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VIOLENT CONFLICT IN A GEOGRAPHICAL POLITICAL ZONE

Metropolitan Lagos occupies a very strategic position in Nigeria. Located on the coast, the metropolis is situated within Lagos State, in the southwest corner of the country, in the equatorial rain forest (map 1). Lagos metropolis is Nigeria’s most populous city. It occupies a geographical region of about 1,800 square kilometres and is inhabited by more than 5 million people. (Bolade, 1993). The city has the country’s premier ports and serves as its commercial, political and industrial hub. By the early 1970s it was estimated that metropolitan Lagos had 38 per cent of all the industrial establishments in Nigeria, offered 45 per cent of all industrial employment and produced over 50 per cent of total industrial output (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 1984). The consolidation of the Lagos-Otta industrial axis in the late 1970s and 1980s, gave further impetus to this development. Thus a study in the early 1980s observed that metropolitan Lagos accounted for 60 per cent of the value-added to production in the whole country (Oyekanmi, 1982).

The city’s position was enhanced by its dual status as the political capital of Lagos State and of Nigeria as a whole. The national seat of government was shifted to Abuja in December, 1991; but Lagos retains significant political status. Almost all government agencies continue to maintain a strong presence there and the metropolis remains the headquarters of the major trading and financial concerns, the stock exchange, foreign legations, banks and security agencies; the implicit suggestion is that Abuja is simply a bureaucratic contraption of political convenience, a pretender to power.

8The predominance of Lagos can be traced to its allure. It is perceived as ‘Camelot’s territory’, a land of opportunities where fortunes are easily made. The average Lagosian has pretensions to this Cinderella syndrome. He poses as being brisk, smart and able, always seeking to manipulate to his own advantage and inclined to take risks. The general refrain is *Eko for show,*which implies that in Lagos one must be some sort of exhibitionist – *You have to advertise.*The pose is a commercial commodity. It attracts migrants. Everyday more and more rural people move into Lagos in search of the good life. In the 1970s and 80s which witnessed severe economic depression and political instability in neighbouring west and central African states, such as Ghana, Niger and Chad, the wave of rural migration to Lagos was supplemented by an influx of refugees from these countries. The consequence is that Lagos in general has experienced an unprecedented growth rate.

9To appreciate the significance of this phenomenon, it is best to situate it in the overall national context. The past five decades were a period of rapid urbanization in Nigeria. From 1963-1980, the overall growth rate of population was estimated at 2.5 per cent while the corresponding growth rate of the urban population was in the neighbourhood of 5 per cent - double the corresponding overall rate of the total population. The urban population estimates for 1963 were about 19.2 per cent of the total population, while estimates for 1980, put urban population at 27 per cent. The case of Lagos was unique, as no city grew as fast as the metropolis.

10The population of Lagos almost trebled in the decade preceding 1963, rising from 267,407 in 1953 to 662,246 in 1963. Moreover, the estimated population of greater Lagos rose from 1.14 million in 1963 to 3.55 million in 1976 and 4,068,578 in 1982 (Mabogunje, 1961, 1968; Aina and Salau, 1992). The 1991 census figures, which were greeted with reservation in several quarters, put current estimates at over 5 million. Early estimates by the National Population Commission had given Lagos a population of 5.84 million for 1985, leading analysts to the view, that given an annual growth of 10 per cent, the population of Lagos could be expected to reach 12 million by 2000 AD (Mabogunje, 1961, 1968; Aina and Salau, 1992). The 1991 census figures considerably reduces this expectation, but still confirms the view (Makinwa and Adebisoye, 1984: 112) that ‘Lagos heads Nigeria’s urban explosion’.

Rampant crime became a serious problem in Nigeria after the civil war of 1967-70. Consequently, in the two-and-half decades that have followed, concern about public safety has became an overriding concern among Nigerian citizens. The total crimes reported to the police in 1980 was 245,972; the figure rose to 325,073 in 1983 (table 1). Since then, it has stabilized, falling to 297,060 in 1986 (table 2); 279,058 in 1987; and 325,061 in 1989. The available figure for the first half of 1990 was 85,602 (table 3). This figure reflects those crimes that have been reported to the police. Public concern derives from the knowledge that approximately 50 per cent of the offences go unreported. Police sources admit this anomaly. The reality’, commented an Assistant Police Commissioner at the Force Headquarters in Lagos, ‘is that the Nigerian public harbour strong delusions about the police. They do not see the force as a friend. If a culprit is apprehended and makes restitution they see no need to go to the police. Even where the contrary is the case, they would only go to the police as a last resort. Nigerians do not like the costs or bother of litigation. Even after prosecution has commenced they often want to drop the case suggesting that they feel they made a mistake in calling police attention in the first place. A large number of offences – I would put the figure at half of the total – go unreported.’[**1**](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn1)

* **2** See *Daily Champion,*14 December 1988; and *Nigerian Tribune,*17 October 1988.

16This view is substantiated by the edge of hysteria that one notices in newspaper reports. On March 28, 1970, *The Nigerian Tribune*was extremely adamant about the need for public authorities to take adequate measures to ‘save us (Nigerian citizens) from the rule of hoodlums’. When, in response the Federal Government promulgated Decree No.47 of 1970, legalizing the public execution of robbers, *The Express*heralded it as a momentous decision. However, the tension precipitated by crime and violence nationwide did not abate, and in 1988 public concern about the rising crime wave motivated the Armed Forces Ruling Council (then, the nation’s highest legislative body) to set up a special six-man committee under Admiral Nyako, to find ways of ensuring ‘the safety of lives and property of Nigerians’.[**2**](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn2)

* **3** October 31- 6 November 1988.

17In this respect, a feature article in *West Africa*[**3**](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn3)noted that ‘with most people sleeping these days with one eye open and an ear cocked for the faintest scratch at the door, it is not surprising that the new initiative has elicited a lukewarm response from a dispirited citizenry’. The extent to which this skepticism was justified is reflected in a *Sunday Times Magazine*feature in April 26th, 1992 which intimated that no worthwhile result had been achieved by the work of the Nyako Committee. ‘Almost two decades since the promulgation of the first armed robbery Decree, No.47 of 1970, robbers are back in full force with new vigour’. The situation marred Nigeria’s diplomatic image and scared investors such that in 1993, the then Head of State, General Ibrahim Babangida admitted, while receiving in audience the outgoing Australian High Commissioner to Nigeria, that his administration was conscious of the damage this lack of security was causing to the country’s corporate image. He pledged his dedication to provide security to all foreign nationals and the country as a whole, and reiterated that measures were being taken to beef up the security of life and property, particularly in crime-prone districts like Lagos.

The problem of street violence is associated with Lagos youths. It marks a dangerous phase in the degeneration of young people who are generally regarded as the *future hope of the Nigerian society.*Certain factors prompt this phenomenon.

42First, there is social disorganisation resulting from the breakdown of values and norms in society. Normally, as a young child is growing up, his parents tell him what he should or should not do, and sanctions are applied to ensure conformity. Peers, teachers in schools, the church, mass media, etc., all contribute to inculcating group and society ethos and encourage him or her to live up to group expectations. The rootlessness of Lagos life, the state of anomie, resulting from migration and social dislocation, rapid economic and social changes, the breakdown of the traditional family structure – which still tends to produce a large number of children who go largely uncared for under this harsh economic setting – where both parents have to work and children are sent out hawking in the streets in order to survive. Thus, one finds many children on the streets of Lagos without parental guidance or proper care.

43Such children are subjected to the temptations of the street, and the streets of Lagos are veritable workshops for criminal apprenticeship. The rising tide of commercialization that gathered steam in the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) period of the Babangida administration has created a situation where reserved open spaces and even sidewalks are converted into business space in Lagos. Indeed, the entire Lagos metropolis itself can be described as a market place. Shadow markets are everywhere. Hence, one can hardly distinguish between purely residential and commercial areas. Apart from the 400 established and recognized markets in Lagos Island, Mushin, Somolu, Apapa, Ajegunle, Ikeja and Agege, many other illegal markets exist in many places wherever inhabitants of an area find convenient.

* **14** See *National Concord,*10 May 1993; *African Guardian,*7 February 1994; and *The Guardian,*27 June 199 [(...)](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn14)

44Street trading in Lagos is the norm rather than the exception.[**14**](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn14) Highways and roads are littered with empty cans, broken bottles and other dangerous containers which constitute a nuisance to the flow of traffic. Hawking on Oshodi, Agege Motor Road, Yaba bus terminus, Boundary Road in Ajegunle and Ikorodu Road is a normal occupation, even though the traders run the risk of being run over by vehicles. Indeed, the Lagos State Deputy Governor, Mrs. Lateefa Okunnu, in 1991 lamented that despite an edict on street trading, ‘it has reached such an alarming stage that there is an average of one death per week of traders caused by motorists’.

* **15** See “Kids in Crime,” *Sunday Times,*26 February 1989.

45For the youth, the consequences are more detrimental.[**15**](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn15) Illegal roadside markets have become fertile grounds for petty thieves, daylight robbery and activity. Those youths who survive the period of apprenticeship provided by the streets normally graduate into *area boys.*They grow into jobless youths with a penchant for ‘living in the fast lane’, aspiring to a lifestyle of wealth and flamboyance which makes them easy targets for employment in the network of drug merchants, where money flows fast and easy. Drug dealers employ area boys as drug pushers at the retail level to carry drugs to the doorstep of domestic consumers. Once an area boy attains this level, he is known as a *striker.*A striker’s life generally follows two roads. Either he retails the drugs and uses the proceeds to purchase the ‘good life’ or he becomes a user himself. Those who take the first option, usually few in number, eventually graduate into dealers and at times, even merchants. Most strikers become drug users. Users are of two varieties: irregular takers and those hooked on drugs. The second option is more common, because the background of area boys induces an addict’s lifestyle.

46Area boys, once conditioned, are tools of others. At times, the vocation appears useful. Traders at Idumota pay one naira each per day to area boys who operate on behalf of the market council. The money is used to procure brooms, rakes and wheelbarrows to clean the streets. Sometimes, however, the money is taken and the streets are not swept, creating a potential conflict with market traders. Again, area boys harass people on the street for money and this irritates potential buyers and incurs the wrath of market women. Hence, there are often disputes provoking violent clashes with market women.

* **16** For a detailed exposé on this subject see the paper by Mr. Wuyi Omitoogun, in volume 2 of the Proce [(...)](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn16)

47Area boys are also used for organized street violence in several ways. Several area boys interviewed between mid-April and June, 1994, at the Adeniji Adele Rehabilitation Centre set up by the Peoples Bank in Lagos, alleged that politicians hired them to disrupt political campaigns of their opponents or disrupt voting during elections, especially in areas where their rivals had a strong following; so that the results of those neighbourhoods would be annulled.[**16**](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn16) They cited the Agbalajobi and Sarumi gubernatorial tussle of 1992 as an instance where they were employed by both parties.

* **17** Area boys and the Lebanese Connection. *Daily Times,*29 February 1994.

48Similarly, Lebanese businessmen hire area boys as bodyguards of intimidators; while night clubs, restaurants and brothels in several parts of Lagos employ their services as *enforcers*.[**17**](https://books.openedition.org/ifra/789?lang=en#ftn17)Enforcement activities took on the dimension of ethnic violence when the crime barons of Ita Agarawu (Ojuina) and Oluwole areas gave out a contract to area boys to chase out Igbo traders and shopkeepers in Idumota, whom the landlords accused of not paying rent. Area boys caused confusion and provoked confrontation, beating up the traders, stabbing people and stealing wares. Area boys were similarly involved in the *street war*on Martins Street where they waylaid the Hausa *mallams*engaged in foreign exchange transactions, snatched bags of money from them and ran away into the protection of their Oluwole hideouts. The mallams after the initial shock rebounded to give them a fight, in which screwdrivers, broken bottles and swords were used with abandon. Business transactions ceased and several people were wounded.

49Area boys also engaged in gang warfare on the streets to nourish *macho images.*Rival outfits engage each other in brutal fighting to demonstrate superiority and one such case which lasted for five days, at Okesuna/Patey Street in Lagos Island in 1992, produced one fatality and several wounded.

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