

# Warri on edge, again: politics reopen old wounds, fault lines



Discover more [🔗 Portable speakers](#) [🔗 Politics News Headlines](#) [🔗 Activewear](#) [🔗 Educational resources Nigeria](#)

[🔗 Nigeria Business Reports](#) [🔗 Nigerian Travel Guide](#) [🔗 Newspaper E-paper Access](#) [🔗 Nigerian news subscriptions](#)

[🔗 Online Casino Guide](#) [🔗 Nigeria News Subscription](#)

## • ***How, why INEC wards threatens fragile peace***

***Two decades after conflict tore through Warri, stealing its peace and slowing its progress, unease is once again rising across its creeks. A Supreme Court–ordered ward delineation has reopened old wounds between the Ijaw and Itsekiri in the creeks. On the upland, the Itsekiri are locked in new disputes with the Urhobos of Okere and Agbassa, and the Ijaws of Ogbe-Ijoh in battles rooted in land ownership and the contested title of the Olu of Warri. South-South Regional Manager Shola Nath O’Neil traces the politics, history, and lingering resentments threatening to pull this oil-rich region back into turmoil.***

The Ijaw/Itsekiri crisis in Warri, **Delta State**, end 22 years ago, but residents of the oil-rich constituency are once again sleeping uneasily. The same undercurrents of tribal distrust, political rivalry, and economic tension that triggered the bloody conflict between 1996 and 2004 are resurfacing, pushing the fragile peace toward the brink.

Across the creeks and city centers, leaders of the two rival groups have resumed verbal hostilities, each accusing the other of provocation and injustice. In the riverside communities of the three Warri local government areas, the rhetoric is fiery; in the upland, tension is heightened by the Urhobo-Itsekiri dispute over who truly owns Warri. The Independent National Electoral Commission’s (INEC) recent ward delineation exercise has further complicated an already combustible situation.



For many residents, the atmosphere brings back haunting memories of the dark years when tribal militias ran amok through the city, killing, maiming, and setting homes and businesses ablaze.

The unease is being stoked by a new kind of warfare; digital and physical. “Keyboard Warriors” from the rival ethnic camps now trade venomous words on Facebook, X, TikTok, and WhatsApp, posting hate-filled content and spreading false news in a bid to please their patrons.

Yet, while community leaders publicly call for calm, developments on the ground tell a more worrying story. Chief Godspower Gbenekama (Fieowei of Gbaramatu Kingdom) and Monday Keme of Gbaramatu (Principal Secretary to the Amako-suo of Ogbe-ljoh Warri, alongside Itsekiri and Agbarha leaders, told our reporter they remain committed to peace, the conditions, followers' actions suggest otherwise.

Discover more [🔗 Business News Analysis](#) [🔗 Nigeria Concert Tickets](#) [🔗 Nigerian National Issues](#)

[🔗 Nigerian Politics Analysis](#) [🔗 Forex trading platforms](#) [🔗 Journalism training programs](#) [🔗 Nigerian news subscriptions](#)

[🔗 Nigerian political biographies](#) [🔗 Sports equipment](#) [🔗 Nigeria News Subscription](#)

These actions, activities of fifth columnists, and the struggle among political and economic interest groups to retain control of oil royalties, political offices, and proceeds from illegal bunkering are steadily eroding the region's uneasy calm.

In the riverside areas, the Itsekiris and Ijaws of Gbaramatu, Ogbe-ljoh, Egbema, and surrounding communities in Warri Southwest and Warri North LGAs are sparring over land, political positions, and territories gained or lost during the last war. In the metropolis, the Urhobo and Itsekiri are once again clashing over the legitimacy of 'newly created' kingdoms and traditional titles, while quietly positioning themselves for future electoral contests. The Ogbe-ljoh community revived claim to parts of Warri, particularly the waterfront enclaves and wards recently allocated by INEC, has reignited old suspicions.

Emeka Nworie, an eastern businessman who lost his shop and livelihood during the war, said he sees disturbing similarities between now and the buildup to the 1996 violence.

Discover more [🔗 Nigerian history books](#) [🔗 Newspaper Archives Access](#) [🔗 Xiaomi Black Friday deals](#)

[🔗 International news memberships](#) [🔗 Educational resources Nigeria](#) [🔗 Business consulting services](#)

[🔗 Nigerian Travel Guide](#) [🔗 Sports equipment](#) [🔗 Groceries](#) [🔗 Public health degrees](#)

"These days, we are constantly bombarded with threats of war on social media," he said. "This time it's worse because, in the 1990s, there was no Facebook or TikTok to issue threats. It shows we learned nothing from the pain of that crisis, which still stares us in the face."

For many like Nworie, the parallels are chilling. The same actors, the same grievances, and the same fiery rhetoric that plunged Warri into chaos decades ago are once again on the rise, herding the area into yet another dark chapter in its history, if the key players do not pull the plug.

## Recurring Patterns of Attacks and Violence

Discover more [🔗 Activewear](#) [🔗 Entertainment News Updates](#) [🔗 Nigerian Travel Guide](#) [🔗 Nigerian history books](#)

[🔗 Print Newspaper Delivery](#) [🔗 Nigeria Investment Guide](#) [🔗 Newspaper Online Subscription](#) [🔗 Portable speakers](#)

[🔗 Entertainment news subscriptions](#) [🔗 Nigerian news subscriptions](#)

This reporter recalls how floats celebrating the first anniversary of Ogiame Atuwatse II, the Olu of Warri (1987–2015), were attacked in May 1988 by some Agbassa youths for allegedly "trespassing" into their kingdom. That incident marked one of the earliest sparks in a chain of events that crippled economic and social life in Warri and pushed Delta State to its knees.

Thirty-seven years later, the feeling of déjà vu is unmistakable, and strong. The former prince from that royal household, Tsola Emiko, the son of Ogiame Atuwatse II, now sits on the throne as Ogiame Atuwatse III. Ironically, though he was only four years old when the 1988 attack occurred, his own anniversary celebration has suffered a similar fate. In early September, a float marking his fourth coronation anniversary was attacked by youths from the same Agbassa area.

These recent incidents have rekindled ethnic suspicion and reopened old wounds, leaving the peace between the communities fragile once again. The latest clashes have already been linked to at least two deaths.

Discover more [Advertise Newspaper Space](#) [Retatrutide peptide supplements](#) [Political science courses](#)

[African governance summits](#) [Xiaomi Black Friday deals](#) [Lagos](#) [Online Casino Directory](#)

[Newspaper Online Subscription](#) [Newspaper](#) [Chair](#)

Two weeks after the attack on the Olu of Warri's celebration float, Itsekiri youths from the Ekurede-Itsekiri area of Warri metropolis were accused of launching an assault that left several Ogbe-Ijoh indigenes badly injured. The victims were part of a team putting up posters to announce the 10th coronation anniversary of their monarch, His Royal Majesty Couple Oromoni, Monbene III, the Pere of Ogbe-Ijoh Warri Kingdom.

Chief Keme condemned the attack in an interview with our reporter in Ogbe-Ijoh. "The posting of banners or billboards does not justify such violence," he said. "Posters are simply a means of passing information."

While that may be true on the surface, the underlying motives tell a deeper story. An Itsekiri leader who also spoke with our reporter accused the Ijaw youths of provocation and of attempting to rewrite historical boundaries.

Discover more [Educational resources Nigeria](#) [Sports News Coverage](#) [African travel tours](#)

[Newspaper Online Subscription](#) [Nigerian political biographies](#) [Groceries](#) [Nigerian Politics Analysis](#)

[educational](#) [Business News Analysis](#) [Newspaper Archives Access](#)

"Find out where those so-called victims were attacked," the Itsekiri leader said. "They were pasting banners right inside Itsekiri territory. Were they really just posting, or were they throwing stones at Ekurede-Itsekiri by the bypass?. Beside, it was not the Itsekiris that tore their banners, it was the police who felt that the action could start another fight."

Observers familiar with the terrain say the issue runs much deeper than the "posting of billboards." Disputes over ownership of the NPA, Mclver, and Ogbe-Ijoh markets, as well as adjoining lands, remain festering wounds between the two groups. These flashpoints, which were heavily bombarded during the 1997–2003 crisis have long been subjects of bitter litigation and political maneuvering. Dozens of victims were killed in those areas, their homes burned, their fates sealed by tribal profiling.

Today, the sense of unease among residents and community stakeholders is sharpened by the reappearance of some key figures from that earlier conflict. The current Pere of Ogbe-Ijoh, HRM Couple Oromoni, was a central figure during the 1997 crisis. He was directly affected when the military government of General Sani Abacha controversially relocated the headquarters of Warri Southwest Local Government Area from Ogbe-Ijoh town to the Itsekiri community of Ogidigben, despite an election that Oromoni had won.

Discover more [Sports News Coverage](#) [Nigerian Travel Guide](#) [Newspaper Archives Access](#)

[Entertainment news subscriptions](#) [Sports equipment](#) [African travel tours](#) [educational](#) [Public health degrees](#)

[Financial literacy workshops](#) [Nigerian political biographies](#)

Oromoni had contested and defeated another Ijaw candidate, Mr. Bosin Ebikeme of Gbaramatu, in the council election. He barely had time to assume office before the crisis erupted, derailing his tenure, governance and igniting waves of violence.

Nearly three decades later, the past seems to echo again. The monarch's younger brother, Chief Sylvester Oromoni, has now emerged as chairman of that council. His emergence aided by an unwritten power-rotation agreement between the two ethnic groups as part of the post-crisis peace accord. He succeeded an Itsekiri, Mr. Taye Duke.

Given this background and the familiarity of the main actors, many observers expected the leaders of both ethnic groups to draw lessons from the past and chart a new path to peaceful coexistence. But investigations reveal that the issues have long spiraled beyond the original dispute over the relocation of the LGA headquarters.

Discover more [⌕ Advertise Newspaper Space](#) [⌕ Nigerian news subscriptions](#) [⌕ Politics News Headlines](#)

[⌕ Retatrutide peptide supplements](#) [⌕ Nigerian Travel Guide](#) [⌕ Financial literacy workshops](#) [⌕ Sports equipment](#)

[⌕ Journalism training programs](#) [⌕ Activewear](#) [⌕ Nigeria Business Reports](#)

The Warri Crisis opened a Pandora 's Box, one that extended beyond politics into the larger struggle to settle historical scores, fight for resource control and development of the Niger Delta. What began as a fight over administrative boundaries evolved into a broader contest for power, oil royalties, and recognition.

Mr. Sunny Amorighoye Mene, Secretary of the Itsekiri Leaders of Thought, blames both the federal and state governments for mishandling the post-crisis phase. He said official patronage and political empowerment of those behind the violence emboldened some groups to act with impunity.

“People now believe that might is right,” Mene said. “The government rewarded the aggressors without addressing the criminal aspects of the conflict. There’s a negative historical trajectory rooted in the 1997–2012 Warri ethnic crisis. One ethnic group believes it emerged victorious and that gave them the right to usurp and take whatever they want, including other people’s land. That perception has given it undue political and economic advantages.”

Discover more [⌕ Public health degrees](#) [⌕ African travel tours](#) [⌕ National News Digest](#) [⌕ Nigerian National Issues](#)

[⌕ Politics News Headlines](#) [⌕ Political science courses](#) [⌕ Chair](#) [⌕ Cultural experience packages](#)

[⌕ Business consulting services](#) [⌕ Nigerian Travel Guide](#)

## All Groups Should Sheathe Their Swords

Mr. Aaron Aghorigho, Managing Director of Dama Holdings Nigeria Limited – a thriving trading company near the NNS Delta Naval Base, like Nowrie, expressed deep concern over the latest threats to peace in Warri.

Playing the battle for control of the city, Aghorigho lamented that ethnic bickering and clashes over ownership have stunted development, curtailed business opportunities, and disrupted the lives of residents.

Discover more [⌕ Retatrutide peptide supplements](#) [⌕ Advertise Newspaper Space](#) [⌕ Sports News Coverage](#)

[⌕ Online Casino Guide](#) [⌕ Online casino betting guides](#) [⌕ Forex trading platforms](#) [⌕ Nigeria Investment Guide](#)

[⌕ Newspaper](#) [⌕ Entertainment News Updates](#) [⌕ Newspaper E-paper Access](#)

“Nobody can claim ownership of Warri,” he said. “True Warri belongs to all tribes, not just those within the state. There are the Old Warri people – those from all over Nigeria who love the city and have invested in it. They have more at stake than the agitators, who have nothing to lose.”

Appealing to stakeholders to “sheathe their swords,” Aghorigho highlighted the lack of investments and limited economic opportunities in the city. While unemployment among youths is rising, he said there is also a shortage of skilled manpower. He urged those with resources, who might otherwise prepare for conflict, to channel them instead into vocational and technical training programs.

---

**Read Also:** [Relief for commuters as Warri-Itakpe rail services resume](#)

---

## Killing the Peacemaker:

Discover more [🔗 Newspaper](#) [🔗 Xiaomi Black Friday deals](#) [🔗 Online casino betting guides](#) [🔗 Lagos](#)

[🔗 Sports News Coverage](#) [🔗 African travel tours](#) [🔗 Educational resources Nigeria](#) [🔗 Political science courses](#)

[🔗 News Alert Service](#) [🔗 Chair](#)

Tensions, however, escalated further after a series of gruesome killings, and alleged attack on Apata, an Ijaw village, by suspected Itsekiris marauders. Among the dead victims was Jerry Aduara, chairman of an Urhobo vigilante group, allegedly killed by Itsekiri militias on Odion Road in Warri. Aduara, 49, was reportedly on a peace mission to an Itsekiri enclave when he was murdered.

Sources told our reporter that Aduara had devoted himself to mediating between Itsekiri and Urhobo communities, hoping to prevent the type of violence witnessed during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Violence has been rising in Warri before that incident. Earlier in September, an Itsekiri youth, Dele Ogunmayo, was shot dead allegedly by men in military fatigues. His remains was deposited at Warri Central Hospital.

Discover more [🔗 educational](#) [🔗 Nigerian Travel Guide](#) [🔗 Sports News Coverage](#) [🔗 Newspaper E-paper Access](#)

[🔗 Nigeria Investment Guide](#) [🔗 Advertise Newspaper Space](#) [🔗 Online casino betting guides](#)

[🔗 International news memberships](#) [🔗 Entertainment News Updates](#) [🔗 Online Casino Guide](#)

These deaths and frequent brawls have amplified fear across the city, where the scars of past devastation are still visible. Thousands of warehouses in the NPA area remain largely unoccupied or taken over by mega-churches. Burnt buildings and graves of victims serve as reminders of the cost the war.

Estimates suggest that about 3,000 people died during the Warri crises across the riverside areas and Warri metropolis. Many Itsekiri towns remain desolate and uninhabited, and the current unrest makes return to these communities highly risky. The city's economy, and indeed that of the state, has struggled to recover from the resulting slump.

This left a generation of young men without jobs or hope. Many turned to tricycle (keke) operations for a living, while others engaged in cybercrime, ritual activities, organ harvesting, and working for beneficiaries of the crisis. Several followed oil companies and contractors that abandoned the area and relocated to neighboring Bayelsa, Rivers and even Lagos states.

Discover more [🔗 educational](#) [🔗 Groceries](#) [🔗 Portable speakers](#) [🔗 Newspaper Online Subscription](#)

[🔗 Nigeria Business Reports](#) [🔗 Cultural experience packages](#) [🔗 Newspaper Archives Access](#) [🔗 Journalism training programs](#)

[🔗 Nigerian political biographies](#) [🔗 International news memberships](#)

Members of the Ndigbo Traders Association said many of its members lost their lives, others died from illnesses triggered by business setbacks during the crisis. Many relocated to their villages, where many succumbed to poverty and hardship.

## Who Owns Warri?

The question of Warri's ownership is central to recurring tensions. Both Ijaw and Itsekiri groups trace the name to colonial-era mispronunciations. While Itsekiri historians argue that Warri derives from "Iwere" (Itsekiri word for homeland), Chief Keme and other Itsekiri leaders say it comes from the Ijaw word "Ware," meaning house.

Discover more [🔗 Nigerian Politics Analysis](#) [🔗 Online casino betting guides](#) [🔗 Advertise Newspaper Space](#)

[🔗 News Alert Service](#) [🔗 Xiaomi Black Friday deals](#) [🔗 Sports News Coverage](#) [🔗 Newspaper E-paper Access](#)

[🔗 Nigerian history books](#) [🔗 Nigeria Investment Guide](#) [🔗 Sports equipment](#)

However, Warri is home to many and more than a city. It encompasses three LGAs: Warri South LGA, with headquarters in Warri metropolis; Warri North (Koko is headquarter), and Warri Southwest, whose headquarters location from Ogbe-Ijoh to Ogidigben (Itsekiri town in Escravos area) sparked the first major crisis. These areas form Warri Federal Constituency, which is a part of Delta South Senatorial District. Ijaws, Itsekiris, and Urhobos (of Warri metropolis) call it home.

Communal conflicts worldwide typically arise from land disputes, and Warri is no exception. In the metropolis, Urhobo residents of Okere and their Itsekiri neighbors have long fought over land ownership. Prominent Okere Urhobo leaders, including the Okumagba brothers, Daniel and Benjamin, engaged in decade-long legal battles with Itsekiris of Okere, each side claiming victory.

---

## Related News

- Warri: No to apocalypse
- Warri cannot afford another crisis
- Warri, a distressed and dying city

Along the waterfront areas, the settlements are inhabited by Ijaws of Ogbe-Ijoh and Itsekiris. Land disputes here, including ownership of properties in the NPA and Ogbe-Ijoh market, were flashpoints of the first crisis. In Warri North, Ijaws of Egbema and Itsekiris of Koko continue to contest ownership of hamlets and towns, though less intensely. The Warri Southwest conflict between Gbaramatu Ijaws and Itsekiris of Ugborodo and neighboring communities is well documented.

Discover more [🔗 National News Digest](#) [🔗 Entertainment news subscriptions](#) [🔗 Newspaper](#) [🔗 Journalism training programs](#)  
[🔗 Nigeria Business Reports](#) [🔗 Nigeria Investment Guide](#) [🔗 Portable speakers](#) [🔗 Sports News Coverage](#)  
[🔗 Nigerian National Issues](#) [🔗 International news memberships](#)

## Much Ado About the 'Olu of Warri'

The Olu of Warri, overlord of the Itsekiris across all three Warris and beyond, remains the most prominent traditional ruler in the LGAs and Delta State. His title, however, has long been a point of contention. Neighboring ethnic groups argue that the king's influence is overstated, particularly over the Ogbe-Ijoh, Isaba, Diebiri, and Gbaramatu Ijaws in Warri Southwest, and the Urhobos of Okere and Agbassa in the metropolis.

Attempts to change the title by the Ijaws and Urhobos have repeatedly caused friction. In 2003, Comrade Ovouzor Macaulay, who was Commissioner for Inter-ethnic Relations, said the title was untouchable, prompting criticism from Ijaw leaders, including Chief Edwin Clark, who slammed him as a Baby Commissioner.

Discover more [🔗 Sports equipment](#) [🔗 Online Casino Directory](#) [🔗 Entertainment news subscriptions](#) [🔗 African travel tours](#)  
[🔗 Sports News Coverage](#) [🔗 Nigerian National Issues](#) [🔗 Activewear](#) [🔗 Entertainment News Updates](#)  
[🔗 Financial literacy workshops](#) [🔗 Tirzepatide peptide supplements](#)

Chiefs Keme and Gbenekama, have again insisted that the title of Olu of Warri fuels tensions. They argue it grants the monarch undue sense of authority over other traditional rulers, tribes and kingdoms. "The title has an intoxicating effect on the monarch and his subjects,"

Gbenekama, who vehemently condemned the tag of customary tenants on his Gbaramatu kinsmen by the Itsekiris contends that the title was politically imposed. "The Awolowo government of Western Nigeria changed it from 'Olu of Itsekiri' to 'Olu of Warri' in 1957. Yet, in doing so, it was made clear that the Olu's authority does not extend to kings of Gbaramatu, Isaba, or Egbema, or their lands."

Mene however differed. He argues that Gbenekema and others are threatened by the influence and recognition that the Olu rightly deserves. He traces the compromise on the title back to 1936, when Ginuwa II was crowned Olu of Itsekiri to prevent conflict with the Urhobo, who argued that Warri Province at the time included their lands. By 1957, the title "Olu of Warri" was confirmed for the present Warri Federal Constituency.

Discover more [🔗 Nigeria Concert Tickets](#) [🔗 Online Casino Directory](#) [🔗 Business News Analysis](#)

[🔗 African governance summits](#) [🔗 Advertise Newspaper Space](#) [🔗 Tirzepatide peptide supplements](#) [🔗 African travel tours](#)

[🔗 Politics News Headlines](#) [🔗 Journalism training programs](#) [🔗 Financial literacy workshops](#)

As the contest over Olu of Warri title go on, Urhobo kingdoms of Agbarha-Warri and Okere-Warri are sprung up. Ijaw kingdoms in the area have also added the prefixes of Warri to their kingdom to reflect their stake and claim. Ogbe-Ijoh Kingdom is Ogbe-Ijoh Warri kingdom, a move to reassert sovereignty in their sides of Warri.

Beyond ceremonial concerns, the disputes reflect deeper struggles over land, patronage, and control of the region's vast oil and gas resources. Warri area sits on vast reserves of oil and gas. Battles over small hamlets and fishing settlements often relate to nearby oil wells and pipelines, which attract royalties and patronages from companies. This is why their names are subject of disputes. For instance, Ijalla (Itsekiri) versus Ijalagha (Ijaw), and Okerenkoko (site of the National Maritime University), claimed differently by Itsekiris of Omadino, as Okerenghigo.

The aftermath of the Warri wars empowered the actors financially and politically, particularly the Ijaws of Gbaramatu. They view the conflict as a fight for freedom from the cultural and political influence of the smaller yet more educated and politically advanced Itsekiris.

Discover more [🔗 Online Casino Directory](#) [🔗 Retatrutide peptide supplements](#) [🔗 Activewear](#) [🔗 Portable speakers](#)

[🔗 Online casino betting guides](#) [🔗 Nigerian history books](#) [🔗 Nigeria Concert Tickets](#) [🔗 International news memberships](#)

[🔗 Nigerian Travel Guide](#) [🔗 Xiaomi Black Friday deals](#)

"What is happening now is about righting ancient wrongs," said an Ijaw leader from Ogbe-Ijoh. "The Itsekiris used marriages and relationships with Europeans to gain influence, which they then used to oppress our forefathers," one member said.

### **"We Keep Conceding, Ijaws Want to Take Everything" – Itsekiri**

On the other hand, some Itsekiris leaders feel they have made too much concessions to the Ijaw groups to sustain the peace. When the Warri Crisis ended in 2003, key concessions were made by the Itsekiris to the Ijaws, including the rotation of political offices in Warri Southwest. The arrangement allowed Chief George Ekemupolo, an Ijaw and younger sibling of Chief Government Ekpemupolo (Tompolo), to be elected chairman of Warri Southwest LGA for the first time.

Discover more [🔗 Forex trading platforms](#) [🔗 Cultural experience packages](#) [🔗 African governance summits](#)

[🔗 Nigerian Travel Guide](#) [🔗 Chair](#) [🔗 News Alert Service](#) [🔗 Nigeria Investment Guide](#) [🔗 Newspaper](#) [🔗 Activewear](#)

[🔗 Journalism training programs](#)

In 2019, another Gbaramatu politician, Mr. Dennis Guwor, became the state lawmaker representing Warri Southwest LGA. By 2023, he was inaugurated as Speaker of the Delta State House of Assembly. Before Guwor, the seat was traditionally held by Itsekiris, including Hon. Daniel Mayuku and others (four terms).

These political gains by the Ijaws have set off alarm bells among Itsekiri politicians and elites, who argue that the Ijaws overran and seized their communities during the crisis. Their fears are compounded by the state of their desolate riverside communities.

Our finding showed that the Itsekiris have over the years after the crisis moved from the hinterland to the mainland, often building mansions in urban centers from wealth accumulated during construction booms such as the Escravos Gas-to-Liquid project in Ugborodo, and other activities at the expense of their villages in the rural areas.

Although Chief Ayirimi Emami, built the 911 resort and other projects, the business and profitability are affected by infighting within the ethnic group. Similarly, some members of the tribe are facing questions over mismanagement of both communities' wealth and national and international projects that they are saddled with executing in their communities. A new town project sponsored by Chevron, an FG shoreline protection project, and a FIFA stadium are among comatose or abandoned projects in Ugborodo that could have change the landscapes of Itsekiri areas.

Conversely, Ijaw communities are experiencing boom. Oporoza, the traditional headquarters, Okerenkoko, Kokodiagbene, Kunukuma, Benikrukru, and others are now hosting major projects and drawing visitors, artistes and actors from across the country. Gbenekama said his kinsmen were returning home in droves and developing properties, which is raising the profile of those areas.

An Itsekiri youth, who refused to be named because of his connection to Tantita Security owned by Tompolo, conceded that the Itsekiris were victims of both their failures and fear of Ijaw militias' incursions. "Many Itsekiris were killed by Ijaw militants during the crisis. We lost family members and property, and were forced to flee. People are afraid of rebuilding because the unknown factor. The Ijaws who were the aggressors have no such fears. Governments' agencies like DESOPADEC and NDDC found it easier to work in Ijaw areas because they wouldn't be attacked, unlike in Itsekiri lands," our source added.

### **INEC's Ward Delineation: Fuel on the Fire**

It was against this backdrop, that the recent ward delineation exercise by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) assumed more significance and has heightened tensions.

In 2022, after many years of shunning politicis, the Ijaws secured a strategic Supreme Court victory aimed at better reflecting their population in the Warri Federal Constituency. The apex court directed INEC to carry out a fresh ward delineation.

Historically, the Itsekiris dominated the Warri South seat in the House of Assembly since 1999. The House of Representatives and Warri North assembly positions were exclusive preserves of the Itsekiris, while Warri South constituencies are shared with Urhobos. But the INEC exercise and an emerging alliance between the Ijaws and Urhobo is set to change the political dynamics.

The INEC ward delineation held between July 2024 and April 2025, is set to redraw the political map, handing advantage to the Ijaws. In Warri South, the number of wards increased from 10 to 20. In Warri Southwest, wards rose from 10 to 19; of these, Gbaramatu Ijaws received seven, Ogbe-Ijoh five, Isaba and Diebiri one each, and

Itsekiris five. Warri North went from 10 to 18 wards, split nine each between Ijaws of Egbema and Itsekiris. In Warri South metropolis, Urhobos secured 10, Itsekiris seven, and Ogbe-Ijoh three.

The Itsekiris have rejected the outcome of the exercise, accusing INEC of bias. Mene claimed that Prof. Rhoda Gumus, and other Ijaw INEC officials involved in executing the Supreme Court judgment, compromised neutrality of the commission. "INEC should have removed all Ijaw and Urhobo elements from the delineation committee. We challenged this in court, but while the matter was ongoing, INEC proceeded using an Ijaw official," Mene said.

"The exercise was skewed against the Itsekiris. INEC brought coordinates from Burutu LGA and Ondo State into Warri constituencies, exceeding its mandate."

For the Ijaws and Urhobos, however, the exercise reflected demographic realities. Dr. Paul Bebenimibo, a Gbaramatu focal person, described the exercise as one of the freest and most credible. "It was thorough, technically, and painstakingly executed," he said.

His kinsman, Gbenekama criticized the Itsekiris for constantly "changing the goalpost midgame."

"Why is it that any time something does not favor the Itsekiris, they try to derail it?" Ward delineation and politics are about numbers. For the past 15 years, the Ijaws have been developing their communities. Our young men are returning home, especially because of the Maritime University. Our communities are growing rapidly. Meanwhile, many Itsekiri areas are empty. We are polygamous and they are monogamous," he said.

Nevertheless, our findings revealed some discontentment even within Ijaw communities of Ogbe-Ijoh, Diebiri, and Isaba. Those who spoke were unhappy with the distribution of the 14 wards allotted to their ethnic group in Warri Southwest.

"With this arrangement, no other Ijaw kingdom can produce a political officeholder without Gbaramatu's consent," one source said. "They gave themselves seven wards and reduced others to five or one. They want everyone to bow before them before gaining anything."

IN Warri South, Chief Westham Adehor told our reporter that the Agbarha Warri people are vetting the coordinates used in the exercise. He said some issues they raised have been presented to the relevant authorities.

INEC's Head of Voter Education and Publicity in Delta State, Nse Abasi Udom, in an interview with our reporter in Asaba, debunked accusation of bias by the Itsekiri. She said the commission is busy with continuous voters registration.

"We are not doing delineation now that process is over. What we're doing is voter registration," Udom said. "We are not compromised. I only resumed in Delta a few months ago, after the delineation exercise had been

concluded, so I can't comment on that process.”

Udom urged the Itsekiri to channel their energy into mobilizing for registration rather than revisiting the delineation issue.

### **Warri Federal Constituency Seat as the Target**

The INEC exercise and the resulting redrawing of wards have altered the political calculus in the Warri Federal Constituency. Once dominant, the Itsekiris now face political marginalization. The federal seat in Warri may soon become out of their reach, leaving them potentially as the only tribe in Delta State without representation at the national level.

By comparison, the Urhobos, spread across eight LGAs in Delta Central, have three House of Representatives seats. The Ijaws have two exclusive constituencies – Burutu and Bomadi/Patani – while the Isoko (the fourth ethnic group in the constituency) has the Isoko constituency. These constituencies, along with Warri, largely determine the Delta South Senatorial seat, a position once held by Ijaw leader James Manager for a record five consecutive terms (2003–2023).

“The Itsekiris risk becoming politically irrelevant under the new order,” a political analyst said. “Negotiation is the only viable option for them.”

Yet, negotiation faces challenges. Many Itsekiri perceive the Ijaws, particularly from Gbaramatu, of pursuing an agenda to dominate, not just the Itsekiri, but the entire state.

Chief Keme dispelled these fears, but called for dialogue, stressing that being the majority does not automatically guarantee election victory.

Whether negotiation without the shadow of violence will succeed in Warri remains uncertain. How the tribes navigate this delicate path will determine the future of an area rich in resources but scarred by decades of conflict.

Meanwhile, Governor Sheriff Oborevwori, is daintily skirting around the issues to avoid being sucked into the fray, after his faux pas at the initial stage. He came under attack when he told the warring groups to sheathe their sword until after his tenure, a statement that did not go well with the public.

His aides said, "The governor is working behind the scene to douse the tension and forge another workable model for the three groups to live in peace. It is not everything that he does that should be publicized."