

ORGANIZED CRIME IN NIGERIA: A THREAT ASSESSMENT



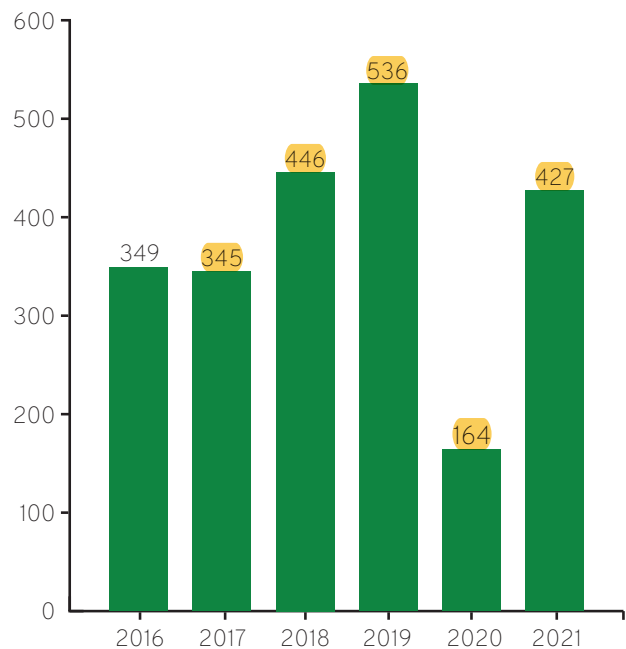
1. Cultism

1.1 Introduction

UNODC first discussed the cult phenomenon in its 2009 organized crime threat assessment for West Africa. The report noted that cults were a syncretic phenomenon, melding university fraternities with traditional secret societies, vigilante and militant groups, and street gangs.¹⁹ Since that time, cultism has become an even more prominent issue in Nigeria and internationally. Recent media accounts in Europe and Africa have portrayed cults as brutal mafias, steeped in secrecy and blood ritual, and active in a wide range of international criminal activities.²⁰

While cultism is a nationwide and even an international phenomenon, the incidence of cult-related violence appears to be greatest in the South-South geopolitical zone of the country. A study of individually targeted killings in the country found that “Rivers, Edo and Lagos are the states that experienced the highest levels of cult-related targeted killings,” with almost all these killings occurring in the south of the country.²¹ The South-South is also the geographic origin of many of the best-known cult groups in Nigeria and, according to statistics compiled by the NPF, the South-South state of Bayelsa had the highest number of cultism incidents detected in 2019.²²

Figure 1: Number of cult attacks in recent years



Source: Nigeria Watch²³

Data on cult-related violence similarly show a concentration of incidents²⁴ in the South-South, with Rivers State having the highest number of incidents. For these and other reasons explained in the methodology below, the field research for this chapter was focused on three states in the South-

18 See ‘51,541 prison inmates awaiting trial – Minister’, The Guardian, October 9, 2022. Accessible at <https://guardian.ng/news/51541-prison-inmates-awaiting-trial-minister/>

19 UNODC. *Transnational Trafficking and the Rule of Law in West Africa: A Threat Assessment*, 2009, p. 24, accessible at https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/West_Africa_Report_2009.pdf.

20 See, for example, Africa Eye. ‘The ultra-violent cult that became a global mafia’, BBC World Service, 13 December 2021, accessed at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59614595>.

21 See Hilary Mattess. *Power, elitism and history: Analyzing trends in targeted killings in Nigeria, 2000 to 2017*, 2018, accessible at <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/TGIATOC-Targeted-Killings-in-Nigeria-Report-1975-web.pdf>.

22 NPF. *Annual Report 2019*, Abuja, 2020. While these data are national, the reporting of cultism by the police is limited to those states that have passed legislation criminalizing membership in cults.

23 Nigeria Watch. *Sixth Report on Violence in Nigeria 2016; Seventh Report on Violence in Nigeria 2017; Eighth Report on Violence 2018; Ninth Report on Violence 2019; Tenth Report on Violence 2020; Eleventh Report on Violence 2021*, all accessible at <http://www.nigeriawatch.org/index.php?html=7>.

24 Partners for Peace. ‘Peace Map’, accessible at <https://p4p-nigerdelta.org/peace-map>.