

10 MYTHS ABOUT VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA



NIGERIA WATCH

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has a reputation for being one of the most violent countries in Africa and in the world. It is sometimes compared to Mexico and Colombia when it comes to drug cartels, Iraq when it comes to oil conflicts in the Niger Delta, or Afghanistan, Syria, and Mali when it comes to jihadist insurgencies like that of Boko Haram in Borno. Such views are widely shared in Nigeria and abroad. Yet they often rely on personal perceptions and, sometimes, rumours about conspiracies, the power of invisible forces, or the scramble for resources. Hence it is necessary to debunk some of the local and global myths about violence in Nigeria.

Using a database which indexes and codes fatal incidents on a daily basis since 1 June 2006, this brief is the first attempt to obtain an objective assessment of the situation from a scientific point of view. It compensates for the lack of police statistics and provides answers to policy-makers, academics, journalists, diplomats, development agencies, humanitarian workers, and security operatives. This brief is the result of a collective effort, carried out during a 5-day Masterclass organized by IFRA-Nigeria (French Institute for Research in Africa) in December 2017. A group of post-graduate students of the University of Ibadan worked under the supervision of senior scholars, specialists in conflicts and violence, and produced these texts and graphs based on Nigeria Watch's data. The methodology used to aggregate the data is detailed online at: <http://www.nigeriawatch.org/>

Some of the myths addressed here include the perception of rising violence, the role of economic recession and oil production, attacks on foreigners, crime cycles, security in Abuja and Lagos, Sharia Law, religious conflicts, and ritual killings.

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Note: In the online system, figures are updated whenever a new source provides a different report, which explains why trends may change slightly according to the current state of data when they are accessed. The algorithm used also rounds up figures a little differently per cause or per incident. The source for the GDP growth rates is the World Bank. Graph 5b is based on the following LGAs: Yenagoa, Port-Harcourt, Onitsha North, Onitsha South, Warri South, Egor (for Benin City) and Ibadan North, Ibadan North East, Ibadan North West, Ibadan South East, Ibadan South West, Oluyole (for Ibadan city), and all the Local Government Areas of Lagos State.

‘NIGERIA IS MORE AND MORE DANGEROUS’

No, fatal violence has declined since 2015

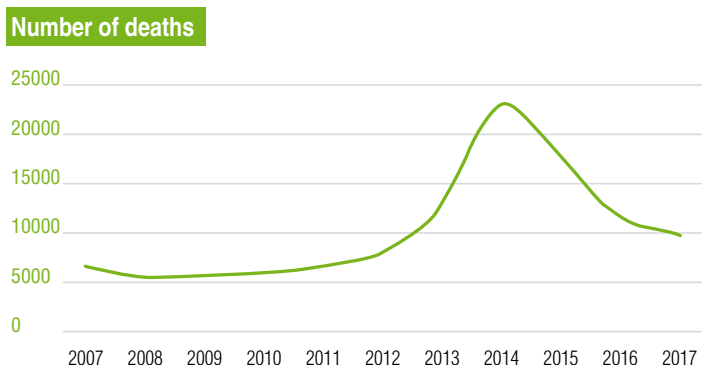
Together with the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls at Chibok, Borno in 2014, the news of Boko Haram terrorism has given Nigeria an uncongenial image as a very dangerous country. Many Nigerians and expatriates think that the situation is getting worse year after year, as if security was better before. The myth of a more violent country cuts across social status and is found amongst the rich, the poor, and the middleclass.

The Data Analysis

Most extreme violence results in fatalities. This is the reason why **Graph 1** focuses on the body-count of the victims of various types of fatal incidents. The number of violent deaths did indeed rise in 2014 due to the Boko Haram insurgency and military repression in the northeast. However, there was a sharp decline in 2015. Since then, the dip has normalized back to the almost steady flow of pre-2014 levels.

The Findings

There are ups and downs when it comes to violence. Worldwide, the general trend is going downward, both for the rates of homicides and battle deaths. In Nigeria, the rates of fatalities also declined in some regions, except of course in the states directly affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, i.e. Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. This finding calls into question some of the stereotypes about violence in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. It also leads one to think beyond national averages and analyse why some regions are more peaceful than others.



Graph 1: Yearly number of fatalities resulting from violent incident (2007–2017)

‘ECONOMIC RECESSION LEADS TO MORE VIOLENCE’

No, because recession often leads to social apathy, while development can trigger social tensions

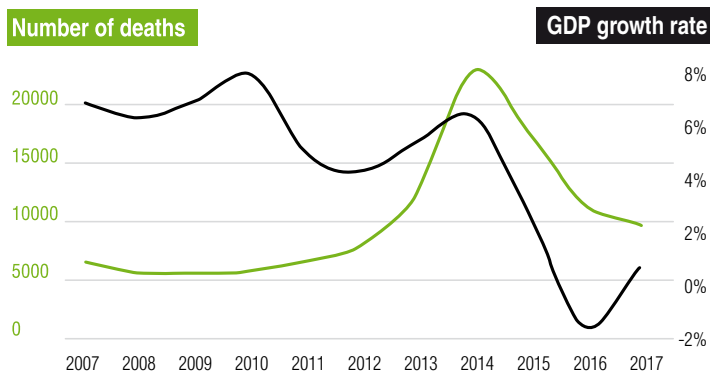
There is a general belief in Nigeria that recession exacerbates fatal conflicts across the six geo-political zones of the nation. Many people think that there is now an amplification of herdsmen attacks, terrorism, militancy, and domestic violence because of the economic crisis.

The Data Analysis

However, **Graph 2** shows a reduction in the number of deaths caused by violence, despite the decline of the growth rate of gross domestic product (GDP) since 2015. The data do not support the myth that economic recession leads to an increase in fatal violence. On the contrary, rising GDP is associated with an increase in the number of fatal deaths, while declining GDP is associated with decline in the number of fatal deaths.

The Findings

Why is that so? In fact, economic growth often exacerbates social inequality and triggers protest. In developing countries, the so-called ‘paradox of plenty’ shows that the extraction of natural resources can widen the gap between the poor and the rich, thereby reducing solidarity and integration between different social classes. Historically, also, many revolutions occurred during periods of economic prosperity—for instance, in Europe. On the other hand, economic recession can lead to social apathy. The bottom line is that there is not always a correlation between economic recession and lethal violence in Nigeria.



Graph 2: GDP growth rate and number of fatalities resulting from violence, per year (2007–2017)

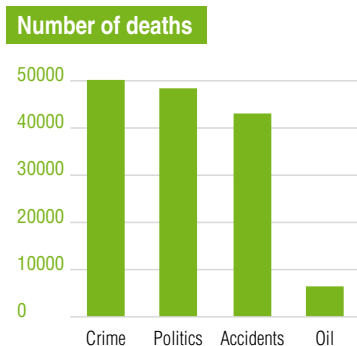
'OIL PRODUCTION IS A MAJOR CAUSE OF FATAL VIOLENCE'

No, it is not in the top main causes of fatal violence, and oil distribution is more deadly

Many people believe that extractive industries play a key role in violence. In Nigeria, this myth is partly based on the focus of local and foreign media on oil production and protests in the Niger Delta. Yet they do not identify the distinct roles of the upstream and downstream sectors in the oil industry. It is thus assumed that oil exploration and production is a primary cause of fatal violence in Nigeria.

The Data Analysis

Graph 3a shows that oil in general is related to a small percentage of fatalities when compared with crime, politics, accidents, and other economic issues. Available data also reveals that 84% of violent deaths in oil-related incidents occur during the distribution stage of refined products onshore, where international companies play a small role. The production stage accounts for 16% of fatalities (**Graph 3b**). Hence it is important to distinguish between the upstream sector of the industry, which explores and produces crude oil, and the downstream sector, which deals with distribution of refined products.

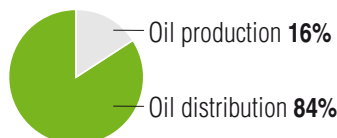


Graph 3a: Fatalities caused by crime, political conflicts, accidents, and oil-related incidents (2007–2017)

The Findings

Three main reasons explain fatal incidents in the downstream sector:

- Firstly, unlike the upstream sector, distribution requires considerable manpower, with a complex network of tanker drivers, marketers, loaders, filling station attendants, and so on.
- Secondly, oil distribution involves all regions of the country, including highly populated areas, while onshore and offshore production is concentrated in four states of the Nigerian federation: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers.
- Finally, refined products such as kerosene, diesel, and petrol are much more volatile and inflammable than crude oil. When transported on deplorable roads in poorly maintained tankers driven by reckless drivers, they can cause many fatalities in cases of accident and fire. Moreover, filling stations and pipelines of refined products are constantly a target for criminals and 'bunkers'. Hence further attention should be given to safety and regulation in oil distribution.



Graph 3b: Proportion of fatalities caused by oil production or distribution (2007–2017)

'NIGERIA IS MOST DANGEROUS FOR FOREIGNERS'

No, considering the number of Nigerian victims

Nigeria is usually seen as unsafe and unattractive for foreigners, investors, and tourists who wish to live, conduct business, or travel in the country. This perception has been exacerbated by international news agencies that portray Nigeria as a battleground under the siege of Boko Haram, while the global outcry about the schoolgirls in Chibok has further contributed to the panic. Also, news about the kidnapping of expatriate workers in the Niger Delta has constructed the region as a dreadful place to live in for foreign nationals. As a result, Nigeria has been labelled a 'high-risk travel destination'.

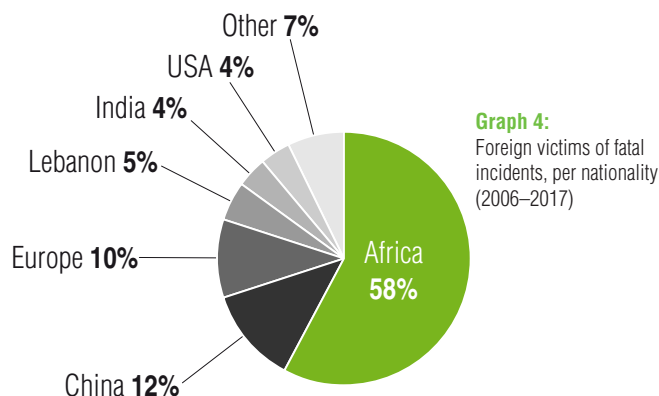
The Data Analysis

However, data shows that the number of foreigners killed in Nigeria is infinitesimal compared with the number of Nigerian victims. Amongst foreigners, South Africans are usually not the prime target: during the period covered from 2006, their case was quite exceptional as 81 of them died in the collapse of a church building in Lagos in 2014.

Graph 4 shows that the Chinese are the second-most likely nationality to fall victim to violence, probably as a result of their huge population, while the Indians and Lebanese have a long history of operating business in Nigeria, thus making them susceptible to attacks. Yet is difficult to assess the risks for each nationality as we do not know the number of expatriates living in Nigeria.

The Findings

Amongst foreigners, African nationals are the primary targets of violent incidents in Nigeria. In fact, the proportion of victims from neighbouring countries (Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Benin Republic) is likely to be much higher. But their killing is hardly reported because many of them have blended into Nigerian society so well that they have become quite invisible. By contrast, reports about the deaths of Europeans and Americans create more sensational news. Therefore, to assess the risk for foreigners, the ideal course to follow would be to obtain similar data about other African countries. A comparison of countries is necessary to claim that the Nigerian case is peculiar.



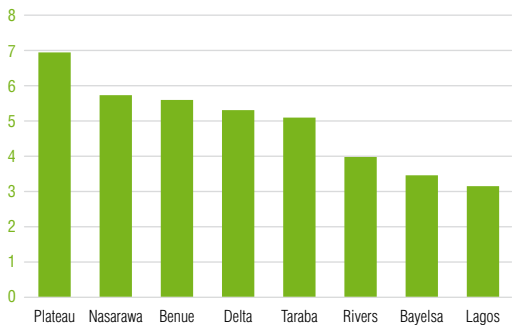
‘LAGOS IS THE MOST CRIMINAL PLACE IN NIGERIA’

No, if you consider the population

Lagos, with a population of over 10 million people according to the 2006 census figures, has a reputation for being the most criminal place in Nigeria. In spite of the relocation of the federal capital to Abuja, Lagos is indeed the nation’s economic nerve centre and the most populated city in the country. Its scale of urban transformation presents formidable challenges. As the city attracts many people, it develops informal settlements, which are poorly serviced and unable to cater for the socioeconomic and physical needs of the inhabitants. People allegedly engage in all forms of criminal activities in order to earn a living.

The Data Analysis

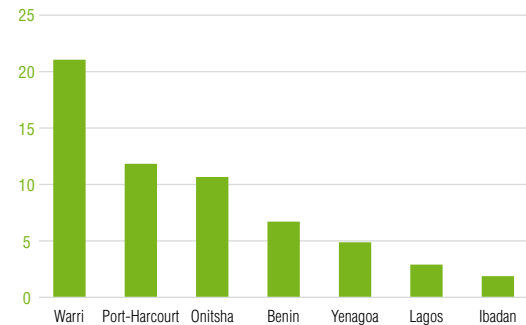
However, **Graph 5a** shows that Lagos does not record the highest rate of homicides related to crime incidents when compared with its population. Plateau and Nasarawa states have the highest rate of crime-related deaths (respectively 7 and 5.8 fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants), compared with Lagos (3.2). A comparison with other cities confirms this pattern. **Graph 5b** shows that Warri records the highest rate of crime-related deaths (21 per 100,000 inhabitants), followed by Port Harcourt (12), Onitsha (10.5), Benin (7), Yenagoa (5), Lagos (3.2), and Ibadan (2.5).



Graph 5a: Homicides caused by crime, per 100,000 inhabitants in the most affected states (2007–2017)

The Findings

Although Lagos is perceived as the most criminal place in Nigeria, the rates of crime-related deaths are more prevalent in the Middle Belt, probably because of disputed land rights and endemic communal clashes between indigenes and settlers. As for Warri and Port Harcourt, their high level of fatal crime incidents may be attributed to both intra- and inter-communal clashes as well as conflicts related to the production of crude oil or the distribution of refined products. The case of Onitsha is different. The city recorded many fatalities because of the deadly fighting between the police and militants of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in 2006.



Graph 5b: Homicides caused by crime, per 100,000 inhabitants in the most affected cities (2007–2017)

‘ABUJA IS SAFE’

Not so much if you consider road accidents

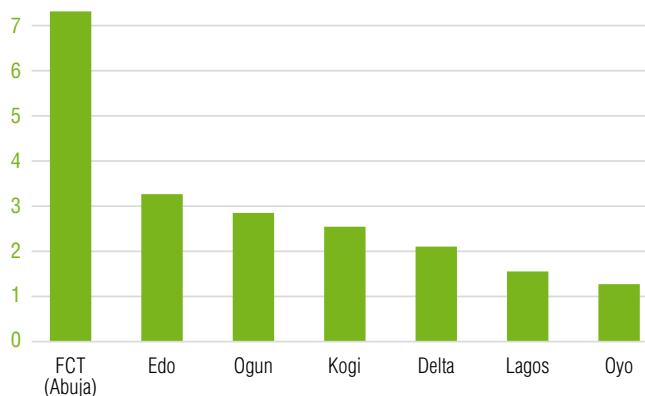
Nigerians and expatriates alike often believe that Abuja is safe compared with the rest of the country. This myth is based on the fact that the ‘rich and powerful’ live in the Federal Capital Territory. Also, Abuja is the seat of power of the Nigerian president and several government officials. It is the most organized urban centre in Nigeria, with well-designed architectural buildings and good roads and drainage systems, as compared with a metropolis like Lagos. Finally, Abuja is assumed to have well thought-out security measures because it is the headquarters of all federal law enforcement agencies.

The Data Analysis

The Capital Territory is indeed less affected by deadly incidents related to crime, riots, and political violence. However, a breakdown of the spatial distribution of violent deaths in Nigeria reveals that Abuja has the highest rate of fatal road accidents in the country. In this regard, **Graph 6** shows that the Federal Capital Territory is more dangerous than the other most affected states: Edo, Ogun, Kogi, Delta, Lagos, and Oyo. Since 2007, Abuja has recorded 7 people killed in road accidents per 100,000 inhabitants.

The Findings

The reasons for the above may be connected to the following hypothesis: First, there are more cars per person in Abuja than in any other city in Nigeria. Secondly, the Federal Capital Territory has better-quality roads and wider express lanes, so there is the temptation to drive at higher speed. Consequently, road accidents in Abuja are more likely to be fatal compared with states that have poor road networks accompanied by traffic congestion, such as in Lagos. It is obviously more dangerous to have an accident when driving at 100 km/h than when driving at 20 km/h. This problem usually attracts less attention than terrorism, yet it causes many deaths and it calls for a reinforcement of road safety.



Graph 6: Fatalities resulting from road accidents, per 100,000 inhabitants in the most affected states (2007–2017)

'THERE ARE MORE CRIME INCIDENTS AT CHRISTMAS'

No, there are no cycles in fatal crime incidents

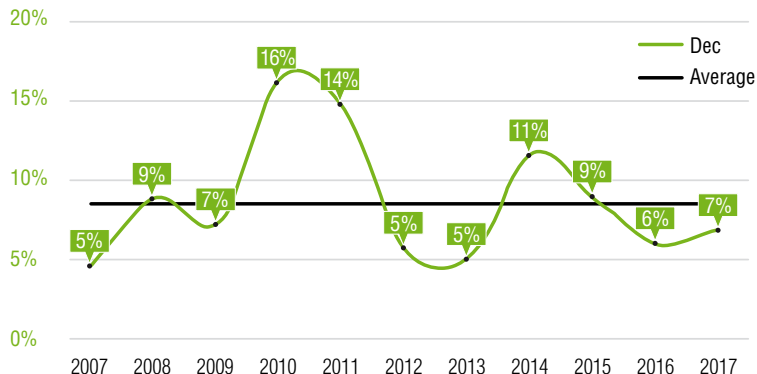
There is a widespread belief amongst Nigerian Christians that there are more crime incidents during the Christmas period, especially armed robberies. Nigerian Muslims also believe this because the period interweaves with the New Year celebration. Rising crime incidents in December allegedly result from armed robbers' desperation to meet the needs of their families when social pressure causes people to buy Christmas gifts and spend money lavishly.

The Data Analysis

However, **Graph 7** does not support this myth. There are no cycles in fatal crime incidents. On the contrary, the data available shows that the rates of crime-related deaths in December are usually below the annual average for the period 2007–2017.

The Findings

Other studies about cattle rustling confirm that there are no monthly cycles in violent crime. The myth of a rise in armed robberies during the Christmas period is dangerous because it can instil fear in the population, thereby leading to paranoia, tensions, and even sometimes lynching of suspected thieves.



Graph 7: Percentage of fatalities resulting from crime in December, per year, compared with the annual average for the period 2007–2017

‘SHARIA LAW HELPS FIGHTING CRIME’

No, there is no discernible impact of Sharia law on levels of fatal crime incidents

Sharia is a set of laws based on the Quran, the holy book of Muslims. These laws have been implemented and practised in the northern part of Nigeria since precolonial times and the 19th century jihad of Usman Dan Fodio, including during the period of British Indirect Rule. At Independence, however, their jurisdiction was reduced. By the end of military rule in 1999, many Muslims in the north thus began to clamour for the reactivation of Sharia law as the overriding legal system in their region. Amongst other effects, the expectation was that Sharia would spell the end of crime, address the ills of the society, and purify Islam from perceived decadent Western influences. The call for Sharia law became a cardinal electoral campaign promise and was hugely exploited by the Muslim ruling class. In 1999, Mallam Shehu Sanni was the first to re-introduce a full application of Sharia when he was elected governor of Zamfara State.

The Data Analysis

However, **Graph 8** shows that Sharia law in Zamfara State has not reduced the number of violent deaths resulting from crime. Various forms of fatal crime incidents have persisted in all local government areas of the state. There was even an upsurge in fatalities related to cattle rustling in 2014 and 2016.

The Findings

The expectations that the implementation of Sharia law would reduce crime have been defeated in Zamfara State. Deaths resulting from cattle rustling, armed robbery, and communal clashes continue to go up and down with no general trend of decline. This finding could also be tested in other states where Sharia law was extended.



Graph 8: Fatalities resulting from crime in Zamfara State (2007–2017)

'RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IS A MAJOR ISSUE'

No, if you look at inter-religious violence

It is widely believed that there is much violence between the two major religions, Islam and Christianity. In Nigeria and abroad, the myth is centred on the 'Clash of Civilizations' theory, according to which cultural and religious identities should be the primary source of conflict in the 21th century. It also relies on the perception of an irreducible opposition in Nigeria between a 'Muslim North' and a 'Christian South'.

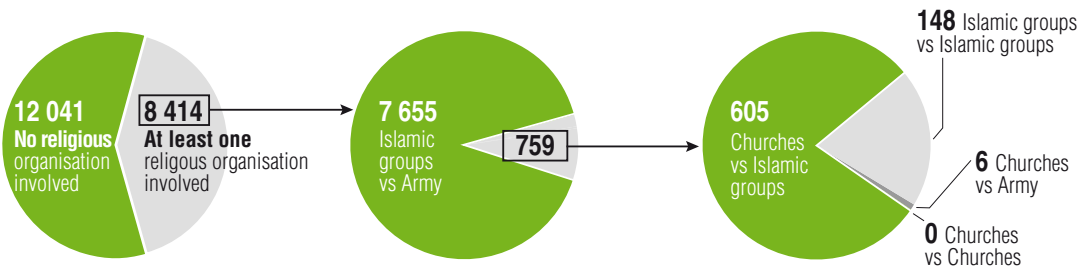
The Data Analysis

However, identifying religion as the cause of fatal clashes is quite complex. Violence involving religious issues or opposing Muslims and Christians can be political, economic, or social, as with land disputes and herdsmen conflicts in Plateau State. This is the reason why in studying the role of religion in violence, a focus on the details of actors that are labelled 'Christian' or 'Islamic' is more accurate. The first group include Pentecostal, Catholic, Anglican, Baptist churches, etc. The second include Shi'a, Izala, Sufi orders, etc. Many Muslims consider that sects such as Boko Haram or Maitatsine are not Islamic. Yet Boko Haram claims to fight in the name of Allah, and hence it is considered as a fringe Islamic organization. In this regard, **Graph 9a** shows

that fatal incidents involving at least one religious organization mainly involve Boko Haram's clashes with the Nigerian security forces. Sometimes, there are also tensions within rival churches or Islamic groups (see **Graph 9b**). But deadly clashes between Islamic and Christian organizations are very rare.

The Findings

The number of fatalities resulting from direct conflicts between the two major religions in Nigeria is infinitesimal. Obviously, religious violence is not only inter-religious—for instance, Boko Haram kills mainly Muslims. So it would be too simplistic to assume that fatal incidents involving Christians against Muslims risk dividing Nigeria.



Graph 9a: Number of fatalities involving at least one religious organization compared with fatalities in incidents that opposed at least two identified actors but no religious organization (2006–2017)

Graph 9b: Number of fatalities involving at least two religious organizations (2006–2017)

‘RITUAL KILLINGS ARE ON THE RISE DURING ELECTION TIMES’

No, there is no correlation between ritual killings and electoral periods

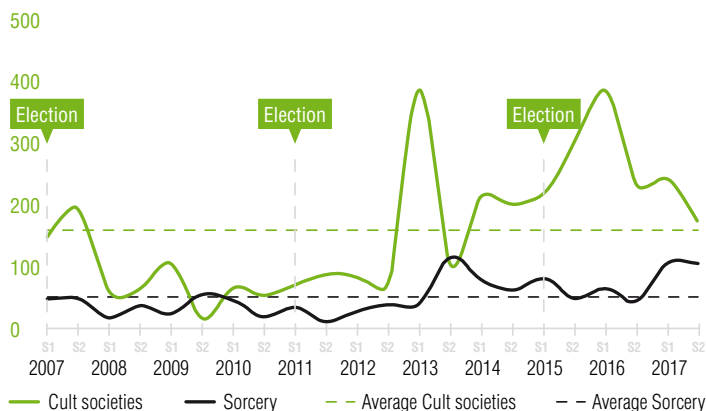
There is a belief that cases of ritual killings increase whenever elections are around the corner. This myth is encountered not only in Nigeria; it is widely shared also in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Togo, Gabon, Uganda, etc. The assumption is that most politicians are members of cult societies, and in a bid to gain or enhance political power make human sacrifices to aid electoral success.

The Data Analysis

While Nigeria is no stranger to electoral violence, **Graph 10** shows no correlation between elections and deaths related to cult societies or witchcraft. Fatalities attributed to sorcery include both ritual killings and lynching of people accused of being involved in witchcraft. Although members of cult societies do not always perpetrate ritual killings, they are often involved in political conflicts, hired by so-called ‘godfathers’ to get rid of opponents. In some cases, cult members are also lynched by the public or killed by security forces. Fatalities attributed to cult societies rose in 2012 and 2013 because of clashes related to the Ombatse sect in Nasarawa State.

The Findings

No established pattern or trend links ritual killings to any specific year in the country’s electoral periods. The myth just shows that politics in Nigeria are perceived to be a very dangerous affair. People do not trust politicians, which explains why the latter can be associated with human sacrifices.



Graph 10: Number of fatalities resulting from incidents involving cult societies and/or sorcery beliefs, per semester, compared with election periods and averages for the period 2007–2017

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