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State-Sponsored Militias, Electoral Violence, and Democratic Backsliding in Africa: Implications for Peace and Regional Security

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Abstract

The persistence of electoral violence and the emergence of state-linked non-state armed groups represent significant challenges to democratic consolidation and peacebuilding in Africa. This article examines how the alleged mobilisation and instrumentalisation of state-sponsored militias, political thugs, party youth groups, vigilante organisations, and other informal coercive networks during electoral processes contribute to democratic backsliding and undermine regional security. Drawing on comparative analysis of selected African cases, the study explores the relationship between political elites, informal coercive actors, and electoral competition, arguing that the outsourcing of coercive authority to non-state actors enables ruling elites to suppress opposition, intimidate voters, manipulate electoral outcomes, and weaken institutional accountability. The article further demonstrates that electoral violence extends beyond domestic political instability by generating broader peace and security consequences, including cycles of retaliation, displacement, erosion of state legitimacy, and cross-border insecurity. By situating electoral violence within debates on hybrid governance, state fragility, and democratic decline, the article highlights how informal coercive arrangements blur the boundaries between state and non-state violence. It concludes that strengthening democratic institutions, improving security sector governance, enhancing electoral accountability, and addressing the political incentives behind militia formation are essential for reducing electoral violence and promoting sustainable peace and regional stability in Africa.

Keywords: state-sponsored militias; electoral violence; democratic backsliding; political coercion; human security; regional security; Africa

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1. INTRODUCTION: ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN AFRICA

1.0 Introduction

The expansion of multiparty democracy across Africa since the early 1990s generated considerable optimism regarding the continent's political transformation. After years of authoritarian rule, military coups, and one-party systems, many African countries introduced changes to their constitutions, electoral systems, and institutions to encourage democratic

governance. Elections became the primary avenue through which citizens could participate in political decision-making and hold leaders accountable. However, despite the institutionalisation of electoral processes, democratic consolidation has remained uneven. In many African countries, elections have increasingly become associated with intimidation, political exclusion, coercion,

and organised violence rather than with peaceful competition and democratic accountability (Cheeseman, 2015; Schedler, 2013; Bernhard et al., 2020).

A major challenge confronting African democracies is the continued reliance of political elites on informal coercive actors, including militias, political vigilantes, party youth wings, ethnic defence groups, and community-based armed organisations, such as the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). These actors operate within the uncertain boundaries between state authority and non-state violence. While they may not formally belong to government security institutions, they frequently receive political protection, financial assistance, logistical support, or selective immunity from state officials. Through these relationships, governments and ruling parties are able to employ coercion while avoiding direct responsibility for human rights violations and electoral manipulation (Carey et al., 2013).

This study argues that electoral violence in Africa This study contends that electoral violence in Africa represents a broader manifestation of democratic erosion, institutional weakness, and struggles over state power, rather than isolated incidents occurring solely during election periods. merely as isolated incidents occurring during election periods. Rather, it represents a broader manifestation of democratic erosion, institutional weakness, and struggles over state power. State-linked militias provide political elites with alternative mechanisms of control where formal institutions such as police forces, courts, and electoral commissions are unable or unwilling to guarantee democratic competition. Consequently, the existence of electoral militias raises fundamental questions about the quality of democracy, the legitimacy of elections, and the prospects for sustainable peace and security in Africa.

1.1 Background to the Study

The relationship between elections and violence has become one of the central concerns in the study of African politics. Although elections are designed to provide peaceful mechanisms for political competition, they often become moments of heightened insecurity because political actors view electoral victory as access to state resources, economic opportunities, and political survival. In many African states where institutions remain fragile and political power is highly personalised, losing an election may represent not simply a temporary political setback but a threat to economic security and social status (Arriola, 2013).

The democratisation processes of the 1990s introduced multiparty elections in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, and Burkina Faso. However, the transition from authoritarian rule to electoral democracy did not always produce strong democratic institutions. Instead, many states developed hybrid

political systems where democratic procedures coexist with authoritarian practices, including political repression, electoral manipulation, and the use of informal coercive networks (Sithole, 2023; Cheeseman, 2015).

In these environments, political elites often rely on informal security actors because conventional state institutions may face legal restrictions, public scrutiny, or international monitoring. Unlike official security forces, militias provide political leaders with flexibility and plausible deniability. They can intimidate opposition supporters, disrupt political campaigns, influence voter behaviour, and enforce local political control without creating direct institutional accountability (Carey et al., 2013).

The emergence of state-linked militias therefore reflects deeper weaknesses in democratic governance. Their activities demonstrate that the existence of elections alone does not guarantee democracy. Democratic consolidation requires effective institutions, civilian control of security forces, rule of law, and protection of political freedoms. Where political elites maintain access to armed informal networks, elections may reproduce authoritarian practices rather than strengthen democratic governance.

1.2 State-Linked Militias and Electoral Competition in Africa

1.2.1 Nigeria: Political Thuggery, Militias, and Electoral Control

Nigeria provides one of the most significant examples of the relationship between electoral competition and informal coercive actors. Since the restoration of civilian government in 1999, Nigerian elections have been characterised by episodes of political violence involving party supporters, armed youth groups, and local militias. Political elites at both the federal and state levels have frequently mobilised unemployed youth and community-based armed groups to influence electoral outcomes.

In states such as Rivers, Bayelsa, Kaduna, and Plateau, politicians have historically relied on networks of political “thugs” to intimidate opponents, disrupt campaigns, and control voting environments. In the Niger Delta region, armed groups originally associated with resource grievances have also been incorporated into political networks, demonstrating how local insecurity can become connected to electoral competition. These relationships illustrate how politicians exploit existing social tensions and economic vulnerabilities to build informal coercive structures (Khan, 2018).

Although Nigeria has strengthened electoral institutions through reforms by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), informal political violence remains a significant challenge. The persistence of electoral militias reflects broader problems of weak accountability, patronage politics, and competition over

control of state resources (Boone, 2007).

1.2.2 Kenya: Ethnic Militias and Electoral Violence

Kenya represents another important case where electoral competition serves as another significant example of the close connection between electoral competition and organised violence. The 2007–2008 post-election crisis remains one of the most severe examples of electoral violence in Africa's recent history. Following disputes over presidential election results, violence erupted across several regions, resulting in more than 1,000 deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

Research on Kenya demonstrates that political elites have historically mobilised ethnic networks and youth militias to strengthen their electoral positions. Groups such as the Mungiki movement among sections of the Kikuyu community and other localised armed organisations became involved in political mobilisation and retaliatory violence. These groups provided politicians with mechanisms for controlling communities and punishing electoral opponents (Mueller, 2014). Although Kenya's 2010 constitution introduced important institutional reforms, such as greater judicial independence and decentralisation, ethnic alliances and informal coercive networks continue to influence political competition. Ethnic alliances and informal coercive networks continue to influence political competition in Kenya. The Kenyan case demonstrates how democratic institutions may coexist with informal systems of violence that undermine electoral legitimacy.

1.2.3 Uganda: Ruling Party Networks and Political Coercion

Uganda illustrates how state-linked coercion can operate within a long-term dominant-party political system. Since President Yoweri Museveni and the National Resistance Movement (NRM) assumed power in 1986, Uganda has maintained regular elections while limiting meaningful political competition.

During election periods, opposition parties have repeatedly accused the government of using security agencies, local defence structures, and ruling-party youth networks to intimidate their opponents. The use of informal political networks enables the ruling elite to maintain control while avoiding reliance solely on formal state institutions.

The Ugandan case demonstrates how electoral authoritarian practices may develop through the combination of formal democratic institutions and informal coercive mechanisms. Elections occur regularly, but the political environment is shaped by unequal access to resources, restrictions on opposition activities, and the presence of state-aligned coercive actors (Tangri & Mwenda, 2013).

1.2.4 Cameroon: State Authority, Armed Networks, and Electoral Legitimacy

Cameroon provides an example of how prolonged authoritarian dominance can weaken democratic institutions and encourage reliance on coercive structures. Since the introduction of multiparty elections in the 1990s, President Paul Biya and the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) have maintained political dominance.

Opposition groups have frequently accused the government of using administrative structures, security forces, and loyalist networks to restrict political competition. The crisis in Cameroon's Anglophone regions further demonstrates how political exclusion, weak institutions, and insecurity can create conditions where armed groups become involved in struggles over legitimacy.

The use of coercive actors has weakened public confidence in elections and contributed to broader challenges of state legitimacy. Cameroon demonstrates how electoral governance becomes increasingly fragile when political competition occurs in an environment characterised by repression and insecurity.

1.2.5 Burkina Faso: Electoral Politics, Self-Defence Militias, and State Fragility

Burkina Faso illustrates the relationship between political instability, insecurity, and the emergence of armed civilian groups. Following the 2014 popular uprising that removed President Blaise Compaoré, the country attempted democratic reconstruction. However, increasing jihadist violence created severe security challenges.

The government created and supported the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) to demonstrate how weak states may increasingly rely on civilian militias to compensate for their limited security capacities. Although these groups primarily serve as security actors, there are concerns regarding their accountability, human rights abuses, and potential politicisation. These groups primarily act as security actors, leading to concerns about accountability, human rights abuses, and potential politicisation. Concerns about accountability, human rights abuses, and potential politicisation have emerged primarily due to these groups' roles as security actors. The emergence of concerns regarding accountability, human rights abuses, and potential politicisation primarily stems from these groups' roles as security actors. This concern arises primarily because these groups function as security actors.

The Burkina Faso case highlights the dangers of normalising armed civilian mobilisation. Once established, such groups may become difficult to control

and can contribute to long-term insecurity and institutional weakening (Hagberg, 2019; Robinson, 2022; Taterová, 2024).

1.3 Problem Statement

Despite decades of democratic reforms and electoral institutional development, many African states continue to experience electoral violence and political instability. A major explanation for this persistence is the ability of political elites to use state-linked militias as instruments of political competition.

Existing studies often focus on election-related violence as short-term outbreaks occurring before, during, or after elections. However, this perspective overlooks the institutional and political structures that enable violence to persist. State-linked militias represent deeper failures of democratic consolidation because they demonstrate the inability or unwillingness of political institutions to regulate competition peacefully.

The continued existence of electoral militias raises important concerns regarding democratic legitimacy, human security, and regional stability. These groups not only influence electoral outcomes but may also contribute to criminal violence, communal conflicts, insurgencies, and weakened state authority after elections.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do state-linked militias shape electoral competition in African states?
2. In what ways does the use of informal coercive actors contribute to democratic backsliding?
3. How do electoral militias affect political stability, human security, and regional peace in Africa?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. Examine the role of state-linked militias in shaping electoral competition in Africa.
2. Analyse how informal coercive organisations contribute to democratic erosion.
3. Assess the implications of electoral militias for peace and security in Africa.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to debates on African democratisation, political violence, and security governance by demonstrating that electoral violence is not simply a temporary breakdown of order but a

reflection of deeper institutional weaknesses. Understanding state-linked militias reveals why some African democracies experience persistent instability despite regular elections.

The research also contributes to policy debates concerning electoral reform, security-sector governance, peacebuilding, and international democracy-support programmes.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: STATE-SPONSORED MILITIAS, POLITICAL VIOLENCE, AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

2.0 Introduction

Understanding the relationship between electoral violence, state-sponsored militias, and democratic decline requires a conceptual framework that moves beyond the traditional assumption that violence represents a temporary breakdown of political order. In many African states, electoral violence is not simply the result of spontaneous conflict between rival supporters or communities; rather, it is frequently embedded within broader systems of political control, elite competition, and institutional weakness. Political actors often employ informal armed groups as strategic instruments to influence electoral processes, intimidate opponents, and preserve access to state power. Consequently, the study of electoral violence requires an examination of how states interact with non-state coercive actors and how these relationships affect democratic consolidation.

This chapter develops the conceptual foundation of the study by examining three interconnected concepts: **state-sponsored militias**, **political violence**, and **democratic backsliding**. The chapter argues that state-linked militias represent a form of hybrid governance in which formal state institutions coexist with informal coercive networks. These actors occupy an ambiguous position between legality and illegality, allowing political elites to exercise violence while avoiding direct responsibility. Furthermore, electoral violence is conceptualised as a deliberate political strategy used to shape electoral outcomes rather than merely as an unintended consequence of political competition. Finally, the chapter demonstrates how militia-based politics contributes to democratic backsliding by weakening institutions, undermining accountability, restricting civil liberties, and reducing citizens' confidence in democratic governance (Boone, 2007).

The conceptual framework draws upon four major theoretical perspectives: **hybrid governance theory**, **political settlement theory**, **state fragility theory**, and **competitive authoritarianism theory**. Together, these perspectives provide analytical tools for explaining why state institutions in some African countries rely on informal coercive organisations and how such practices undermine democratic development.

2.1 Conceptualising State-Sponsored Militias and Hybrid Governance

2.1.1 Definition and Characteristics of State-Sponsored Militias

"State-sponsored militias" refer to non-state armed organisations that receive varying degrees of support, protection, coordination, or political authorisation from state actors. Unlike official security institutions such as the military and police, militias operate outside conventional legal structures. However, their activities governments and political elites often tolerate, encourage, or strategically manage the activities of state-sponsored militias. by governments and political elites. The relationship between the state and militias may involve direct financing, provision of weapons, intelligence sharing, recruitment assistance, political protection, or selective immunity from prosecution (Carey et al., 2013).

The defining characteristic of state-sponsored militias is therefore not simply their existence outside formal government institutions but their connection to state power. These groups operate in a political environment where the boundaries between state authority and non-state violence are blurred. These groups operate in a political environment that blurs the lines between state authority and non-state violence. They may appear independent from government structures while simultaneously serving the interests of ruling elites. This ambiguity provides governments with strategic advantages because they can benefit from coercive outcomes while denying formal involvement in violence.

Carey et al. (2013) state that pro-government militias are often created or supported by states facing political challenges because they provide governments with additional coercive capacity without imposing the same political and legal costs associated with deploying official security forces. In electoral contexts, these groups can be particularly attractive because they allow political leaders to influence competition while avoiding direct accountability for abuses committed against opposition actors.

In Africa, state-sponsored militias have appeared in different forms depending on historical and political contexts. In Nigeria, political parties have frequently relied on armed youth groups and local political enforcers to intimidate opponents during elections. In Kenya, ethnic-based militias have historically political elites in Kenya have historically mobilised ethnic-based militias by political elites during periods of electoral competition. In Uganda, ruling party networks and local defence structures Ruling party networks and local defence structures in Uganda maintain political dominance. to maintain political dominance. In Burkina Faso, civilian defence organisations such as the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) demonstrate how

governments facing security crises increasingly rely on armed non-state actors. Although these cases differ, they share a common pattern: political authorities using informal coercive actors to compensate for institutional weaknesses or pursue political objectives.

2.1.2 State-Sponsored Militias as Instruments of Political Control

The political significance of state-sponsored militias lies in their ability to extend state power beyond formal institutions. In fragile or competitive political environments, governments may consider conventional security institutions insufficient for controlling populations, managing opposition movements, or influencing electoral outcomes. Militias therefore become instruments through which elites exercise political authority indirectly.

Unlike regular security forces, militias provide several strategic benefits. First, they allow governments to avoid direct responsibility for violence. When militia members attack opposition supporters, journalists, civil society activists, or minority communities, political leaders can claim that such actions are independent activities rather than state policy. This creates what scholars describe as **plausible deniability**, enabling governments to maintain international legitimacy while benefiting from coercive practices (Raleigh, 2010).

Second, militias often possess local knowledge and social connections that formal security forces lack. Because they are embedded within communities, they can identify political opponents, monitor local populations, and enforce political loyalty more effectively than distant state institutions. This explains why political elites frequently recruit unemployed youth, ethnic networks, or community-based organisations as instruments of electoral mobilisation.

Third, militias provide governments with flexibility. Formal security institutions Constitutional rules, judicial oversight, and international human rights standards constrain formal security institutions. by constitutional rules, judicial oversight, and international human rights standards. Informal armed groups, however, operate with fewer restrictions. Their unofficial status allows political actors to engage in coercive practices while limiting institutional consequences.

The Nigerian case demonstrates this dynamic. Political elites have historically mobilised local armed groups during elections because these actors can intimidate opponents and influence voting behaviour while allowing politicians to deny responsibility. Similarly, Kenya's experience shows how political elites have utilised ethnic networks and youth organisations to strengthen their electoral bargaining power. These examples demonstrate that militias are not simply security actors; they are political instruments embedded within

systems of competition for state power.

2.1.3 Twilight Institutions and Informal Governance

The concept of **twilight institutions** provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between formal states and informal coercive actors. "Twilight institutions" refer to organisations and networks that operate between official state structures and informal social arrangements. They are somewhat dependent on the state and partially incorporated into government institutions. Instead, they occupy an ambiguous space where authority, legitimacy, and coercive power are negotiated between state and non-state actors (Lund, 2006). Instead, they occupy an ambiguous space where state and non-state actors negotiate authority, legitimacy, and coercive power (Lund, 2006). This negotiation occurs between state and non-state actors (Lund, 2006).

In many African contexts, political authority often operates outside of formal bureaucratic institutions. Instead, governance often depends on informal networks involving traditional authorities, community organisations, patronage systems, business elites, and armed groups. These arrangements emerge because state institutions may lack capacity, legitimacy, or territorial control.

Militias represent one form of twilight institution because they perform functions associated with the state while remaining outside formal structures. They may provide security, enforce political order, regulate communities, or protect political interests. However, unlike legitimate state institutions, they operate without transparent accountability mechanisms.

This creates significant challenges for democratic governance. When governments rely on informal coercive actors, the distinction between lawful authority and political violence becomes increasingly unclear. Citizens may experience the state not as a neutral institution protecting rights but as a system where access to power depends on personal connections and coercive networks.

2.2 Electoral Violence as a Political Strategy

2.2.1 Beyond the Understanding of Electoral Violence as Disorder

Traditional explanations often portray electoral violence because of ethnic conflict, social instability, or citizen frustration. While these factors may contribute to violence, contemporary research demonstrates that electoral violence is frequently a calculated political strategy employed by elites seeking electoral advantage.

Electoral violence involves the intentional use or threat of physical force during electoral periods to influence political outcomes. It includes intimidation,

assassination, voter suppression, destruction of campaign materials, harassment of opposition supporters, manipulation of security institutions, and attacks against electoral officials (Höglund, 2009).

Rather than representing a failure of politics, violence may function as an extension of political competition. Political actors employ coercion when they believe the benefits of controlling electoral outcomes outweigh the risks of punishment. In weak institutional environments, violence becomes an alternative method of political bargaining.

2.2.2 Mechanisms through Which Electoral Militias Influence Elections

State-sponsored militias influence elections through several mechanisms.

(a) Intimidation and Political Threats

One of the most common strategies involves creating fear among opposition supporters. Militias may threaten voters, disrupt opposition campaigns, or attack political organisers. The objective is not always to oppose completely, but to reduce participation among groups perceived as unfavourable to ruling parties.

(b) Voter Suppression

Violence can influence electoral participation by preventing certain communities from accessing polling stations or participating freely. In areas where militias operate, citizens may avoid political activities due to fear of retaliation.

(c) Control of Political Space

Militias also shape elections by controlling public spaces. They may prevent opposition rallies, monitor communities, and enforce political loyalty. Through these activities, they influence the broader environment within which elections occur.

(d) Post-Election Mobilisation

Electoral violence does not necessarily end after voting. Political elites may continue using militias to challenge results, suppress protests, or punish communities perceived to have supported opponents. The Kenyan post-election crisis of 2007–2008 illustrates how electoral violence can emerge from organised political mobilisation rather than from spontaneous conflict. Similarly, Nigeria's recurring electoral violence demonstrates how political actors use informal armed networks as tools of competition.

2.3 Democratic Backsliding and the Politics of Militias

2.3.1 Understanding Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, norms, and practices by elected leaders or political elites. Unlike traditional coups or abrupt authoritarian transitions, democratic decline often occurs through incremental processes where governments maintain electoral institutions while weakening their effectiveness (Bermeo, 2016).

Backsliding may involve restrictions on civil liberties, weakening judicial independence, manipulation of electoral institutions, suppression of opposition groups, and increased executive control over security institutions. State-sponsored militias contribute to democratic backsliding because they undermine the foundations necessary for democratic competition.

2.3.2 Erosion of Rule of Law and Accountability

The reliance on militias weakens the rule of law because violence becomes selectively tolerated depending on political interests. When militia members commit abuses without consequences, citizens lose confidence in justice institutions.

In countries where political elites protect armed supporters, accountability mechanisms become ineffective. Courts, police agencies, and electoral institutions may appear politically controlled rather than independent. Over time, such a situation creates a culture where political violence becomes normalised.

2.3.3 Decline of Civil Liberties and Political Participation

Democracy depends on citizens' ability to organise, campaign, criticise their leaders, and participate freely in elections. Militias threaten these freedoms by creating environments of fear and insecurity.

Opposition parties, journalists, and civil society organisations are particularly vulnerable because they challenge existing power structures. When political violence becomes common, citizens may withdraw from political participation, reducing democratic accountability.

2.3.4 Declining Public Trust in Democratic Institutions

The continued use of coercive actors damages citizens' perceptions of democracy. Elections lose legitimacy when people believe outcomes are determined by intimidation, rather than genuine competition. When people believe that intimidation, rather than genuine competition, determines election outcomes, they lose faith in the legitimacy of the process. Through intimidation rather than genuine competition.

In many African states, declining trust in electoral institutions. Many African states link declining trust in electoral institutions to experiences of violence and insecurity, as well as electoral fraud. Not only to electoral fraud but also to experiences of violence and insecurity. Citizens may view democracy as a system that benefits political elites rather than ordinary populations.

2.4 Theoretical Perspectives Guiding the Study

2.4.1 Hybrid Governance Theory

Hybrid governance theory explains how state and non-state actors jointly produce political authority. It is particularly useful in African contexts where governments often depend on informal networks to govern territories and populations.

This theory explains why militias can simultaneously challenge and support state authority. They undermine formal institutions while also extending government influence into areas where state capacity is limited.

2.4.2 Political Settlement Theory

Political settlement theory emphasises that institutions reflect agreements among powerful actors regarding access to resources and political authority. In many African states, political elites maintain stability through informal agreements involving patronage, coercion, and resource distribution.

Militias become part of these settlements because they provide elites with mechanisms for maintaining political control.

2.4.3 State Fragility Theory

State fragility theory highlights the inability of governments to provide security, enforce laws, and maintain legitimate authority. Weak states often rely on informal armed groups because formal institutions lack capacity.

However, such a situation creates a cycle where dependence on militias further weakens state institutions.

2.4.4 Competitive Authoritarianism Theory

Competitive authoritarianism explains political systems where elections exist but democratic competition is undermined by unequal power relations. Governments maintain formal democratic institutions while using coercion, patronage, and institutional manipulation to remain in power (Levitsky & Way, 2020).

State-sponsored militias represent one mechanism through which competitive authoritarian regimes maintain political dominance.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has established the conceptual foundation for examining the relationship between state-sponsored militias, electoral violence, and democratic backsliding in Africa. The central argument is that militias are not merely security actors but political instruments embedded within broader systems of power. Through hybrid governance arrangements, political elites use informal coercive organisations to influence elections while avoiding direct accountability.

The analysis demonstrates that electoral violence is often strategic rather than accidental and that militia politics contributes directly to democratic erosion by weakening institutions, restricting political freedoms, and reducing public trust. The theoretical perspectives of hybrid governance, political settlements, state fragility, and competitive authoritarianism provide complementary explanations for why state-linked militias emerge and why they remain influential in African political systems.

3. STATE-SPONSORED MILITIAS AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: COMPARATIVE EVIDENCE FROM AFRICA

3.0 Introduction

The relationship between state-sponsored militias and electoral violence represents one of the most significant challenges facing democratic consolidation in Africa. While electoral competition has expanded across the continent, political contests in many countries continue to be shaped by informal coercive networks that operate alongside formal state institutions. These groups include party-linked youth organisations, ethnic militias, political vigilantes, community defence forces, and other armed actors that receive varying degrees of state support, political protection, or tacit approval.

The emergence of state-sponsored militias reflects a broader pattern of hybrid political governance in which formal democratic institutions coexist with informal mechanisms of power preservation. Political elites often mobilise these groups when electoral competition becomes threatening, particularly in contexts where losing power may result in economic exclusion, legal vulnerability, or loss of access to state resources. Rather than relying exclusively on official security institutions, governments and political parties may employ informal armed networks to influence electoral outcomes while maintaining plausible deniability (Carey et al., 2013).

This chapter provides comparative empirical analysis of state-sponsored militias and electoral violence in selected African countries: Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. These cases were selected because they represent different forms of militia-state relationships and different political contexts, ranging from competitive multiparty systems to dominant-party regimes. The

analysis focuses on three central dimensions:

1. **Formation and mobilisation** – examining who creates these groups, how they are recruited, and what resources sustain them.

2. **Political functions** – analysing how militias are used for voter intimidation, opposition suppression, protest control, and electoral manipulation.

3. **Relationship with state institutions** – exploring cooperation between militias and security agencies, weak accountability mechanisms, and political protection from prosecution.

The chapter argues that state-sponsored militias function as instruments of political control that enable elites to manage electoral competition through coercion. Although their organisational forms differ across countries, their political purpose remains similar: extending state power through informal violence while weakening democratic accountability.

3.1 Nigeria: Party-Linked Political Thugs, Ethnic Militias, and Electoral Violence

3.1.1 Formation and Mobilisation of Political Militias in Nigeria

Nigeria provides one of the clearest examples of the relationship between electoral competition and informal coercive organisations. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, elections have frequently been accompanied by violence involving political thugs, armed youth groups, ethnic militias, and community-based security organisations.

The emergence of electoral militias in Nigeria is closely connected to the country's patronage-based political system. Political elites often recruit unemployed youth from economically marginalised communities and transform them into instruments of political mobilisation. These recruits' promises of financial rewards, employment opportunities, protection from law enforcement, and access to political networks (Khan, 2018) attract these recruits. These recruits' promises of financial rewards, employment opportunities, protection from law enforcement, and access to political networks (Khan, 2018) attract these recruits. These recruits' promises of financial rewards, employment opportunities, protection from law enforcement, and access to political networks (Khan, 2018) attract these recruits.

Political parties and influential politicians have historically maintained relationships with informal armed groups because such organisations provide advantages in electoral competition. Unlike official security agencies, these groups can engage in intimidation and violence without creating direct institutional responsibility for

political leaders.

In states such as Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, and Kaduna, political actors in states like Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, and Kaduna have faced accusations of mobilising armed supporters to sway elections. Political actors in states like Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, and Kaduna have faced accusations of mobilising armed supporters to influence elections. The Niger Delta region illustrates the incorporation of existing armed networks into electoral politics. Militias that were initially associated with resource control, environmental grievances, and regional inequality have sometimes been transformed into political instruments by competing elites. Competing elites have sometimes transformed militias, initially associated with resource control, environmental grievances, and regional inequality, into political instruments. into political instruments by competing elites.

The Nigerian case demonstrates that militia formation is rarely accidental. Instead, political incentives, economic inequality, weak state institutions, and competition for access to state resources shape militia formation. Militia formation is influenced by political incentives, economic inequality, weak state institutions, and competition for access to state resources.

3.1.2 Political Functions of Electoral Militias in Nigeria

State-linked militias in Nigeria perform several political functions during electoral periods.

(a) Voter Intimidation and Electoral Control

One of the primary roles of political thugs is intimidating voters and opposition supporters. Armed groups may threaten communities, disrupt political rallies, attack campaign offices, or create insecurity around polling locations. Such actions influence electoral participation by discouraging citizens from voting freely.

(b) Opposition Suppression

Political militias are also used to weaken opposition organisations. Opposition candidates and supporters may face harassment, physical attacks, or restrictions on their ability to campaign. In competitive states, controlling political space becomes a central objective of militia activity.

(c) Election-Day Manipulation

During elections, militias may engage in ballot disruption, monitoring of voter behaviour, and interference with electoral officials. Their presence creates fear and influences perceptions regarding which political choices are safe.

(d) Post-Election Enforcement

Following elections, political militias may continue

operating as mechanisms for rewarding supporters and punishing opponents. This contributes to cycles of violence and reinforces patron-client relationships between politicians and armed groups.

3.1.3 Relationship between Militias and State Institutions

The relationship between Nigerian political militias and state institutions: Nigerian political militias and state institutions informally cooperate and exhibit weak accountability. by informal cooperation and weak accountability. Although security forces are legally responsible for maintaining electoral security, political interference often limits their ability to act independently.

In some cases, security agencies have been accused of selective enforcement, where violence committed by politically connected groups receives limited investigation while opposition groups face greater scrutiny. This creates an environment where militia actors operate with relative confidence that political connections will protect them from prosecution.

The Nigerian experience illustrates the concept of hybrid security governance: formal state institutions exist, but political elites rely on informal coercive networks to achieve political objectives.

3.2 Uganda: Youth Mobilisation, Informal Security Networks, and Opposition Control

3.2.1 Formation and Mobilisation of Political Networks

Uganda represents a different form of state-linked coercion, where militia-like structures operate within a dominant-party political environment. Since the National Resistance Movement (NRM) took over in 1986, Uganda has regularly held elections, but limited political competition has persisted.

Rather than relying primarily on openly armed militias, political control has often involved youth networks, local defence structures, intelligence-linked actors, and informal security organisations connected to the ruling party's interests.

Youth mobilisation represents an important component of Uganda's political system. Young supporters: Party structures and local political networks frequently recruit young supporters. through party structures and local political networks. These groups may provide campaign support, monitor opposition activities, and mobilise public demonstrations in favour of the ruling authorities.

Economic vulnerability among young populations contributes to their recruitment. Political actors provide financial incentives, employment opportunities, and social protection in exchange for political loyalty.

3.2.2 Political Functions of Informal Security Networks in Uganda

(a) Opposition Restriction

One of the major functions of informal political networks in Uganda is to limit opposition mobilisation. Opposition parties, particularly during election periods, have reported harassment, restrictions on rallies, and intimidation of supporters.

The 2021 presidential election demonstrated continued tensions between the ruling government and opposition movements, particularly among younger voters supporting opposition candidates.

(b) Protest Management

Informal networks also contribute to controlling political protests. Rather than relying exclusively on formal security forces, governments may use political supporters and local networks to monitor dissent and discourage opposition mobilisation.

(c) Electoral Surveillance

Political networks can function as mechanisms for monitoring communities and identifying opposition supporters. This creates an atmosphere where citizens may hesitate to participate openly in opposition politics.

3.2.3 Relationship with State Institutions

Uganda demonstrates a close relationship between ruling-party networks and state institutions. Although these actors may not formally belong to government security agencies, they often operate within political environments shaped by state authority.

Weak accountability mechanisms allow politically connected actors to engage in coercive practices without facing significant legal consequences. This contributes to democratic stagnation by reducing confidence in electoral institutions.

Tangri and Mwenda (2013) show that Uganda's political system demonstrates how dominant-party regimes maintain stability through a combination of institutional control, patronage, and informal coercive mechanisms.

3.3 Kenya: Ethnic Militias and Electoral Violence

3.3.1 Formation and Mobilisation of Ethnic-Based Armed Groups

Kenya provides one of the most studied examples of

electoral violence involving ethnic militias and political mobilisation. Since the early 1990s, the introduction of multiparty elections has often linked political competition to ethnic identity and community-based mobilisation.

Political elites have historically relied on ethnic networks because ethnic communities provide organisational structures capable of mobilising large numbers of supporters. In some cases, these networks have developed into armed groups capable of enforcing political objectives.

The 2007–2008 post-election crisis demonstrated the destructive consequences of this system. Following the disputed presidential election results, violence spread across several regions, involving organised youth groups and ethnic militias.

Groups such as the Mungiki movement among sections of the Kikuyu community and other localised armed groups became associated with political violence during electoral cycles (Mueller, 2014).

3.3.2 Political Functions of Kenyan Electoral Militias

(a) Ethnic Mobilisation

Militias in Kenya have often functioned as instruments of ethnic protection and political competition. Leaders mobilise communities by presenting elections as struggles for ethnic survival.

(b) Territorial Control

Armed groups influence elections by controlling specific geographic areas. Communities may rival groups may pressure communities to support specific candidates or exclude them from their territories. to support particular candidates or excluded from areas dominated by rival groups.

(c) Retaliatory Violence

After disputed elections, militias have sometimes engaged in retaliatory attacks against communities associated with opposing political alliances.

3.3.3 State Response and Accountability

Kenya's experience demonstrates the difficulties of achieving accountability after electoral violence. Although investigations and reforms followed the 2007–2008 crisis, many perpetrators avoided prosecution.

The continued presence of politically connected armed networks illustrates the challenges of transforming democratic institutions in societies where informal power structures remain influential.

3.4 Tanzania: Informal Coercive Networks and Electoral Management

3.4.1 Formation of Political Security Networks

Tanzania has historically been considered more politically stable than several neighbouring states. However, the country's dominant-party political system has also involved informal mechanisms for managing electoral competition.

The ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), has maintained political dominance since independence. During competitive elections, especially in Zanzibar, political tensions have increased, with allegations of intimidation, harassment, and restrictions against opposition groups.

Informal youth organisations and politically connected networks have sometimes been involved in managing political competition.

3.4.2 Political Functions

(a) Opposition Restriction

Informal coercive actors contribute to limiting opposition mobilisation through surveillance, intimidation, and disruption of political activities.

(b) Electoral Advantage

Maintaining political dominance requires controlling political space. Informal networks support ruling parties by discouraging opposition expansion.

(c) Protest Control

Following disputed elections, political networks may contribute to controlling demonstrations and preventing challenges to electoral outcomes.

3.4.3 Relationship with State Institutions

The Tanzanian case demonstrates how informal coercion can operate within relatively strong state structures. Unlike fragile states where militias emerge because government capacity is weak, Tanzania illustrates how dominant political organisations can use informal networks to maintain political control.

This reinforces the argument that militia politics is not only a consequence of state weakness but can also emerge from efforts by powerful political organisations to preserve their dominance.

3.5 Comparative Analysis of State-Sponsored Militias in Africa

The cases examined demonstrate several common patterns.

3.5.1 Formation and Mobilisation

Across Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, militias emerge through relationships between political elites and vulnerable social groups. Youth unemployment, economic inequality, and weak institutional opportunities create conditions for recruitment.

Political leaders provide resources and protection, while militia members provide political services, including intimidation and mobilisation.

3.5.2 Political Functions

Despite differences in organisational form, electoral militias perform similar political functions:

- Intimidating voters.
- Suppressing opposition activities.
- Controlling political spaces.
- Monitoring communities;
- Enforcing political loyalty
- Influencing electoral outcomes.

These activities demonstrate that electoral violence is strategic rather than accidental.

3.5.3 State-Militia Relationships

The relationship between militias and governments varies across cases. In some contexts, such as Nigeria and Kenya, militias operate through informal alliances with politicians. In Uganda and Tanzania, coercive networks are more closely connected to dominant-party structures.

However, all cases demonstrate weak accountability. Political protection enables militia actors to avoid punishment and encourages continued reliance on violence.

The comparative evidence from Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania demonstrates that state-sponsored militias represent a significant challenge to democratic consolidation in Africa. These groups operate as extensions of political power, allowing elites to influence electoral competition through coercion while maintaining formal commitments to democracy.

The evidence indicates that political patronage creates militias, material incentives sustain them, and relationships with state institutions protect them. Their activities undermine democratic governance by restricting political freedoms, weakening accountability, and

reducing public trust in elections.

Therefore, addressing electoral violence requires more than improving electoral procedures. It requires transforming the political and institutional environments that allow state-linked militias to emerge and operate with impunity.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE, HUMAN SECURITY, AND REGIONAL SECURITY

4.0 Introduction

The consequences of state-sponsored militias and electoral violence extend far beyond electoral outcomes and domestic political competition. While the immediate purpose of electoral militias is often to influence political contests, their activities generate broader security challenges that affect social stability, human welfare, and regional peace. The normalisation of political violence weakens state legitimacy, deepens social divisions, and creates environments where armed actors become embedded within everyday governance structures.

In many African states, electoral militias represent a critical link between political competition and insecurity. Once political elites create, arm, or empower informal coercive organisations, these groups may develop independent interests, maintain access to weapons, and continue operating beyond electoral periods. As a result, mechanisms initially designed to secure political advantage may contribute to prolonged insecurity, criminal violence, communal conflicts, and state fragility.

This chapter examines the broader consequences of state-linked electoral militias through three interconnected dimensions: domestic peace and political stability, human security, **and** regional security implications. It argues that electoral militias undermine peace not only by generating immediate violence but also by transforming political competition into militarised struggles for power. Their activities threaten human security by exposing citizens to physical harm, psychological insecurity, restrictions on democratic participation, and social fragmentation. Furthermore, militia networks contribute to regional instability through displacement, cross-border armed movements, weapons proliferation, and challenges to regional peace initiatives.

4.1 Domestic Peace Consequences of Electoral Militias

4.1.1 Cycles of Political Revenge and Recurrent Violence

One of the most significant consequences of state-sponsored electoral militias is the creation of cycles of political revenge. Electoral violence often continues after elections. Instead, violence often produces grievances,

unresolved disputes, and demands for retaliation among affected communities. Where perpetrators enjoy political protection and victims lack access to justice, communities may become trapped in repeated cycles of revenge.

In Kenya, the 2007–2008 post-election crisis demonstrated how electoral disputes can transform into wider communal conflicts. Violence initially triggered by contested election results quickly developed into attacks between ethnic communities, resulting in deaths, displacement, and long-term mistrust. Although political reforms followed the crisis, many underlying grievances remained unresolved, demonstrating how electoral violence can produce enduring social divisions (Mueller, 2014).

Similarly, Nigeria's electoral history demonstrates how political violence creates patterns of retaliation between rival political groups. In some regions, armed groups initially mobilised for elections later become involved in criminal activities or community conflicts. When politicians lose control over these organisations, militias may continue operating independently, creating additional security challenges.

The continuation of these cycles demonstrates that electoral militias are not temporary political tools. Once violence becomes normalised as a method of political competition, it becomes incorporated into broader patterns of insecurity.

4.1.2 Community Polarisation and Identity-Based Conflict

State-sponsored militias frequently exploit existing social divisions, particularly ethnic, religious, regional, or communal identities. Political elites often mobilise these identities because they provide effective mechanisms for organising support and defining political enemies.

In many African contexts, electoral competition becomes framed as a struggle between communities rather than between competing political programmes. Militias reinforce these narratives by presenting violence as necessary protection of a particular group's interests.

Kenya provides an important example of how political elites have historically used ethnic identities as foundations for mobilising armed supporters. Similarly, in Nigeria, political competition often intersects with regional and ethnic tensions, particularly in areas where communities compete over access to state resources.

The consequences of such mobilisation extend beyond elections. Identity-based violence damages relationships between communities, weakens social trust, and creates long-term barriers to national reconciliation. Communities may continue viewing political opponents as security threats rather than legitimate competitors.

Cederman et al. (2013) found that exclusionary political systems that link identity and access to state power increase the likelihood of conflict because groups perceive political competition as a struggle for survival.

4.1.3 Population Displacement and Humanitarian Consequences

Electoral militias also contribute to forced displacement by creating insecurity that pushes populations to flee their homes. Displacement may occur during election periods when communities fear targeted attacks or after elections when violence spreads through retaliation.

The Kenyan post-election crisis displaced hundreds of thousands of people, demonstrating how electoral violence can produce humanitarian emergencies. Similar patterns have occurred in Nigeria, particularly in regions affected by political, communal, and security-related violence.

Displacement creates additional pressures on governments and humanitarian organisations. Internally displaced populations often face limited access to healthcare, education, employment, and legal protection. Furthermore, displacement can deepen social grievances because affected communities may perceive themselves as abandoned by the state.

The humanitarian impact of electoral militias therefore extends beyond immediate violence. It creates long-term social and economic consequences that undermine peacebuilding efforts.

4.1.4 Militarisation of Politics

A major consequence of state-sponsored militias is the militarisation of political competition. Militarisation occurs when political actors increasingly rely on coercive strategies rather than negotiation, institutions, and democratic processes.

When politicians demonstrate that violence produces electoral advantages, other actors are encouraged to adopt similar strategies. This creates a political environment where access to armed supporters becomes an important resource for gaining and maintaining power.

In countries such as Nigeria, political elites have historically maintained relationships with armed youth groups because these networks provide electoral advantages. In Burkina Faso, the growth of civilian defence organisations demonstrates how security challenges can normalise armed political participation.

The militarisation of politics weakens democratic institutions because elections become contests of coercive capacity rather than of public legitimacy. Over time, citizens may lose confidence in peaceful political participation and become increasingly dependent on armed protection networks.

4.2 Human Security Effects of State-Sponsored Militias

4.2.1 Physical Insecurity and Targeted Violence

The human security approach shifts attention from state survival to the protection of individuals. Rather than

focusing only on military threats, human security examines how political violence affects everyday life, safety, and dignity (UNDP, 1994).

State-sponsored militias directly threaten physical security through targeted killings, assaults, intimidation, and destruction of property. Unlike conventional armed conflicts, electoral violence often targets civilians because the objective is political control rather than territorial conquest.

Victims may include opposition supporters, journalists, election officials, activists, and ordinary citizens perceived to support rival political groups.

The use of militias increases civilian vulnerability because these actors often operate outside legal accountability systems. Their unofficial status allows them to commit abuses while avoiding institutional punishment.

4.2.2 Psychological Insecurity and Fear-Based Governance

Beyond physical harm, electoral militias create psychological insecurity by governing through fear. The threat of violence can influence political behaviour even when actual attacks are limited.

Citizens may avoid attending opposition rallies, expressing political opinions, or participating in elections because they fear retaliation. This creates what scholars describe as "coercive political environments," where citizens modify their behaviour based on perceived threats.

Fear-based governance undermines democracy because meaningful participation requires citizens to make political choices freely. When intimidation determines political behaviour, elections lose their democratic legitimacy.

In Uganda, restrictions on opposition activities and reports of intimidation during electoral periods illustrate how fear can become a mechanism of political control. Similarly, in Tanzania and Nigeria, concerns about political intimidation have affected citizens' willingness to participate openly in political activities.

4.2.3 Restrictions on Civic Freedoms and Democratic Participation

State-linked militias affect human security by limiting fundamental civic freedoms, including freedom of expression, assembly, and political organisation.

Democracy requires citizens to participate without fear. However, when armed groups threaten opposition supporters or civil society organisations, political participation becomes unequal.

The result is the creation of politically unequal societies where ruling parties possess access to coercive resources unavailable to opponents. This contributes to democratic decline because elections become formally competitive but practically restricted.

4.2.4 Social Cohesion and Community Fragmentation

Militia politics damages social cohesion by transforming political disagreement into identity-based conflict. Communities may become divided according to ethnicity, religion, region, or political affiliation.

The long-term consequences include reduced trust between citizens, weakened community cooperation, and difficulties in reconciliation after violence.

In Kenya, Nigeria, and Cameroon, political violence has demonstrated how electoral competition can intensify existing social divisions. Once communities associate political opponents with physical threats, rebuilding peaceful relationships becomes more difficult.

4.3 Regional Security Implications of Electoral Militias

4.3.1 Refugee Flows and Cross-Border Displacement

Electoral violence can generate regional security challenges by forcing populations to cross national borders in search of safety. Large-scale displacement places pressure on neighbouring countries and may create humanitarian and political tensions.

For example, instability in one country may produce refugee movements into neighbouring states, affecting local resources and social relations.

Regional displacement can also spread political tensions, as displaced populations may maintain political grievances and organisational networks outside their countries of origin.

4.3.2 Cross-Border Armed Networks

State-sponsored militias may develop connections beyond national boundaries, particularly in regions where borders are weakly controlled.

Armed groups involved in political violence may cooperate with criminal networks, insurgent organisations, or community-based armed groups that operate across borders.

The Sahel region demonstrates how armed networks can move between countries, exploiting weak governance and security gaps. Although not all militias originate from electoral politics, the existence of armed civilian organisations contributes to broader patterns of insecurity.

4.3.3 Weapons Proliferation and Expansion of Armed Actors

The availability of weapons among political militias creates long-term security risks. Once armed groups acquire weapons, preventing their demobilisation becomes increasingly difficult.

Weapons obtained for political purposes may later be used in criminal activities, communal conflicts, or insurgencies. This contributes to cycles of insecurity because communities increasingly rely on armed protection.

The proliferation of weapons among non-state actors remains a major challenge for African peace and security institutions.

4.4 Regional Institutions and Responses

4.4.1 African Union Peace and Security Mechanisms

The African Union (AU) has developed several mechanisms aimed at preventing unconstitutional changes of government, electoral crises, and violent conflicts. Through institutions such as the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the AU seeks to promote conflict prevention, mediation, and democratic governance.

However, addressing electoral militias remains challenging because these groups often operate within domestic political systems rather than as openly hostile armed organisations. Effective responses require stronger monitoring of political violence, accountability mechanisms, and support for democratic institutions.

4.4.2 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Conflict Prevention Frameworks

ECOWAS has played an important role in conflict prevention and democratic governance in West Africa. Through mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Early Warning System and electoral assistance programmes, the organisation seeks to identify and prevent political crises.

Nigeria's experience demonstrates the importance of regional engagement because electoral instability in major states can affect wider West African security.

However, ECOWAS faces challenges when governments themselves are connected to coercive actors. Maintaining regional legitimacy requires balancing respect for sovereignty with protection of democratic principles.

4.4.3 East African Community Regional Stability Initiatives

The East African Community (EAC) has increasingly focused on regional peace, security cooperation, and political stability. Electoral conflicts in Kenya, Uganda, and neighbouring states demonstrate the importance of regional mechanisms for preventing instability.

The EAC's effectiveness depends on strengthening early warning systems, supporting democratic institutions, and addressing the political conditions that allow armed groups to influence elections.

State-sponsored electoral militias represent a significant threat to peace, human security, and regional stability in Africa. Their consequences extend beyond election periods by creating cycles of revenge, community polarization, displacement, and political militarization.

At the human security level, militias undermine individual safety, restrict democratic participation, and weaken social cohesion. At the regional level, they contribute to displacement, armed network expansion, weapons proliferation, and challenges for regional peace organisations.

The evidence demonstrates that electoral violence is not merely a domestic political problem. It is a security challenge that requires coordinated responses from national governments, regional organisations, and international actors. Strengthening democratic institutions, improving accountability, reforming security sectors, and reducing dependence on informal coercive actors are essential steps toward sustainable peace.

5. CONCLUSION: ADDRESSING ELECTORAL MILITARISATION AND STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

5.0 Introduction

This study has examined the relationship between state-sponsored militias, electoral violence, and democratic fragility in Africa. Through a comparative analysis of Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, the study has demonstrated that electoral violence is not merely an accidental consequence of political competition or a temporary breakdown of social order. Rather, it represents a deeper institutional and political challenge rooted in the ways political elites organise power, manage competition, and maintain authority.

The central argument advanced throughout this study is that state-sponsored militias constitute a significant threat to democratic consolidation because they enable political actors to employ coercive strategies while avoiding direct institutional responsibility. By operating between formal state institutions and non-state armed organisations, these groups create hybrid systems of coercive governance in which violence becomes an accepted instrument of political competition.

The analysis has shown that electoral militias weaken democratic governance in several ways. First, they undermine the principle of free and fair elections by intimidating voters, suppressing opposition movements, and influencing political participation through fear. Second, they weaken the rule of law by operating with political protection and limited accountability. Third, they contribute to broader insecurity by sustaining armed networks that may continue operating beyond election periods.

Consequently, addressing electoral militarisation

requires more than just improving electoral procedures alone. It requires comprehensive reforms that address both the **supply side** of political violence, including access to weapons, political sponsorship, and weak accountability, and the **demand side**, including youth unemployment, exclusion, poverty, and limited political opportunities that make militia recruitment possible.

5.1 SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

5.1.1 State-Sponsored Militias as Instruments of Political Control

The study has demonstrated that state-sponsored militias function as important instruments through which political elites exercise power. Although these groups differ across national contexts, they share common characteristics: they operate outside formal security institutions, receive varying forms of political support, and provide coercive services that benefit political actors.

In Nigeria, political thugs and armed youth groups have historically been mobilised by politicians seeking electoral advantage. In Kenya, ethnic militias have been linked to elite competition and identity-based political mobilisation. In Uganda, informal political networks and youth organisations have contributed to restricting opposition activities within a dominant-party system. In Tanzania, informal coercive networks have supported mechanisms of political control within a long-standing ruling-party environment.

These cases demonstrate that militias are not simply symptoms of weak states. They may also emerge within relatively strong political systems where elites deliberately create informal mechanisms to maintain power. As Carey et al. (2013) argue, pro-government militias provide states with additional coercive capacity while reducing the political and legal costs associated with direct state violence.

5.1.2 Electoral Violence as a Strategic Political Tool

A major finding of this research is that electoral violence. This research reveals that electoral violence serves as a deliberate political strategy rather than an unintended consequence of competition. Political actors frequently calculate the benefits of coercion against the potential costs of punishment.

Militias influence electoral processes through intimidation, voter suppression, opposition harassment, campaign disruption, and post-election retaliation. Their purpose is not always to completely eliminate political competition but to shape the conditions under which it occurs.

This finding challenges explanations that treat electoral violence primarily as a result of ethnic conflict, poverty, or social disorder. While these factors may

contribute to vulnerability, violence is often organised and strategically deployed by political elites seeking to influence electoral outcomes.

5.1.3 Electoral Militarisation and Democratic Backsliding

The study further demonstrates that militia politics contributes directly to democratic backsliding. Democratic systems depend not only on elections but also on institutions capable of guaranteeing political equality, accountability, and citizen participation.

The use of militias undermines these foundations by:

- Weakening the rule of law;
- Reducing accountability for political violence
- Restricting freedom of expression and assembly.
- Undermining trust in electoral institutions;
- Normalising coercion as a method of political competition.

Bermeo (2016) argues contemporary democratic decline often occurs through gradual institutional weakening rather than sudden authoritarian takeover. State-linked militias represent one mechanism through which democratic institutions can be undermined. State-linked militias serve as a mechanism that can keep democratic institutions formally intact while undermining their practical meaning. State-linked militias serve as a mechanism that can keep democratic institutions formally intact while undermining their practical meaning.

5.2 Policy Recommendations

5.2.1 Strengthening Electoral Institutions and Democratic Processes

The first priority for reducing electoral militarisation is to strengthen the credibility and independence of electoral institutions. Electoral commissions must possess sufficient legal authority, financial independence, and operational capacity to manage elections without political interference.

Independent electoral bodies should be strengthened through:

- Transparent appointment procedures;
- Professional electoral administration;
- Effective monitoring systems;
- Improved voter registration processes;
- Reliable mechanisms for resolving electoral disputes.

Electoral disputes should be addressed through legitimate judicial and institutional channels rather than through street violence or armed mobilisation. Strengthening electoral justice mechanisms is particularly important because perceptions of unfairness often provide political actors with justification for mobilising militias.

In countries such as Nigeria and Kenya, improvements in electoral management have contributed to reducing some forms of electoral manipulation. However, institutional reforms must be accompanied by broader accountability measures that address actors who intentionally organise violence.

5.2.2 Security Sector Reform and Civilian Oversight

A second critical area of intervention involves reforming security institutions to prevent their political misuse.

In democratic systems, security forces must remain politically neutral and operate according to constitutional principles. However, where governments use police, intelligence services, or military institutions to protect political interests, citizens lose confidence in state security structures and may increasingly rely on informal armed groups.

Security sector reform should therefore focus on:

- Strengthening civilian oversight of security agencies;
- improving professional standards within police and military institutions;
- Preventing partisan deployment of security forces.
- Increasing transparency in security operations;
- Strengthening human rights accountability.

The objective should be to establish security institutions that protect citizens rather than serve partisan political interests.

5.2.3 Accountability for Political Violence and Ending Impunity

The persistence of electoral militias is closely linked to weak accountability. When politicians and militia leaders believe they will not face consequences, violence becomes a rational political strategy.

Effective accountability requires:

- Investigating political sponsors of violent groups;
- Prosecuting individuals responsible for electoral violence;
- Strengthening judicial independence;
- Protecting witnesses and victims;
- Improving documentation of election-related abuses.

A major challenge in many African states is that perpetrators of electoral violence often possess political influence or connections with powerful elites. As a result, accountability mechanisms must focus not only on individual militia members but also on the political networks that finance and protect them.

Ending impunity is essential because selective justice reinforces the belief that political violence is an acceptable pathway to power.

5.2.4 Youth Political Inclusion and Reducing Recruitment Incentives

The study has shown that young people frequently constitute the main recruitment base for electoral militias. Economic exclusion, unemployment, and limited political opportunities create conditions where vulnerable youth may accept participation in violent political networks.

Addressing militia recruitment, therefore, requires expanding opportunities for youth through:

- Employment creation;
- Vocational training;
- Youth entrepreneurship programmes;
- Greater inclusion in political decision-making;
- Civic education initiatives.

However, youth inclusion should not be understood only as an economic issue. Young people must also have meaningful opportunities to participate in democratic processes without depending on political patrons.

When young citizens have legitimate pathways to political influence and economic advancement, the incentives for militia recruitment Legitimate pathways to political influence and economic advancement for young citizens reduce the incentives for militia recruitment..

5.2.5 Regional Cooperation against Cross-Border Militia Networks

Because armed networks increasingly operate across national borders, addressing electoral militarisation requires regional cooperation.

Regional organisations, including the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the East African Community (EAC), should strengthen mechanisms for:

- Intelligence-sharing;
- Monitoring armed networks;
- Preventing weapons trafficking
- supporting electoral conflict prevention;
- Coordinating responses to cross-border insecurity.

The African Union Peace and Security Architecture provides an important framework for addressing unconstitutional political practices and conflict prevention. However, regional institutions require stronger political commitment and enforcement capacity.

Similarly, ECOWAS conflict prevention mechanisms demonstrate the importance of regional approaches in West Africa, where political instability in one country can generate broader security consequences. In East Africa, enhanced cooperation through the EAC can support early warning and conflict prevention efforts.

5.3 Addressing the Supply and Demand Sides of Political Violence

A central conclusion of this study is that electoral militarisation This study conclerecruitment.urity responses

alone cannot address electoral militarisation. through security responses alone. Effective solutions require attention to both the supply **and** demand dimensions of political violence.

5.3.1 The Supply Side of Violence

The supply side refers to the actors and resources that make militia violence possible. This includes:

- Political sponsorship;
- Access to weapons;
- Financial support;
- Protection from prosecution;
- Weak security institutions.

Reducing supply requires dismantling political networks that create and sustain militias.

5.3.2 The Demand Side of Violence

The demand side refers to the social conditions that make individuals willing to join armed political groups. These include:

- Unemployment;
- Poverty;
- Political exclusion;
- Lack of social mobility
- Weak civic participation.

Reducing demand requires addressing the structural conditions that make militia recruitment attractive.

A comprehensive approach must therefore combine institutional reforms with social and economic interventions.

5.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to existing debates on African democracy and security by demonstrating that electoral violence linked to state-sponsored militias represents a broader challenge than election management alone.

Existing discussions often examine electoral violence as an event occurring during specific election cycles. This study advances the argument that electoral militarisation represents a long-term governance problem connected to state authority, political settlements, and democratic resilience.

By examining comparative cases from Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, the study demonstrates that militia politics operates across different regime types and is not limited only to fragile or conflict-affected states. Instead, informal coercive networks may emerge wherever political elites perceive violence as an effective strategy for maintaining power.

5.5 Final Conclusion

State-sponsored militias represent one of the most significant challenges confronting democratic

consolidation and peacebuilding in Africa. Their influence extends beyond election periods, shaping patterns of governance, security, and political participation.

The evidence presented in this study demonstrates that electoral violence linked to militias is not simply a domestic governance problem. It represents a wider challenge to Africa's democratic resilience, human security, and regional peace architecture.

Addressing this challenge requires a multidimensional strategy that strengthens electoral institutions, reforms security sectors, promotes accountability, expands youth opportunities, and enhances regional cooperation. Democracy cannot be consolidated where political competition remains dependent on coercion and violence.

Ultimately, strengthening African democracy requires transforming elections from contests of political survival into genuine mechanisms of representation, accountability, and peaceful transfer of power.

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