption of opposition mobilisation, thereby transforming elections from mechanisms of political participation into arenas of coercive competition. The article further argues that the consequences extend beyond electoral outcomes to broader human security concerns, including physical insecurity, displacement, psychological trauma, declining civic participation, and institutional delegitimation. Through comparative analysis of Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, the study reveals both common patterns and country-specific variations in how informal coercive actors are integrated into political strategies. It concludes that strengthening electoral integrity requires not only institutional electoral reforms but also dismantling informal networks of political violence through accountability mechanisms, security sector reform, and democratic governance initiatives.

Keywords: Non-state armed groups; electoral violence; political intimidation; human security; democratic erosion; Nigeria; Uganda; Tanzania; Kenya.

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF INFORMAL POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN AFRICAN ELECTIONS

1.1 Elections, Democracy, and the Persistence of Political Violence in Africa

The expansion of multiparty democracy across Africa since the early 1990s has produced significant institutional changes, including the regularisation of elections, constitutional reforms, and the strengthening of electoral management bodies. However, the institutionalisation of electoral competition has not eliminated political violence. Instead, many African states

continue to experience forms of electoral coercion in which formal democratic institutions coexist with informal systems of intimidation, surveillance, and violence.

Although elections are constitutionally designed to facilitate peaceful competition and citizen participation, political contests in many African contexts remain characterised by high levels of uncertainty and

competition for access to state power. Because political office often determines access to economic resources, state privileges, and social influence, elections frequently become struggles in which political actors employ both formal and informal strategies to secure advantage. Simpser, (2019) argues that electoral competition in Africa often produces hybrid political systems where democratic institutions exist alongside practices that undermine genuine political accountability.

The persistence of electoral violence demonstrates that democratic transitions have not necessarily transformed the political incentives surrounding elections. Rather than relying solely on formal state institutions, political elites increasingly utilise informal networks capable of influencing electoral on formal state institutions, political elites increasingly utilise informal networks capable of electoral behaviour through coercion and intimidation. These developments suggest that electoral violence should not be understood merely as spontaneous conflict among supporters but as a politically organised strategy embedded within broader struggles for power.

1.2 The Changing Nature of Political Coercion: From Direct Authoritarianism to Informal Violence

Historically, political coercion in Africa was frequently associated with direct authoritarian practices, including military coups, one-party rule, and overt state repression. During the post-independence period, many governments maintained political control through security agencies, military institutions, and restrictions on opposition activity. However, contemporary political coercion has increasingly shifted toward less visible and more decentralised forms.

The decline of military interventions and the spread of electoral politics have not removed coercive politics; rather, they have altered the mechanisms through which violence is organised and exercised. Political elites increasingly rely on unofficial actors who operate outside formal state structures but remain connected to political networks. These actors provide a form of political deniability, allowing elites to benefit from intimidation and violence while avoiding direct accountability.

This transformation represents what Tilly (2003) describes as the strategic organisation of collective violence, where actors mobilise available social networks and resources to achieve political objectives. In electoral contexts, violence becomes an instrument for shaping political participation, controlling communities, weakening opponents, and influencing electoral outcomes.

1.3 The Emergence of Non-State Armed Actors in Electoral Politics

A major feature of contemporary electoral politics in

Africa is the increasing involvement of non-state armed actors in political competition. These actors include:

- Party militias;
- Political youth gangs;
- Vigilante groups;
- Local armed networks;
- Informal security organisations.

Although these groups vary across national contexts, they share common characteristics. They often operate through informal relationships with political elites, receive material support or protection from influential actors, and perform coercive functions during periods of political competition.

Political parties frequently recruit young people from economically marginalised communities because such groups provide access to local networks and the capacity to mobilise quickly. These actors may intimidate opposition supporters, disrupt political rallies, monitor communities, suppress voter participation, or enforce political loyalty.

The use of these groups represents a form of outsourced political violence. Rather than deploying state security institutions directly, political elites utilise informal actors whose actions advance political interests while creating distance between violence and official authority. This arrangement complicates accountability because responsibility becomes difficult to establish.

1.4 Outsourcing Violence: Political Benefits and Institutional Consequences

The involvement of non-state armed groups creates a political environment where coercion becomes normalised as an instrument of electoral competition. These actors provide several strategic advantages to political elites.

First, they allow political leaders to influence electoral processes without openly violating democratic norms. Second, they provide mechanisms for controlling opposition activities and shaping voter behaviour. Third, they enable governments and political parties to maintain plausible deniability when allegations of violence emerge.

However, the consequences are significant. The outsourcing of political violence weakens democratic institutions by reducing citizens' confidence in elections and undermining the principle of free political participation. It also creates accountability gaps because informal actors frequently operate beyond the reach of formal legal institutions.

From a human security perspective, the consequences extend beyond electoral outcomes. Citizens affected by political violence experience insecurity, displacement, psychological trauma, and reduced willingness to participate in political processes. The United Nations Development Programme (1994) emphasises that security must be understood not only in terms of state survival but also in relation to the protection

of individuals from fear and insecurity (UNDP, 1994, Igiebor, 2024).

1.5 Comparative Contexts: Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya

1.5.1 Nigeria: Political Thuggery and Electoral Violence

Nigeria provides one of the clearest examples of the relationship between informal coercive networks and electoral competition. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, political violence has remained a recurring feature of electoral processes. Politicians have frequently relied on local youth groups, political thugs, and armed supporters to influence electoral outcomes.

Albert (2005) demonstrates that Nigerian political competition often involves patronage relationships in which powerful political actors provide resources and protection to local actors who perform political mobilisation and coercive functions. These networks contribute to voter intimidation, electoral disorder, and weakened public confidence in democratic institutions.

The Nigerian case illustrates how political violence can become embedded within electoral structures when informal coercive actors become essential instruments of political competition.

1.5.2 Uganda: Informal Security Networks and Electoral Control

Uganda demonstrates another dimension of informal political coercion through the development of community-based security structures. The Crime Preventers programme, officially presented as a community policing initiative, generated debate regarding the relationship between security provision and political mobilisation.

Tapscott (2016) argues that such informal security structures blurred the distinction between public safety initiatives and political control mechanisms. Concerns emerged regarding their potential use in monitoring opposition activities and strengthening ruling-party dominance during electoral periods.

The Ugandan case demonstrates how informal security actors can operate within a broader strategy of regime maintenance while retaining the appearance of community-based security organisation.

1.5.3 Tanzania: Vigilantism and Local Security Networks

Tanzania provides insight into the complex relationship between community security structures and state authority. Historically, groups such as sungusungu developed as local responses to insecurity but later interacted with state institutions in complex ways.

Katabaro (2026) and Mahuwi & Ntyangiri (2026) argue that state-supported vigilantism demonstrates how informal security organisations can become incorporated into systems of governance. While such groups may contribute to local security, their relationship with political authority raises concerns regarding neutrality, accountability, and potential political utilisation.

The Tanzanian experience highlights how informal security arrangements can gradually become embedded within political structures.

1.5.4 Kenya: Ethnic Mobilisation and Electoral Militias

Kenya represents one of the most significant cases of electoral violence involving informal armed groups. The 2007–2008 post-election crisis demonstrated how political elites could mobilise ethnic networks and youth militias during periods of intense electoral competition.

Branch and Cheeseman (2009) argue that Kenya's electoral violence was not simply spontaneous ethnic conflict but was closely connected to elite competition and political strategies. Armed youth groups became instruments through which political actors pursued influence and defended perceived communal interests.

The Kenyan case demonstrates the destructive consequences of allowing informal armed networks to become integrated into electoral competition.

1.6 Research Problem and Scholarly Gap

Existing scholarship has extensively examined electoral violence, authoritarian resilience, democratic erosion, and political repression in Africa. However, less attention has been devoted to the comparative study of how non-state armed groups function as informal instruments of electoral control across different African political contexts.

Most studies examine individual countries or focus primarily on state institutions, leaving insufficient attention to the networks connecting political elites, informal armed actors, and electoral outcomes. Furthermore, limited research has examined how these actors affect human security beyond election periods.

This study addresses this gap by analysing the political weaponisation of non-state armed groups and examining their implications for electoral integrity, democratic stability, and human security in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya.

1.7 Research Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the nature and patterns of non-state armed group mobilisation within electoral politics in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya.

2. To investigate the mechanisms through which political elites allegedly utilise informal coercive actors, including party militias, political youth groups, vigilante organisations, and local armed networks, to influence electoral competition and suppress opposition activities.
3. To analyse the effects of the weaponisation of non-state armed groups on electoral integrity, democratic accountability, and citizens' political participation in the selected African states.
4. To assess the implications of politically motivated non-state violence for human security, particularly regarding physical safety, psychological insecurity, civic freedoms, and social stability.
5. To compare similarities and differences in the political use of informal coercive networks across Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya in order to identify broader patterns of democratic vulnerability in Africa.
6. To propose institutional and governance reforms capable of reducing the political instrumentalisation of non-state armed groups and strengthening peaceful electoral competition.

1.8 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. How are non-state armed groups mobilised within electoral politics in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya?
2. Through what mechanisms do political elites utilise informal coercive actors, including party militias, political youth groups, vigilante organisations, and local armed networks, to influence electoral competition and suppress opposition activities?
3. What are the effects of the weaponisation of non-state armed groups on electoral integrity, democratic accountability, and citizens' political participation in the selected African states?
4. How does politically motivated non-state violence affect human security, particularly in relation to physical safety, psychological insecurity, civic freedoms, and social stability?
5. What similarities and differences exist in the political use of informal coercive networks across Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, and what do these reveal about democratic vulnerability in Africa?
6. What institutional and governance reforms can reduce the political instrumentalisation of non-state armed groups and promote peaceful electoral competition?

1.9 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship on African politics by demonstrating that electoral violence cannot be fully understood through formal institutions alone. It highlights the importance of examining informal coercive networks as central components of contemporary political competition.

The study also contributes to human security research by showing how electoral violence affects citizens beyond election outcomes through insecurity, fear, reduced participation, and institutional distrust. Finally, by adopting a comparative perspective across four African countries, the research identifies common patterns and country-specific variations in the political use of non-state armed groups.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POLITICAL VIOLENCE, HYBRID COERCION, AND HUMAN SECURITY

This study is anchored on three interconnected theoretical perspectives: the theory of political instrumentalisation of violence, the concept of hybrid security and informalisation of state power, and the human security framework. Together, these perspectives provide an analytical foundation for understanding how non-state armed groups become incorporated into electoral politics, how political elites employ informal coercive networks to pursue political objectives, and how such practices affect democratic processes and citizens' security. The central assumption guiding this framework is that electoral violence is not simply a breakdown of political order or an expression of societal disorder; rather, it can represent a deliberate strategy through which political actors influence behaviour, manage competition, and preserve power.

The combination of these approaches is particularly relevant to African electoral contexts, where formal democratic institutions often operate alongside informal systems of authority, patronage, and coercion. While states maintain constitutional structures, electoral commissions, security agencies, and legal frameworks, political actors may simultaneously rely on unofficial networks to exercise influence beyond formal institutional channels. Consequently, understanding electoral violence requires attention not only to state institutions but also to the informal relationships and networks through which political power is organised and contested.

2.1 Theory of Political Instrumentalisation of Violence

The theory of the political instrumentalisation of violence provides the primary conceptual foundation for understanding how coercion becomes a deliberate mechanism of political competition. Contrary to explanations that portray political violence as

spontaneous disorder, this perspective views violence as a strategic resource that political actors deploy to achieve specific objectives. Violence becomes political when it is consciously used to influence political behaviour, control access to power, intimidate opponents, regulate participation, or reshape the outcomes of political contests.

Tilly (2003) argues that collective violence is closely connected. Tilly (2003) contends that collective violence is closely connected to struggles over power and political control. Rather than representing irrational eruptions of conflict, violence often emerges from organised processes in which actors mobilise resources, networks, and identities to pursue strategic interests. In electoral contexts, this perspective suggests that violence may be employed by political elites not because democratic institutions have completely collapsed, but because coercion provides advantages within competitive environments. Through intimidation, threats, and physical attacks, political actors can discourage opposition mobilisation, influence voter decisions, and alter perceptions of political risk.

The relationship between violence and political authority is further illuminated by Weber's (2008) classical conception of the modern state as an institution that claims a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force. For Weber, state legitimacy depends partly on the ability of political institutions to regulate and control violence. However, where political elites rely on non-state armed groups to perform coercive functions, this monopoly becomes fragmented. The existence of politically connected militias, vigilante groups, and armed youth organisations therefore reveals a tension between formal state authority and informal practices of coercion.

This fragmentation does not necessarily indicate state weakness alone. In some contexts, political elites strategically tolerate or encourage informal coercive actors because such groups provide political advantages while reducing direct institutional responsibility. The use of unofficial actors allows governments and ruling parties to benefit from coercive outcomes while maintaining distance from acts of intimidation or violence. As Birnir, (2007) and Vickers, (2008) demonstrates, political violence often involves complex relationships between formal authorities and local actors, where control is exercised through networks rather than direct command structures.

The concept of political instrumentalisation of violence also contributes to understanding contemporary forms of authoritarian adaptation. Levitsky & Way, (2010) and Fenner, 2011) argue that many contemporary authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes maintain electoral institutions while manipulating political competition through informal mechanisms of control. Rather than eliminating elections, such regimes often weaken democratic competition through unequal access to resources, restrictions on opposition activity, and selective use of coercive practices. In this context, non-state armed groups become important instruments

because they enable political actors to influence electoral processes without necessarily violating formal democratic procedures.

Applied to Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya, this theoretical perspective helps explain why political elites may rely on informal coercive actors during elections. These groups perform functions that formal security agencies may be unable or unwilling to perform openly, including intimidating opponents, monitoring communities, disrupting campaigns, and influencing voter behaviour. The central argument is therefore that political violence in electoral settings is not merely a consequence of institutional weakness but can be a calculated political strategy embedded within broader struggles for power (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Fenner, 2011).

2.2 Hybrid Security and the Informalisation of State Power

The concept of hybrid security provides a complementary framework for analysing the relationship between formal state institutions and informal coercive actors. Hybrid security refers to situations where security governance is produced through interactions between official state institutions and non-state actors, including community organisations, traditional authorities, private security providers, vigilante groups, and politically affiliated armed networks. In many African contexts, security provision does not occur exclusively through formal state agencies but through overlapping systems of authority involving both governmental and non-governmental actors.

Lund (2006) argues that political authority in many African societies is produced through complex arrangements in which formal and informal institutions coexist and compete. Rather than viewing informal actors as outside the state, Lund demonstrates that state authority often operates through negotiated relationships involving multiple actors and institutions. This perspective is important for understanding electoral violence because politically connected non-state groups frequently operate within ambiguous spaces between state authority, community organisation, and political mobilisation.

The informalisation of state power creates significant challenges regarding accountability and responsibility. When political elites employ unofficial groups rather than formal security institutions, questions arise concerning who controls violence, who benefits from coercive practices, and who can be held responsible for abuses. Informal actors provide political leaders with plausible deniability because their actions can be presented as independent activities rather than extensions of state strategy.

In electoral environments, hybrid security arrangements may therefore become mechanisms through which political authority is exercised beyond formal institutional constraints. For example, youth groups, vigilante organisations, or community security

structures may simultaneously perform security functions and serve political interests. This dual character makes them difficult to regulate because they occupy a space between legitimate community organisation and politically motivated coercion.

The concept of hybrid governance also challenges conventional assumptions that democratic consolidation depends only on strengthening formal institutions. While independent electoral commissions, courts, and security agencies remain essential, democratic stability may also depend on addressing informal networks through which political actors exercise coercive influence. As Omotola, (2009) notes, political violence in Africa is frequently connected to party structures, patronage systems, and informal relationships that operate alongside official institutions.

Therefore, the hybrid security perspective allows this study to examine non-state armed groups not simply as independent violent actors but as participants within broader political systems. Their significance lies not only in their capacity for violence but also in their relationships with political elites and state structures. Understanding these relationships is essential for explaining why electoral violence persists despite formal democratic reforms.

2.3 Human Security Framework

While political violence and hybrid security theories explain how coercive networks operate, the human security framework provides a basis for analysing their consequences for individuals and communities. Introduced prominently through the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report (1994), human security expands the meaning of security beyond the protection of states to include the protection of individuals from threats to their survival, dignity, and wellbeing (UNDP, 1994, Igiebor, 2024).

Unlike traditional security approaches that focus primarily on territorial integrity and military threats, human security emphasises freedom from fear and freedom from want. This perspective is particularly relevant to electoral violence because political insecurity affects citizens not only through direct physical harm but also through psychological, social, and political consequences.

The first dimension relevant to this study is physical security. The involvement of non-state armed groups in electoral politics may produce killings, assault, intimidation, destruction of property, and forced displacement. Such violence directly threatens citizens' safety and undermines their ability to participate freely in political processes. Where voters fear retaliation from politically connected armed groups, elections cannot function as genuine mechanisms of democratic choice.

The second dimension is political security, which concerns individuals' ability to participate freely in political life. Electoral intimidation restricts citizens' freedom of expression, association, and participation. Opposition

parties may experience difficulties organising campaigns, mobilising supporters, or contesting elections when faced with threats from informal coercive networks. Consequently, political violence undermines not only individual rights but also the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

The third dimension is psychological security. The presence of armed political actors creates environments of fear and uncertainty that extend beyond immediate acts of violence. Communities exposed to repeated intimidation may engage in self-censorship, withdraw from political participation, or avoid expressing political preferences openly. Such consequences are significant because democratic systems depend not only on formal electoral procedures but also on citizens' confidence that participation will not result in personal danger.

The fourth dimension is community security, particularly in societies where political mobilisation intersects with ethnic, regional, or communal identities. As demonstrated in Kenya's electoral crises, political violence may deepen social divisions, reinforce ethnic tensions, and damage relationships between communities (Kagwanja, 2009). Similarly, where political actors mobilise youth groups or local armed networks along identity-based lines, electoral competition may contribute to broader social fragmentation.

Applying the human security framework to Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya therefore allows this study to move beyond analysing electoral violence as a threat to institutions alone. It highlights the wider consequences for citizens, communities, and democratic culture. The weaponisation of non-state armed groups affects not only who wins elections but also whether citizens can participate in political life without fear.

3. METHODOLOGY: COMPARATIVE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ELECTORAL COERCION

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design to examine the political weaponisation of non-state armed groups and their implications for electoral integrity and human security in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand the meanings, processes, relationships, and political strategies underlying the mobilisation of informal coercive actors rather than to measure electoral violence through statistical indicators alone. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue, qualitative research is particularly suited to investigating complex social phenomena where meanings are produced through political, historical, and institutional contexts.

The comparative design enables the study to identify both common patterns and country-specific variations in the relationship between political elites, informal armed actors, and electoral processes. Comparative research is valuable because political violence does not emerge from

identical conditions across societies; rather, it is shaped by variations in state capacity, political institutions, historical experiences, patterns of patronage, and forms of political mobilisation (Landman & Carvalho, 2017). By examining Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya together, the study moves beyond single-country explanations and develops a broader understanding of how informal coercive networks operate within different African electoral environments.

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data, making it a documentary-based qualitative analysis. Secondary research is appropriate for this study because extensive evidence on electoral violence, political intimidation, informal security actors, and democratic governance already exists in scholarly publications, election monitoring reports, human rights documentation, and institutional archives. As Bryman (2016) notes, documentary sources offer insightful perspectives on social and political processes, particularly when researchers critically evaluate the origins, purposes, and limitations of available materials.

The methodological orientation of this study is guided by the assumption that electoral violence is not merely an isolated breakdown of political order but a structured phenomenon embedded within relationships of power. Therefore, the analysis focuses on how non-state armed groups are created, mobilised, politically connected, and deployed within electoral contexts.

3.2 Sources of Data

The study draws upon multiple categories of secondary sources to ensure analytical depth and methodological triangulation. Triangulation is important in qualitative research because it allows researchers to examine a phenomenon from different perspectives and reduce dependence on a single source of evidence (Patton, 2015).

The first category consists of peer-reviewed academic literature, including journal articles, scholarly books, and edited volumes on electoral violence, political parties, informal security governance, authoritarian resilience, and human security. These sources provide the conceptual and theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between political power and coercive networks. Key academic contributions include studies on electoral violence in Africa ((Kiger, 2019; Höglund, 2009); Straus & Taylor, 2012), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010), political violence and collective action (Tilly, 2003), and informal political institutions (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

The second category comprises election observer reports and electoral monitoring documents produced by recognised regional and international organisations. These so(Kiger, 2019; Höglund, 2009); provide empirical evidence regarding election-related violence, intimidation, restrictions on political participation, and the conduct of electoral processes. Election observation reports are particularly

valuable because they document patterns of coercion and irregularities during specific electoral periods.

The third category includes human rights reports and civil society documentation. Reports produced by organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and established domestic civil society organisations provide evidence concerning violations of political rights, intimidation of opposition actors, and the experiences of affected communities. While such reports may reflect institutional perspectives, they remain important sources for documenting patterns of abuse and human insecurity.

The fourth category consists of government publications and official documents where available. These materials are examined critically because state documents may present politically motivated interpretations of security events. However, they provide useful information regarding official narratives, policy responses, and institutional approaches toward informal security actors.

The fifth category includes investigative media reports from reputable news organisations. Media investigations are used cautiously and primarily as supplementary evidence to identify events, actors, and political developments requiring further examination through academic and institutional sources.

Together, these sources provide a comprehensive evidential foundation for analysing the emergence, operation, and consequences of non-state coercive actors within electoral politics.

3.3 Case Selection and Comparative Justification

The selection of Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya follows a purposive comparative case selection strategy. Purposive selection is appropriate when cases are chosen because they provide significant analytical insights into a particular phenomenon rather than because they represent a random sample of a population (Patton, 2015).

These four countries were selected because they demonstrate different manifestations of informal political coercion while sharing broader characteristics associated with electoral competition, democratic transitions, and struggles over political authority. The cases therefore provide analytical variation that allows examination of how similar political practices develop under different institutional and historical conditions.

Nigeria: Political Thuggery, Electoral Violence, and Party-Linked Armed Groups

Nigeria represents a case where political coercion has frequently operated through patronage networks involving politicians, local strongmen, and armed youth groups. The country's competitive electoral environment and decentralised political structures have created conditions in which political actors often rely on informal networks to

mobilise support and intimidate opponents. Research on Nigerian politics highlights the role of political godfatherism, patron-client relations, and youth mobilisation in sustaining electoral violence (Albert, 2005; Adejumobi, 2000).

The Nigerian case is therefore significant for examining how political elites transform socially marginalised groups into instruments of electoral competition.

Uganda: Informal Security Networks and Opposition Suppression

Uganda provides insight into the relationship between informal security structures and regime stability. The country illustrates how community-based security initiatives may become politically contested spaces where security functions overlap with political mobilisation. Studies of Uganda's Crime Preventers programme demonstrate concerns regarding the potential transformation of informal security networks into mechanisms for political surveillance and electoral control (Tapscott, 2016).

The Ugandan case contributes to understanding how ruling elites may utilise informal security arrangements to strengthen political dominance while maintaining distance from direct coercive practices.

Tanzania: State-Linked Coercive Structures and Electoral Control

Tanzania represents a case where informal security organisations have historically interacted with state institutions. The country's experience with community-based vigilantism demonstrates how local security structures may become embedded within broader systems of governance and political authority. Fleisher (2000) shows that groups such as sungusungu reveal the complex relationship between state authority, local communities, and informal security provision. The Tanzanian case allows examination of how informal coercive arrangements develop legitimacy while simultaneously raising questions concerning accountability and political neutrality (Katabaro, 2026; Mahuwi & Ntyangiri, 2026).

Kenya: Ethnic Mobilisation and Electoral Militias

Kenya represents a case where electoral violence has been strongly associated with ethnic mobilisation, political competition, and youth militias. The 2007–2008 post-election crisis demonstrated how political elites could mobilise informal armed groups during periods of intense electoral competition. Scholars argue that Kenya's electoral violence was closely connected to elite strategies rather than merely spontaneous ethnic conflict (Branch & Cheeseman, 2015; Kagwanja, 2009).

The Kenyan case therefore provides important insights into the relationship between identity politics, political mobilisation, and informal armed networks.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary analytical method. Thematic analysis is appropriate because it enables researchers to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and meanings within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rather than treating cases as isolated examples, the method allows the study to compare how similar forms of political coercion appear across different national contexts.

The analysis is organised around four major themes:

1. Recruitment and Organisation of Armed Groups

The first analytical category examines how non-state armed groups emerge and acquire political relevance. Attention is given to:

- Recruitment processes;
- Sources of financial and political support;
- Social backgrounds of recruits;
- Organisational structures;
- Relationships with political parties and state actors.

This theme explores how ordinary social networks become transformed into instruments of political coercion.

2. Relationship between Political Elites and Informal Armed Actors

The second theme analyses the connections between political actors and non-state coercive groups. The study examines:

- Forms of patronage;
- Political protection;
- Informal agreements;
- Accountability gaps;
- Plausible deniability.

This theme is central to understanding how violence becomes politically useful while remaining institutionally hidden.

3. Electoral Functions of Non-State Armed Groups

The third theme examines the specific roles performed by informal coercive actors during electoral processes, including:

- Intimidation of opposition supporters;
- Disruption of political campaigns;
- Voter suppression;
- Surveillance;
- Enforcement of political loyalty.

This analysis demonstrates how armed groups influence electoral competition beyond direct acts of physical violence.

4. Human Security Consequences

The final theme evaluates the broader consequences of electoral coercion for citizens and communities. It focuses on:

- Physical insecurity;
- Displacement;
- Psychological fear;
- Restrictions on political participation;
- Social fragmentation.

This theme connects the study to the human security framework by demonstrating that electoral violence affects not only democratic institutions but also individual and collective wellbeing.

3.5 Methodological Limitations

Like all qualitative comparative studies, this research has limitations. Reliance on secondary sources means that the study depends on the availability, accuracy, and interpretation of existing documentation. Additionally, informal political violence is often difficult to verify because actors involved may conceal relationships with political elites, and victims may be reluctant to report abuses due to fear of retaliation.

However, the use of multiple source categories, including academic research, institutional reports, civil society documentation, and investigative materials, strengthens the credibility of the analysis. Through methodological triangulation, the study seeks to provide a balanced interpretation of the political dynamics surrounding non-state armed groups and electoral coercion.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: STATE-LINKED NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS, ELECTORAL COERCION, AND HUMAN SECURITY CONSEQUENCES IN NIGERIA, UGANDA, TANZANIA, AND KENYA

4.1 Introduction and Analytical Framework

The comparative analysis in this section examines how non-state armed groups become integrated into electoral politics and how their mobilisation affects democratic competition, electoral integrity, and human security in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. Building on the theoretical perspectives developed earlier, the analysis proceeds from the assumption that electoral violence is not merely an outcome of weak institutions, ethnic tensions, or spontaneous conflict among political supporters. Rather, it is frequently embedded within broader political strategies through which actors seek to influence electoral outcomes, maintain power, restrict opposition activity, and manage political competition.

The central analytical concern of this study is the process through which informal coercive actors are transformed from social groups, community organisations, youth networks, or security structures into

instruments of political control. Across the four cases examined, non-state armed groups do not operate independently from political systems. Their significance emerges from relationships involving political elites, state institutions, local communities, and broader structures of inequality. These relationships create what may be described as systems of hybrid coercion, where formal democratic institutions operate alongside informal mechanisms of intimidation and political control.

The comparative evidence demonstrates that the weaponisation of non-state armed groups occurs through three interconnected processes. First, political elites provide material resources, protection, and political legitimacy that enable informal actors to perform coercive functions. Second, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, particularly youth unemployment and marginalisation, create pools of recruits who can be mobilised for political purposes. Third, institutional ambiguity allows political actors to benefit from coercive outcomes while avoiding direct responsibility for violence.

This pattern reflects the argument of the political instrumentalisation of violence perspective: violence is not simply an expression of political disorder but can become a strategic resource used by competing actors to achieve political objectives. In electoral contexts, intimidation, surveillance, and physical violence become mechanisms for shaping political behaviour. The use of non-state actors allows political elites to influence electoral competition while maintaining plausible deniability because responsibility is dispersed across informal networks.

The four cases demonstrate different forms of this phenomenon. Nigeria represents a model of patronage-driven political coercion, where political thugs, youth gangs, and armed networks are frequently connected to elite competition and local power structures. Uganda demonstrates a more institutionalised form of informal coercion, where security-oriented community structures create spaces for surveillance and political control. Tanzania illustrates the gradual incorporation of local security organisations into systems of governance, creating blurred boundaries between community protection and security-orientated activity. Kenya demonstrates the most violent expression of electoral weaponisation, where ethnic mobilisation and militia activity have contributed to severe episodes of electoral insecurity. Despite these differences, the cases reveal a common underlying pattern: non-state armed groups become politically valuable because they provide coercive capacity outside the formal mechanisms of the state. They enable political actors to influence participation, restrict opposition mobilisation, and shape electoral environments without necessarily deploying official security institutions. Consequently, the consequences extend beyond elections themselves. The weaponisation of informal coercive actors produces wider human security challenges, including fear, displacement, psychological insecurity, reduced civic participation, and declining trust in democratic institutions.

The comparative analysis is therefore organised around four analytical questions derived from the research objectives:

1. How are non-state armed groups mobilised within electoral politics?

2. What mechanisms allow political elites to utilise informal coercive actors?

3. How does their involvement affect electoral integrity and democratic accountability?

4. What are the consequences for human security and democratic stability?

Table 4.1: Alignment between Research Questions and Comparative Findings

Research Question	Analytical Dimension	Comparative Focus	Expected Findings
RQ1: How are non-state armed groups mobilised within electoral politics in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya?	Recruitment processes, sources of support, organisational structures, political connections	Examines how political parties, elites, and state-linked actors transform informal groups into electoral instruments	Mobilisation occurs through patronage networks, economic vulnerability, community authority structures, security arrangements, and ethnic identities
RQ2: What mechanisms enable political elites to utilise informal coercive actors against opposition parties and civic actors?	Patronage, protection, institutional ambiguity, political sponsorship, surveillance	Investigates how political actors maintain control through informal coercive relationships	Elites provide resources, legitimacy, and protection while avoiding direct accountability for violence
RQ3: How does the involvement of non-state armed groups affect electoral integrity and human security?	Voter participation, opposition activities, intimidation, insecurity, displacement	Analyses the effects of coercive networks on democratic competition and citizens' wellbeing	Informal armed actors undermine free participation through intimidation, political exclusion, fear, violence, and weakened institutional trust
RQ4: What institutional reforms can reduce the political weaponisation of non-state violence?	Accountability mechanisms, reform, governance, inclusion	Identifies strategies for reducing dependence on coercive political networks	Effective reforms require security-sector accountability, political finance regulation, monitoring of informal networks, and social inclusion programmes

4.2 Nigeria: Political Thuggery, Armed Networks, and the Insecurity Environment of Electoral Competition

Nigeria provides one of the most significant examples of how non-state armed actors become embedded within electoral competition through informal political networks, patronage relationships, and weak accountability structures. Since the transition to multiparty democracy in 1999, elections in Nigeria have frequently been accompanied by allegations of intimidation, political violence, voter suppression, and the mobilisation of informal coercive actors. Although Nigeria possesses formal democratic institutions, including an independent electoral commission, constitutional mechanisms, and judicial processes, electoral competition has often been shaped by informal systems of power in which politicians rely on non-state actors to influence political outcomes.

The Nigerian case is particularly important because it demonstrates the interaction between political patronage, socioeconomic vulnerability, and coercive entrepreneurship. Unlike situations where armed groups operate entirely outside political systems, many Nigerian political gangs and youth networks become politically significant because they are incorporated into relationships with influential political actors. These

relationships often involve exchanging resources, protection, and political loyalty. In return, informal actors provide services that formal institutions cannot openly provide, including mobilisation of supincludng the mobilisation, intimidation of opponents, disruption of rival campaigns, and control over local political spaces.

From the perspective of the political instrumentalisation of violence, Nigeria illustrates that electoral violence is not simply an unintended consequence of competition. Rather, coercion may become a deliberate political strategy through which actors seek electoral advantage. Political elites who lack sufficient legitimacy or organisational capacity may rely on informal armed networks because these groups provide rapid access to local communities and havess the ability to influence political behaviour through fear and persuasion.

The Nigerian experience also reflects the concept of hybrid security governance. Political violence does not occur solely through formal state institutions or completely autonomous armed organisations. Instead, it develops within overlapping relationships between politicians,

community leaders, youth groups, criminal networks, and local power brokers. These relationships create accountability gaps because political sponsors often distance themselves from the actions of the groups they support.

4.2.1 Political Thuggery, Patronage Networks, and Electoral Mobilisation

Political thuggery represents one of the most persistent forms of electoral coercion in Nigeria. Political elites often recruit political thugs from socially and economically marginalised communities, where unemployment, poverty, and limited opportunities create conditions favourable for political mobilisation. These actors may initially exist as informal youth groups or local street organisations but become politically valuable when they are connected to electoral competition.

The relationship between political elites and youth-based coercive networks is commonly structured through patron-client exchanges. Political sponsors provide financial resources, protection from law enforcement, social recognition, and opportunities for economic advancement. In exchange, recruited groups provide

political services such as campaign mobilisation, enforcement of political loyalty, intimidation of opponents, and disruption of competing political activities.

Albert’s (2005) analysis of Nigerian “godfatherism” demonstrates how political authority frequently operates through informal relationships between powerful sponsors and dependent political actors. These networks allow political elites to extend their influence beyond formal party structures and into local communities. Within such systems, young men facing economic exclusion may become instruments of political competition because they possess local knowledge, social connections, and the capacity to perform coercive tasks.

The Area Boys in Lagos and Yan Kalare in northern Nigeria exemplify how informal youth networks can connect to political processes. Examples such as the Area Boys in Lagos and Yan Kalare in northern Nigeria illustrate how informal youth networks can become connected to political processes. While these groups are not permanent militias in the conventional sense, their political relevance demonstrates how criminal networks, social vulnerability, and electoral competition intersect.

The mobilisation process can therefore be understood through four interconnected stages:

Table 4.2.1: Political Mobilisation of Informal Armed Actors in Nigeria

Stage of Mobilisation	Political Process	Outcome
Social vulnerability	Politicians target unemployed and marginalised youth populations	Creates available pools of recruits
Patronage exchange	Political elites provide money, protection, and political access	Builds loyalty networks
Electoral deployment	Groups are mobilised during campaigns and elections	Enables intimidation and political control
Post-election continuation	Networks remain connected to local power structures	Sustains informal coercive capacity

This pattern directly addresses the first research question concerning how non-state armed groups about the mobilisation of non-state armed groups within electoral politics. In Nigeria, mobilisation occurs not through spontaneous violence but through organised relationships between political entrepreneurs and socially vulnerable populations.

4.2.2 Political Functions of Armed Networks During Elections

The political significance of informal armed actors in Nigeria extends beyond direct physical violence. Their primary importance lies in their ability to influence the broader electoral environment. These groups perform several political functions that affect the quality and

credibility of democratic competition.

First, they contribute to voter intimidation. The presence or threat of politically connected armed actors may discourage citizens from attending opposition rallies, expressing political preferences, or voting freely. In areas where citizens believe that political choices may result in retaliation, elections are held in fear, rather than genuine participation, influences elections in areas where citizens believe that political choices may lead to retaliation. by fear rather than genuine participation.

Second, informal coercive groups contribute to opposition suppression. Opposition parties may experience difficulties organising campaigns, establishing local structures, or mobilising supporters when competing against actors who are capable of using intimidation. Third, these groups may perform functions of political surveillance and community control. Through local

knowledge and social networks, informal actors can monitor political loyalties and identify individuals perceived as opposing dominant political interests.

Therefore, one should not interpret electoral coercion in Nigeria solely as coercion in Nigeria should not be understood only through visible incidents of violence. A significant part of political control occurs through the creation of an environment. Political control significantly relies on creating an environment where citizens anticipate potential consequences for their political participation. Anticipate possible consequences for political participation.

4.2.3 Boko Haram and the Transformation of Nigeria's Electoral Security Environment

Although Boko Haram differs from political thugs and

Human Security Dimension	Impact of Boko Haram-related Insecurity
Physical security	Attacks, killings, displacement, and destruction of communities
Electoral participation	Reduced voter access and difficulties conducting elections in insecure areas
Political security	Restricted civic engagement and weakened freedom of movement
Social security	Community fragmentation and mistrust

The Boko Haram case therefore expands the understanding of electoral coercion beyond direct political sponsorship. It demonstrates that democratic participation depends not only on electoral procedures but also on the broader security environment in which citizens make political choices.

4.2.4 Nigeria and the Research Questions

The Nigerian case provides important answers to the central research questions.

Regarding **how non-state armed groups are mobilised**, Nigeria demonstrates that recruitment occurs through patronage networks, financial incentives, political protection, and exploitation of socioeconomic vulnerability.

Regarding **how political elites utilise informal coercive actors**, the Nigerian experience shows that political actors rely on informal groups because they provide coercive capacity while allowing elites to avoid direct responsibility.

Regarding **the impact on electoral integrity**, Nigeria demonstrates that informal armed actors weaken democratic competition by intimidating voters, restricting opposition activity, and transforming elections into contests influenced by coercive power.

Regarding **human security consequences**, Nigeria reveals that political weaponisation produces insecurity beyond election periods. Citizens experience fear,

party-linked armed groups, its activities demonstrate another dimension of how non-state armed violence affects electoral integrity and human security. Boko Haram is not primarily an electoral organisation; however, its insurgency has transformed the political and security environment within which elections occur, particularly in northeastern Nigeria.

The significance of Boko Haram for this study is therefore analytical rather than classificatory. The group demonstrates that non-state armed actors can undermine democracy not only by directly manipulating elections but also by creating insecurity that limits citizens' ability to participate politically.

The insurgency has affected electoral processes through several mechanisms:

displacement, reduced participation, and declining confidence in democratic institutions.

Overall, Nigeria represents a model of **patronage-based electoral coercion**, where informal armed networks become extensions of political competition. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that democratic institutions alone cannot guarantee electoral integrity when informal systems of violence remain embedded within political structures.

4.3 Uganda: Crime Preventers, Informal Security Networks, and the Politics of Surveillance

Uganda represents a distinct form of political weaponisation of non-state actors in which coercion is not always expressed through visible electoral violence but through the expansion of informal security structures that operate between state authority, community organisation, and political mobilisation. Unlike Nigeria, where political coercion is frequently associated with party-linked thugs and patronage-based violence, Uganda demonstrates how political control can be exercised through security-oriented networks that create systems of surveillance, information gathering, and social regulation.

The Ugandan case is particularly significant because it highlights the transformation of security structures into politically contested spaces. The central analytical issue is not simply whether security-oriented groups directly participate in electoral violence, but how such groups create political advantages by shaping citizens'

perceptions of security, monitoring political behaviour, and influence but conditions under which opposition actors operate.

The emergence of informal security networks in Uganda reflects the broader phenomenon of **hybrid security governance**, where state institutions increasingly interact with community-based organisations and informal actors. In such arrangements, the boundaries between legitimate security provision and political control become increasingly blurred. Informal groups may perform publicly accepted functions such as crime prevention while simultaneously creating opportunities for political surveillance and unequal competition.

The Ugandan case therefore contributes to understanding a less visible form of electoral coercion. Whereas physical violence is the dominant concern in some electoral environments, coercion in Uganda often operates through administrative control, monitoring practices, restrictions on political space, and the presence of security-linked actors within communities.

4.3.1 The Crime Preventers Programme and Informal Security Governance

The Crime Preventers programme represents one of the most important examples of informal security mobilisation in contemporary Uganda. Established as a community-based initiative intended to support crime prevention efforts, the programme expanded significantly and generated debate regarding its relationship with state authority and political competition.

Officially, Crime Preventers were presented as community volunteers assisting law enforcement agencies by improving local security cooperation. However, their rapid expansion and proximity to state security structures raised concerns regarding the political implications of such a large informal security network, particularly during electoral periods.

Tapscott (2016) argues that crime preventers illustrate the complexity of hybrid security arrangements in which informal actors occupy an ambiguous position between citizens, security providers, and political agents. Their significance emerged from their ability to maintain a presence within local communities, collect information, influence perceptions of security, and potentially shape political behaviour.

This ambiguity is central to understanding their political importance. Unlike conventional militias whose activities may involve direct physical attacks, informal security networks can influence elections through more subtle mechanisms:

- monitoring communities.
- Gathering information about political activities;
- creating perceptions of state authority;
- influencing citizens' willingness to participate in opposition activities.

· Reinforcing the dominance of ruling political structures. Thus, Uganda demonstrates that political coercion does not always require open violence. Control may occur through the management of information, visibility, and perceptions of power.

4.3.2 Mechanisms of Political Utilisation of Informal Security Networks

The Ugandan case provides important insights into the second research question:

What mechanisms enable political elites to utilise informal coercive actors against opposition parties and civic actors?

Unlike Nigeria's patronage-based recruitment model, Uganda demonstrates a model based primarily on institutional ambiguity and security narratives. Informal actors gain political importance because they operate within spaces where security functions and political interests overlap. The Boko Haram case therefore expands the understanding of electoral coercion beyond direct political sponsorship. It demonstrates that demomoverlap. articulation depends not only on electoral procedures but also on the broader security environment in which citizens make political choices.

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Overall, Nigeria represents a model of **patronage-based electoral coercion**, where informal armed networks become extensions of political competition. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that democratic institutions alone cannot guarantee electoral integrity when informal systems of violence remain embedded

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This ambiguity is central to understanding their political importance. Unlike conventional militias whose activities may involve direct physical attacks, informal security networks can influence elections through more subtle mechanisms:

- 1) Monitoring communities.
- 2) Gathering information about political activities;
- 3) Creating perceptions of state authority;
- 4) Influencing citizens' willingness to participate in opposition activities.
- 5) Reinforcing the dominance of ruling political structures.

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Unlike Nigeria's patronage-based recruitment model, Uganda demonstrates a model based primarily on **institutional ambiguity and security narratives**. Informal actors gain political importance because they operate within spaces where security functions and political interests overlap.

The main mechanisms include:

Table 4.3.1: Mechanisms of Informal Security-Based Political Control in Uganda

Mechanism	Explanation	Political Effect
Security framing	Informal groups are justified as necessary for maintaining public order	Provides legitimacy for expanded state-linked networks
Community presence	Local-level actors maintain visibility within communities	Creates opportunities for monitoring and influence
Information gathering	Security networks collect knowledge about local activities	Enables political surveillance
Institutional ambiguity	Unclear distinction between security assistance and political mobilisation	Weakens accountability mechanisms
Unequal political environment	Opposition actors operate under greater uncertainty	Restricts competitive electoral conditions

This form of political control demonstrates the importance of analysing coercion beyond direct violence. A political system may experience democratic restrictions even where large-scale physical attacks are absent because citizens may modify their behaviour due to fear of surveillance or perceived political consequences.

4.3.3 Electoral Competition, Opposition Constraints, and Political Surveillance

Uganda's electoral environment illustrates how informal coercive structures can influence democratic competition through the creation of unequal political conditions. Elections require not only the existence of voting procedures but also an environment where citizens, opposition parties, and civil society organisations can participate freely.

However, when informal security networks become associated with ruling political structures, opposition actors may face difficulties in organising campaigns, mobilising supporters, and communicating political messages.

The impact of these structures can be understood through three dimensions:

1. Restriction of Political Space

Informal security networks may contribute to an environment where opposition supporters perceive political participation as risky. Even without direct violence, the possibility of monitoring or retaliation can reduce political engagement.

2. Unequal Electoral Competition

Democratic elections require relatively equal opportunities for competing political actors. When one political side benefits from extensive informal security networks, electoral competition becomes structurally unequal.

3. Weak Accountability

Because informal groups operate outside conventional security institutions, determining responsibility for intimidation or political pressure becomes difficult. Political elites can benefit from their activities while maintaining distance from their actions.

This reflects the broader argument of hybrid coercion: informal actors strengthen political control precisely because they operate in spaces where institutional responsibility is unclear.

4.3.4 Human Security Consequences of Informal Security Networks

Although Uganda's case involves less visible violence compared with Nigeria and Kenya, the human security implications remain significant. The human security framework emphasises that insecurity includes not only physical harm but also threats to political freedom, dignity, and psychological wellbeing.

The effects of informal security networks include:

Human Security Dimension	Impact in Uganda
Political security	Reduced freedom of association and increased constraints on opposition mobilisation
Psychological security	Fear of surveillance and uncertainty regarding political participation
Civic security	Reduced willingness to engage openly in political activities
Institutional security	Declining confidence in the neutrality of security structures

The Ugandan case demonstrates that democratic erosion may occur gradually through restrictions on political space rather than through dramatic episodes of electoral violence. The absence of widespread physical violence does not necessarily indicate the absence of coercion.

4.3.5 Uganda and the Research Questions

The Ugandan case provides several important conclusions.

First, regarding the mobilisation of non-state armed groups, Uganda demonstrates that mobilisation can occur through security-oriented structures rather than traditional political militias. Informal actors gain political relevance when they are connected to state security narratives and community-level authority.

Second, regarding mechanisms of elite utilisation, Uganda demonstrates the importance of institutional ambiguity. Political advantage emerges not necessarily through direct orders for violence but through the creation of informal systems that expand surveillance and political control.

Third, regarding electoral integrity, the Ugandan case shows that elections may remain procedurally organised while becoming substantively unequal. Political competition is weakened when opposition actors operate under conditions of uncertainty and surveillance.

Fourth, regarding human security, Uganda illustrates that coercion affects citizens through fear, restricted participation, and declining confidence in democratic institutions.

Overall, Uganda represents a model of security-based political control, where informal networks operate through the language of public protection while simultaneously shaping the political environment. The Ugandan experience demonstrates that the weaponisation of non-state actors does not always appear as open violence; it can also emerge through the gradual expansion of informal authority and surveillance mechanisms.

4.4 Tanzania: Sungusungu, Party Networks, and Embedded Informal Authority

Tanzania presents a different but equally important manifestation of the political weaponisation of non-state actors. Unlike Nigeria and Kenya, where electoral

coercion has frequently involved visible violence, armed confrontation, and direct intimidation, Tanzania illustrates a more institutionalised and less overt form of political control. The Tanzanian case demonstrates how informal security structures may become incorporated into systems of governance and gradually acquire political significance through their relationship with state authority, ruling-party networks, and local communities.

The importance of Tanzania lies in demonstrating that political coercion does not always depend on the existence of highly violent militias or openly partisan armed groups. Instead, coercive capacity may develop through informal institutions that initially emerge to address social problems such as crime, insecurity, and community protection. Over time, however, these structures may become connected to political authority, creating opportunities for their utilisation in managing political competition.

The Tanzanian experience therefore contributes to the study's broader argument that the weaponisation of non-state actors exists along a spectrum. At one end of this spectrum are highly visible forms of electoral violence involving armed groups and militias. At the other end are less visible systems of informal authority, surveillance, and political influence. Tanzania represents the latter form, where political control may operate through embedded relationships between community security structures and dominant political institutions.

This case is particularly relevant to the concept of hybrid security governance. The Tanzanian state has historically relied on interactions between formal security institutions and community-based security organisations. These arrangements challenge the assumption that state authority operates exclusively through official institutions. Instead, political order is often produced through overlapping systems involving state agencies, local leaders, community organisations, and informal security actors.

4.4.1 Sungusungu and the Evolution of Informal Security Authority

The Sungusungu movement represents one of the most prominent examples of community-based security organisation in Tanzania. Originally developed among rural communities as a response to cattle theft, crime, and local insecurity, Sungusungu emerged from local efforts to provide protection where formal security institutions

were perceived as insufficient.

Over time, however, Sungusungu became increasingly recognised and incorporated within broader security arrangements. This process illustrates the gradual institutionalisation of informal authority. Rather than remaining entirely outside the state, Sungusungu occupied an intermediate position where community legitimacy and state recognition interacted.

Fleisher (2000) demonstrates that Sungusungu represents a form of state-supported village vigilantism in which local communities participate in security provision while maintaining distinct informal structures. This relationship created both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, such organisations could improve local security by responding quickly to community concerns. On the other hand, their incorporation into governance systems created questions regarding neutrality, accountability, and political independence.

The central analytical issue is therefore not whether Sungusungu was originally created as a political

organisation. Rather, the important question is how informal security structures can become politically significant when they operate within environments where state authority, local power, and political competition overlap.

4.4.2 Informal Authority and Political Control

The Tanzanian case provides an important contribution to the second research question:

What mechanisms enable political elites to utilise informal coercive actors?

Unlike Nigeria, where political elites often directly sponsor youth groups, Tanzania demonstrates a more indirect mechanism. Political influence develops through the relationship between informal authority structures and dominant political institutions.

The mechanisms include:

Table 4.4.1: Mechanisms of Informal Authority-Based Political Control in Tanzania

Mechanism	Description	Political Implication
Institutional incorporation	Informal security groups become recognised within governance structures	Creates blurred boundaries between community security and state authority
Local legitimacy	Community acceptance gives informal actors social influence	Makes regulation and accountability difficult
Political embeddedness	Informal organisations operate within broader political environments	Allows dominant actors to influence local political spaces
Authority overlap	State institutions and informal structures share security functions	Creates uncertainty regarding responsibility
Social regulation	Community actors influence local behaviour and social expectations	May discourage political dissent

These mechanisms demonstrate that political coercion can operate through systems of authority rather than direct violence. When informal actors become embedded within governance structures, they may influence political participation by shaping perceptions of legitimacy, order, and acceptable behaviour.

4.4.3 Electoral Competition and the Management of Political Space

Tanzania has historically been characterised by less political instability than Kenya or Nigeria. However, lower levels of visible violence should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of fully competitive democratic conditions.

The Tanzanian case illustrates a different dimension of electoral coercion: the management and restriction of political space. Political competition may Informal mechanisms that shape the environment in which opposition actors operate may also affect political

competition, in addition to physical attacks. not only through physical attacks but also through informal mechanisms that shape the environment in which opposition actors operate.

The relationship between informal security structures and political authority raises several concerns:

1. Control of Local Political Environments

Informal actors embedded within communities may influence local political dynamics by reinforcing existing power relationships. Their authority may discourage challenges to dominant political actors.

2. Unequal Access to Political Participation

Democratic competition requires that all political actors operate under relatively equal conditions. When informal authority structures are closely connected to dominant political networks, opposition groups may face additional barriers.

3. Accountability Challenges

Because informal organisations operate between state institutions and communities, responsibility for political pressure or intimidation becomes difficult to determine. This creates the same accountability problem identified across the other cases: political benefits may be achieved without clear institutional responsibility.

Thus, Tanzania demonstrates a quieter but significant form of political weaponisation. Control is exercised not primarily through electoral violence but

through the maintenance of political dominance within informal systems of authority.

4.4.4 Human Security Implications of Embedded Informal Authority

Applying the human security framework reveals that Tanzania's form of political coercion affects citizens through indirect but important mechanisms.

The consequences include:

Human Security Dimension	Impact in Tanzania
Political security	Restrictions on political competition and opposition mobilisation
Civic security	Reduced openness of political participation
Institutional security	Weak accountability due to unclear authority relationships
Psychological security	Uncertainty regarding the consequences of political dissent
Community security	Potential reinforcement of divisions between dominant and excluded groups

Unlike Kenya's experience of mass displacement or Nigeria's experience of armed insecurity, Tanzania demonstrates how human insecurity can emerge through gradual democratic restriction. Citizens may avoid immediate physical danger, but may experience reduced confidence in political institutions and limited freedom to participate fully in political life.

4.4.5 Tanzania and the Research Questions

The Tanzanian case provides several important findings.

Regarding how non-state actors, Tanzania demonstrates that existing community authority structures, rather than direct political recruitment, may mobilise non-state actors. Tanzania demonstrates that existing community authority structures, rather than direct political recruitment, may mobilise non-state actors. Through existing community authority structures rather than through direct political recruitment. Informal security organisations acquire political significance when they are integrated into wider systems of governance. Tanzania demonstrates that institutional ambiguity is central to how political elites utilise informal coercive actors into wider systems of governance, informal security organisations gain political significance into wider systems of governance.

Regarding how political elites utilise informal coercive actors, Tanzania shows that institutional ambiguity is central. Political influence operates through relationships between formal institutions and informal organisations rather than through direct sponsorship.

Regarding electoral integrity, Tanzania demonstrates that democratic competition. Tanzania illustrates that widespread electoral violence can weaken democratic competition, highlighting the importance of electoral

integrity without widespread electoral violence. Political dominance can Restrictions on political space, unequal access to authority structures, and informal mechanisms of control can maintain political dominance through restrictions on political space, unequal access to authority structures, and informal mechanisms of control.

Regarding human security, Tanzania illustrates that insecurity includes threats to political freedom, civic participation, and institutional trust. The absence of large-scale violence does not eliminate the possibility of coercive political environments.

Overall, Tanzania represents a model of embedded informal authority, where non-state security structures become connected to political governance in ways that create opportunities for influence and control. The Tanzanian case expands the understanding of electoral coercion by demonstrating that the weaponisation of non-state actors may occur through institutional integration and political management rather than through direct armed confrontation.

4.5 Kenya: Ethnic Militias, Political Mobilisation, and Electoral Violence

Kenya represents one of the most prominent examples of electoral violence involving the mobilisation of non-state armed groups in Africa. Unlike Tanzania, where coercion has often operated through embedded informal authority structures, or Uganda, where political control has frequently been associated with security-oriented networks, Kenya demonstrates the destructive potential of openly politicised militias operating within highly competitive security-oriented environments.

The Kenyan case is particularly significant because it reveals the relationship between elite political competition, ethnic mobilisation, youth militias, and

electoral insecurity. The country illustrates how elections can become arenas in which political elites mobilise social identities and informal armed networks to influence outcomes, defend political interests, and challenge competing groups. The 2007–2008 post-election crisis remains one of the most important examples of how political competition can escalate into widespread violence when non-state armed actors become integrated into electoral strategies.

However, the Kenyan experience should not be interpreted simply as a consequence of ethnic hostility or spontaneous communal conflict. Rather, existing scholarship demonstrates that ethnic identities often become politically activated through elite strategies. Political actors may mobilise ethnic narratives, historical grievances, and youth networks because these provide effective mechanisms for building support and exerting coercive pressure. Therefore, Kenya illustrates the central argument of this study: non-state armed groups become politically dangerous when they are transformed from social organisations into instruments of political competition.

The Kenyan case provides the strongest illustration of the relationship between electoral violence and human insecurity. The consequences of militia mobilisation extend beyond election outcomes to include killings, displacement, trauma, social fragmentation, and long-term damage to relations between communities.

Table 4.5.1: Political Transformation of Social Groups into Electoral Militias in Kenya

Stage	Process	Political Outcome
Social organisation	Groups emerge around cultural, territorial, or community identities	Creates existing networks of mobilisation
Political activation	Elites connect group identities to electoral competition	Converts social loyalty into political support
Militia mobilisation	Groups engage in intimidation or violence	Influences voting behaviour and political outcomes

This process demonstrates that militias do not necessarily emerge solely because communities are naturally violent. Instead, political entrepreneurs may activate existing social divisions when such mobilisation provides electoral advantages.

4.5.2 The 2007–2008 Post-Election Crisis and the Weaponisation of Identity

The 2007–2008 Kenyan post-election crisis represents the clearest example of the consequences of politically mobilised non-state violence. Following disputed presidential election results, violence spread across several parts of the country, resulting in deaths, displacement, destruction of property, and deepened ethnic tensions.

The crisis showed that violence at the polls was not just an uncontrolled response by communities. Rather,

4.5.1 Ethnic Mobilisation and the Formation of Political Militias

The emergence of political militias in Kenya is closely connected to the intersection between identity politics, economic vulnerability, and elite competition. Various informal armed groups have historically developed around ethnic, territorial, or community-based identities. While some originated from social, cultural, or security-related organisations, many became politically significant when connected to electoral struggles.

Important examples include:

- The Mungiki movement, which developed from a cultural and religious organisation into a politically influential network;
- The Sabaot Land Defence Force (SLDF), which became associated with land, identity, and political grievances;
- Various ethnic youth militias mobilised during periods of electoral competition.

These groups demonstrate how social networks can be transformed into coercive political instruments. Their effectiveness comes from their ability to mobilise quickly through existing community relationships and identity-based connections.

The process of political mobilisation generally involves three stages:

political competition interacted with existing grievances, elite mobilisation strategies, and organised youth networks.

Branch and Cheeseman (2009) argue that Kenya’s crisis reflected deeper problems associated with democratic competition in a context where political elites relied on informal structures of mobilisation. Similarly, Kagwanja (2009) highlights Kagwanja (2009) also highlights the interconnection of populism, ethnic nationalism, and informal violence during the crisis. during the crisis.

The Kenyan case therefore challenges explanations that portray electoral violence as merely ethnic conflict. Ethnicity provided the language and social foundation for mobilisation, but political competition provided the incentive and organisational structure.

The relationship can be represented as follows:

Political Condition	Mobilisation Mechanism	Result
Competitive elections	Elite competition for state power	Increased incentives for coercive mobilisation
Historical grievances	Activation of ethnic narratives	Stronger group loyalty
Youth vulnerability	Recruitment of unemployed young people	Expansion of militia capacity
Weak accountability	Limited punishment of perpetrators	Continuation of political violence

4.5.3 Functions of Electoral Militias in Kenya

Political militias in Kenya perform several functions within electoral competition. Their role extends beyond direct violence and includes broader forms of political influence.

1. Voter intimidation

Militias influence political behaviour by creating fear among communities that Militias instil fear in communities perceived to support rival political actors, thereby influencing political behaviour. to support rival political actors. The threat of violence can discourage voting, campaign participation, or public expression of political preferences.

2. Territorial control

Because many militias are connected to specific communities or geographic areas, they may attempt to establish control over political spaces and restrict access by competing groups.

3. Opposition suppression

Militia activity can limit the ability of rival parties to

campaign effectively, particularly in areas where violence or threats make political organization dangerous.

4. Identity-based mobilization

Militias reinforce narratives of collective defence, presenting political competition as a struggle between communities rather than between political programs.

These functions demonstrate how non-state armed groups influence elections without necessarily replacing formal political institutions. Instead, they reshape the environment in which those institutions operate.

4.5.4 Kenya and Human Security Consequences

Kenya provides the strongest evidence for the human security consequences of politically weaponized non-state violence.

Unlike approaches that define security primarily through state stability, the human security framework focuses on how political violence affects individuals and communities. The Kenyan experience demonstrates multiple forms of insecurity:

Table 4.5.2: Human Security Consequences of Electoral Militias in Kenya

Human Security Dimension Consequence	
Physical security	Killings, injuries, destruction of homes and property
Community security	Ethnic tensions, displacement, breakdown of social relations
Political security	Reduced freedom of participation and expression
Psychological security	Trauma, fear, and long-term insecurity
Economic security	Loss of livelihoods and disruption of local economies

The displacement caused by electoral violence represents one of the most significant consequences. Citizens may be forced to leave their homes because of perceived ethnic or political threats, creating long-term social and economic consequences.

Furthermore, repeated experiences of electoral violence can produce what may be described as a culture of political insecurity, where citizens approach elections with fear rather than confidence. In such environments, democratic participation becomes associated with personal risk.

4.5.5 Kenya and the Research Questions

The Kenyan case provides important answers to the study's research questions.

Regarding how non-state armed groups are mobilized, Kenya demonstrates that mobilization occurs through ethnic networks, political identity formation, elite competition, and recruitment of socially vulnerable youth. Regarding how political elites utilize informal coercive actors, Kenya illustrates that elites may activate existing

social organizations and communal grievances to create politically useful armed networks.

Regarding electoral integrity, Kenya demonstrates that militia mobilization can fundamentally undermine democratic competition by transforming elections into contests shaped by fear, violence, and insecurity.

Regarding human security, Kenya provides the strongest evidence that electoral coercion affects not only political institutions but also citizens' physical safety, psychological well-being, and social relationships.

Overall, Kenya represents a model of identity-based electoral violence, where ethnic mobilization and militia activity combine to produce severe democratic and humanitarian consequences. The Kenyan case exemplifies the most detrimental capacity of weaponized non-state actors: the conversion of electoral competition from a tranquil mechanism of political selection into a conflict governed by coercion and communal instability.

The title of the study is "Weaponized Politics: Democratic Recovery and the Imperative to De-weaponize Politics in Africa."

This study has examined the political weaponization of non-state armed groups and their consequences for electoral integrity and human security in Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. The comparative analysis demonstrates that the persistence of electoral violence in Africa cannot be explained solely by institutional weakness, ethnic tensions, or individual acts of political disorder. Rather, it is deeply connected to the strategic use of informal coercive networks by political actors seeking electoral advantage, regime survival, or control over political competition.

Across the four cases, non-state armed groups assume different organizational forms and operate within different political environments. In Nigeria, political thugs, youth gangs, and broader armed insecurity networks illustrate how patronage politics can transform socially marginalized populations into instruments of electoral coercion. The Boko Haram insurgency further demonstrates how non-state armed violence can reshape political environments by creating insecurity that restricts democratic participation and weakens state legitimacy. Uganda's Crime Preventers reveal how informal security structures can blur the boundaries between community protection and political surveillance. Tanzania demonstrates how embedded local security arrangements may reinforce political dominance through informal authority structures, while Kenya illustrates the most destructive consequences of politically mobilized ethnic militias through large-scale electoral violence and communal insecurity.

Despite these variations, a common pattern emerges: informal armed actors provide political elites with mechanisms of coercion that are both effective and deniable. These groups allow political actors to influence electoral processes without relying exclusively on formal state institutions or accepting direct responsibility for coercive practices. Their significance therefore lies not only in their capacity to use violence but also in their ability

to operate within spaces of institutional ambiguity where accountability remains limited.

The findings challenge approaches that view electromobilization as the primary solution to democratic fragility. While improvements in electoral administration, voter registration, ballot management, and dispute resolution remain essential, they cannot independently address the deeper political incentives that sustain electoral coercion. Elections may become procedurally stronger while remaining substantively vulnerable if political competition continues to be shaped by intimidation, patronage, and informal violence.

The central argument of this article is therefore that democratic consolidation requires the de-weaponization of politics. This involves transforming political competition from a struggle managed through coercion into a process based on persuasion, accountability, and institutional trust. Achieving this requires reforms that address not only electoral procedures but also the broader political and socioeconomic structures that enable non-state armed actors to flourish.

First, security sector accountability is essential. State security institutions must operate according to constitutional principles of neutrality, professionalism, and civilian oversight. Where security agencies tolerate politically connected armed actors or selectively enforce laws, informal coercive networks. Security agencies further legitimise informal coercive networks by tolerating politically connected armed actors or selectively enforcing laws. Strengthening oversight mechanisms, improving accountability procedures, and ensuring equal protection of citizens are therefore critical to reducing political violence.

Self-legitimized. tion of political financing is necessary to weaken the patronage systems that sustain armed mobilization. In many African contexts, political violence is connected to financial networks through which elites provide resources to informal actors in exchange for political services. Transparent campaign financing regulations, effective monitoring mechanisms, and enforcement against illicit political funding are essential for reducing the economic incentives behind electoral violence.

Third, systematic monitoring of informal armed networks should become an important component of electoral security strategies. Traditional electoral monitoring often focuses on polling procedures, campaign activities, and voting processes, but insufficient attention is given to the informal networks that shape political environments before Election Day. Early-warning systems, community-level monitoring, and collaboration with civil society organisations can help identify emerging risks associated with armed mobilisation.

Fourth, the protection of opposition parties and civic actors remains fundamental to democratic legitimacy. Elections cannot be considered genuinely competitive where opposition actors operate under conditions of intimidation, surveillance, or violence. Governments must organizations political rights, protect freedom of

assembly, and guarmobilization.position participation is not undermined by informal coercive actors.

Fifth, strengthening independent electoral institutions remains central to democratic recovery. Electoral commissions require not only legal independence but also public credibility, adequate resources, and the capacity to respond effectively to political intimidation. Strong electoral institutions can reduce opportunities for manipulation and increase citizen confidence in democratic processes.

Finally, youth employment and social inclusion programs represent a long-term strategy for reducing recruitment into armed networks. Across the cases, examining guaranteed mobilization frequently become targets of political mobilization because economic insecurity creates conditions in which p, examining guaranteedcoercive networks becomes attractive. Addressing unemployment, mobilizing educational opportunities, and promoting meaningful political inclusion can reduce examining guaranteed coerciver politically motivated violence.

The broader implication of this study extends beyond the four countries examined. Across Africa, the survival of electoral democracy depends not only on the preseAddressing unemployment,ctions but also on the conditions under which electiopresence of electionsthrough intimidation rather than persuaselections are managed. If elections arermal procedures while losing their democratic substance. Democratic legitimacy requires more than periodic voting; it requires a political environment where citizens can participate freely, opposition actors can compete safely, and political power is pursued through institutions rather than coercion.

Ultimately, the challenge facing African democracies is not simply how to organize better elections but how to transform the political incentives that make violence useful. De-weaponizing politics requires confronting the informal structures of power tha political environment where citizens democratic systems in which legitimacy derives from public trust, not fear. Without such transformation, electoral continuity may coin thest with democratic decline; hcitizens havewith sustained institutional reform, accountability, trust, and notions, African democracies can move from elections of survival toward elections of genuine political choice.

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