Support, Toleration, and Repression: Incumbent Responses to Dissident Armed Groups in
Nigeria and Kenya

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Under what conditions do national incumbents support, tolerate, or repress dissident armed groups in
their territory? I argue that incumbent responses are driven by their priority of maintaining the
ruling coalition, which is key to their political survival. Incumbents support armed groups in
coalition provinces where local elites have defected from the ruling coalition, relying on armed
groups to engage in violence and intimidation and extend incumbent power into the defecting
province. Where provinces are firmly in or outside the ruling coalition, I theorize that armed
groups’ ties with local communities explain when incumbents tolerate or repress these groups.
Incumbents tolerate groups that provide protection and other basic goods to local communities
because repression generates political instability that in turn weakens provincial political elites’
commitment to the ruling coalition. Conversely, incumbents repress predatory groups because
doing so boosts support for the ruling party and projects incumbents’ authority into the periphery.
The paper uses most similar and most different case studies from Nigeria and Kenya to support
the argument: the Bakassi Boys, the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force, and Mungiki. The
findings add to a growing literature on government-armed group relationships and speak to larger
questions about how incumbents wield and withhold violence to maintain power.
Under what conditions do incumbents support, tolerate, or repress armed actors in their territory? Examples around the world illustrate significant variation in incumbent strategies toward armed groups across different levels of governments as well as between and within countries. Local office holders in Brazil collude with drug trafficking organizations that control Rio de Janeiro’s favelas to gain access to voters, yet these same groups have been subject to military repression by the federal government (Barnes 2021). In India, the national government has both cooperated and fought with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland at different points in time (Staniland 2021). Mungiki, a violent dissident group in Kenya, was repressed throughout the 1990s. The government’s strategy took a dramatic turn in 2002 when it began covertly supporting the group (Kagwanja 2006). In the US, Republican politicians called on armed White supremacist groups to engage in violence during the 2020 election (The Washington Post 2021). This support contrasts sharply with the repression of other armed groups in recent US history, such as the Black Panthers (Davenport 2010). Variation in government strategies toward armed groups can be found beyond these examples from South Asia, Africa, and the Americas. According to the Government and Armed Actors Relations Dataset (GAARD), 25% of armed groups undergo a change in their relationship with the national government at least once in their organizational life (Otto, Scharpf, and Gohdes 2020).

Understanding when incumbents support, tolerate, or repress armed groups is important for at least three reasons. One, questions about incumbent strategies toward armed actors are ultimately questions about how incumbents wield or withhold violence against different groups to project authority, govern, and forge political orders (Kalyvas, Shapiro, and Masoud 2008). With important exceptions (Day and Reno 2014; Staniland 2021), existing work has narrowly focused on government support of armed actors, and is therefore limited in its ability to explain a
wider array of incumbent strategies. Two, incumbent responses to armed actors are key to understanding important political phenomenon, including election violence (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013; Roessler 2005), genocide (Straus 2015), criminal violence (Barnes 2017), and civil war (Biberman 2019, Driscoll 2015; Roessler 2016). Studying incumbent strategies promises to deepen scholarly understanding of such phenomenon, as well as how these different forms of political violence are connected (Kalyvas and Straus 2020). Third, from a policy perspective, effective security reforms require an accurate understanding of incumbents’ incentives to deploy violence and against whom (Kleinfeld 2018). Studies of incumbent strategies towards violent armed groups in their territory speak directly to these important policy questions.

This paper studies national incumbent responses to dissident armed groups, or those nonstate organizations that use lethal violence and are officially opposed to government policy.¹ I argue that incumbent strategies are driven by their goal of maintaining the ruling coalition, which is essential to their political survival. Incumbents provide support to dissident armed groups, specifically money, weapons, vehicles, and other resources, when provincial political elites have defected from the ruling coalition. In this scenario, incumbents rely on armed groups to engage in violence against defecting elites and keep the province in the ruling coalition.

When provinces are firmly in or outside of the ruling coalition, I theorize that groups’ ties with local communities explain when incumbents tolerate or repress them. Incumbents tolerate protective groups, or those that provide security and basic goods to local communities, because cracking down on them often results in political instability that weakens local elites’ commitment to the ruling coalition in coalition provinces, and galvanizes support for the

¹ For the remainder of the paper, “incumbent” refers to national incumbents and “armed groups” refer to dissident armed groups, unless otherwise noted.
opposition in opposition provinces. Conversely, I maintain that incumbents repress predatory groups, or those that violently extract from local communities and provide little to nothing in return. Deploying state security agencies against these groups eliminates challenges to incumbents’ authority, boosts support among citizens, and projects incumbent power into the periphery, in coalition and opposition provinces alike.

I combine most similar and most different case studies of incumbent strategies toward dissident armed groups in Nigeria and Kenya to empirically support the argument. In Nigeria, I study the president’s strategies toward the Bakassi Boys and the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC)/Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF); in Kenya, I examine the president’s strategies towards Mungiki. Comparing shifts in incumbents’ strategies towards the same group over time creates most similar cases that help me to assess rival explanations; the comparison across groups yields most different cases that provide a preliminary probe of the argument’s generalizability. The case studies rely on an array of qualitative data to corroborate key political developments, including NGO reports, election observer reports, local news media, detail-rich ethnographies, and semi-structured interviews conducted in Nigeria between 2011 and 2019 and in Kenya in 2019.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first review the existing literature and elaborate on the paper’s contributions. Next, I define important concepts, including my outcome of interest and dissident armed groups. The paper then presents my argument about coalition maintenance, followed by a discussion of the theory’s scope conditions. I next explain why the paper focuses on Nigeria and Kenya and the strengths and limitations of this comparison. The research design section details the case selection strategy and data and measurement. It also assess three rival

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2 The IYC is the NDPVF’s parent organization.
explanations that highlight identity politics, economic factors, and local resistance capacity. The paper then delves into the Bakassi Boys, IYC/NDPVF, and Mungiki case studies. I conclude by considering the strength and limitations of the theory and evidence and avenues for future research.

**Existing Work on Government-Armed Group Relationships**

A body of work on government-armed group relationships offers numerous insights into why incumbents might tolerate or support different armed actors in their territory. One prominent perspective maintains that governments turn a blind eye or support armed groups as a function of state capacity. Those in power are either too weak militarily to eliminate armed actors, and thus have no choice but to tolerate them (Bates 2008; Marten 2012; Menkhaus 2006/7), or cultivate strategic alliances with them to project state authority into the periphery where state infrastructure, presence, and legitimacy are limited (Migdal 1988; Mukhopadhyay 2014; Naseemullah 2014). A second view claims incumbents deliberately weaken formal security institutions and outsource violence to paramilitaries, pro-government militias, or private security companies to hold onto power through violence and intimidation, while avoiding accountability at home and maintaining plausible deniability with foreign donors (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015; Kleinfeld and Barham 2018; Mazzei 2009; Raleigh 2016; Raleigh and Kishi 2018; Roessler 2005). A third group of studies examines government strategies toward armed groups in the context of civil or international conflict, arguing that incumbents collude with armed groups when doing so helps them regain territory (Biberman 2019), counter security threats while avoiding the costly project of building a
centralized state security apparatus (Ahram 2011), or destabilize rival regimes, project power abroad, and advance other foreign policy interests (Byman 2005).

Two recent studies explain incumbent strategies beyond support or toleration. Recent work on South Asia maintains that government’s political ideological projects shape their threat perception of armed groups, and thus their response. Armed groups with political agendas compatible with regime ideology are likely to receive support or toleration, whereas incompatible groups are likely to be targeted for elimination or containment. Groups that fall into an ideological gray zone will enjoy government support or be targeted with violence depending on whether they can help governments achieve core interests, such as winning elections, advancing foreign policy goals, or victory in civil war (Staniland 2021).

Scholarship on Africa similarly argues that rebel groups are assigned different threat levels by incumbents, but that this is a function not of regime ideology but of patronage resources that armed groups are able to muster. Groups that pose the gravest threat are those that historically enjoyed close connections with the state, and their leaders thus had access to significant patronage resources; such groups are targeted for cooptation back into patronage networks as a way of neutralizing them. In contrast, groups that have been historically excluded from state patronage hold few resources and pose little threat to incumbents; they are likely to be targeted for violent elimination (Day and Reno 2014).

The above studies offer rich insights into incumbent strategies as well as a conceptual and theoretical foundation upon which to build. There are limited in important ways, however. Many focus on incumbent support of armed groups (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013; Byman 2005; Carey, Mitchell, and Colaresi 2015; Kleinfeld and Barham 2018; Mazzei 2009; Raleigh 2016; Raleigh and Kishi 2018; Roessler 2005), leaving a wider spectrum of strategies
undertheorized. To be sure, these studies have powerfully challenged traditional conceptualizations of the state as an organization that holds a monopoly on legitimate violence in a given territory, compelling scholars to rethink theoretical frameworks and assumptions about state-building and political order (Abbott et al. 2020; Davis and Pereira 2003). Currently underdeveloped however are explanations that shed light on a larger set of government responses to armed groups, from support to repression. Under what conditions do incumbents tolerate armed groups? Why do incumbents change strategies over time, actively supporting an armed group during one period, only to repress it later? Why do some armed groups enjoy the government’s toleration, while others elsewhere in the country suffer government crackdowns, and still other groups receive material resources? The literature currently offers a limited number of explanations.

The few studies that theorize and examine a broader range of government strategies have important scope conditions – as all arguments – that limit their applicability to the cases under study here. Staniland maintains that his argument about regime ideology and government-armed group relations in South Asia does not travel well to contexts where patronage is the primary tool of building political order (2021, 12-14). In those contexts, studying bargaining and conflict among political elites will be essential to understanding government responses to armed groups (de Waal 2015; Driscoll 2015; Utas 2012). Day and Reno (2014) focus on rebel groups in their analysis of incumbent responses. Incumbent strategies toward armed groups however are almost certainly shaped by the type of armed group they are dealing with; that is, the likelihood of cooperation, toleration, and conflict is influenced by whether armed groups are pro-government militias, vigilantes, terrorists, rebels, or dissident armed groups.
The central goal of this paper is to contribute to a growing literature on government-armed group relations by studying incumbent responses to dissident armed groups (Staniland 2017; Thaler 2022). This larger research agenda is worthwhile for several reasons. One, it promises to provide a more accurate and complete picture of how incumbents wield violence to remain in power. A critical contribution of previous scholarship is its successful challenge of the Weberian assumption that those who occupy state office seek a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence in their territory; as many of the studies cited above persuasively argue, several governments around the world strategically support different nonstate armed actors in their territory (Thaler 2022). Yet supporting armed groups is but one of many strategies that state actors use to project authority, maintain power, govern, and pursue other core interests (Staniland 2021). Studying incumbent strategies toward armed groups next to one another promises to yield a more complete understanding of how political authority is forged and challenged in many parts of the world (Kalyvas, Shapiro, and Masoud 2008).

Second, examining government strategies toward armed actors offers one way to connect distinct literatures on political violence (Staniland 2017). Government ties with armed groups are important for understanding the organization of election violence (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Santos 2013; Roessler 2005), civil war (Ahram 2011; Biberman 2019), genocide (Straus 2015), and criminal politics (Arias 2017; Barnes 2017). To be clear, these are distinct phenomenon that demand their own focus and explanation. What studying government-armed group ties promises to offer is one way to enhance the scholarly conversation across these literatures by theorizing and studying how different government strategies toward armed groups facilitate different types of violence, and the connection among these distinct phenomenon (Kalyvas and Straus 2020).
Third, from a policy perspective, understanding incumbents’ incentives to build different relationships with armed groups provides vital information for those interested in political reforms to enhance public security (Kleinfeld 2018). If governments tolerate armed groups because of weak state capacity, as they do indeed do in some cases (Menkhaus 2006/7), then investing in military and policing capacity may be worthwhile; however, if, as in many contexts, governments with substantial military force deliberately tolerate or support violent armed groups, then reforms that will bring better security to local communities will require an understanding of incumbent incentives to respond in different ways to armed groups (Kleinfeld and Barham 2018). We currently have limited answers however when it comes to why governments collude with, tolerate, or repress different armed groups in their territory (Day and Reno 2014; Staniland 2021). Developing empirically grounded explanations with clear scope conditions is essential to the larger task of security reform that is of interest to many practitioners and policymakers (Kleinfeld 2018).

**Conceptualizing Incumbent Strategies and Dissident Armed Groups**

I examine three types of incumbent strategies as my outcome of interest: support, toleration, and repression. Support entails the provision of material resources to armed groups, such as money, weapons, vehicles, and other equipment. At the other end of the spectrum is repression, where incumbents deploy state security agencies against armed groups with the aim of violently eliminating them. Toleration occurs when incumbents neither provide material resources nor respond with lethal state violence, withholding the state security forces instead. To be sure, this is a broad-brush approach to incumbent strategies toward armed groups. Support can vary by the type of resources and amount (Byman 2005; Thaler 2022), and state repression can
vary in intensity (Staniland 2021). I focus on these three given the bounds of the paper and because the clear conceptual distinctions among them allows me to build an overarching theoretical framework that can serve as a foundation for future work.

The type of armed group is all but certain to influence incumbent responses. Armed actors bent on violently overthrowing the government, such as insurgents and terrorists, are usually targeted for elimination. In contrast, paramilitaries and pro-government militias that seek to shore up government authority are natural allies to those in power. Indeed, in many cases the line between the state and pro-government armed groups is blurry (Ahram 2011; Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015, Mazzei 2009; Thaler 2022). How armed groups position themselves vis-à-vis the central government – as violent rivals or armed allies – render some government responses more likely over others. For instance, cooperation between incumbents and rebels is possible, but these alliances tend to be fleeting and quickly dissolve after shared goals are achieved; similarly, incumbents can turn on pro-government groups when they no longer find them useful (Staniland 2021). Put differently, the conditions under which incumbents cooperate with rebels are surely quite different from those where governments do so with pro-government militias. It is essential to clarify the type of armed group under study when theorizing and examining government responses to them.

I study dissident armed groups, or those nonstate organizations that use lethal violence and are officially opposed to current government policy. I borrow existing definitions of an organization as a collection of individuals engaged in mutually oriented activity with one or more criteria for membership and an authority structure (Kenny 2010, 535). Dissident armed groups include a wide array of actors, such as vigilantes, ethnic militias, armed wings of

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3 Elimination may take the form of lethal violence or incorporating rebels into patronage networks (Day and Reno 2014) or formal state security agencies (Staniland 2021).
opposition parties, and armed factions of social movements mobilizing for political reform, among others. What this diverse collection of armed groups has in common is that they fight primarily to compel the central government to make fundamental policy adjustments. Vigilantes, by their very existence, call attention to governments’ failed security policies and institutions. Some demand territorial control and reject police authority whereas others advocate for policy changes that legalizes their operations (Bateson 2021; Moncada 2021). Ethnic militias mobilize for self-determination and group-based rights (Hazen 2009), and armed wings of opposition parties or social movements similarly demand fundamental political and policy reforms (Tarrow 1994). In short, these groups take issue with some government policy and seek to change it.

Unlike rebels, dissident groups do not seek to violently overthrow the government and install a new regime; rather, they seek reform under the current political dispensation. Unlike pro-government militias or paramilitaries, dissident groups are not natural government allies given their opposition to current policy. There should thus be greater flexibility for incumbents when it comes to responding to dissident groups; cooperation is not off the table, but neither is repression. Studying government strategies toward dissident groups should thus allow us to observe a wider range of responses, relative to insurgents or paramilitaries. It is additionally important to examine dissident armed groups given that they are influential and violent actors common in many countries historically and contemporarily, including armed youth groups in Pakistan (Staniland 2015), vigilantes in Latin America (Moncada 2021), and ethnic and reformist militias in Africa (Reno 2011).
Incumbent Strategies, Dissident Armed Groups, and Coalition Maintenance

Building off insights from previous work, I argue that incumbents’ strategies toward dissident armed groups are driven by incumbents’ priority of maintaining the ruling coalition (Christia 2012; Lacina 2014; Roessler 2016). Coalition management is an essential and ongoing task for incumbents because it is necessary for their political survival; if the ruling coalition collapses, so too does their ability to remain in power (Shellman 2006). Provincial political elites are essential coalition partners. They deliver the province in national elections by mobilizing voters, organizing campaign rallies, distributing state patronage, and stifling opposition with violence intimidation (Migdal 1988; Roessler 2016). Absent the support of their coalitional partners in the periphery, national incumbents have a difficult time retaining power in the capital.

I theorize that where provincial elites defect from the ruling coalition, national incumbents support dissident armed groups in that region, sending them after their former coalition partners. Provincial elites might defect because they are no longer satisfied with the benefits of membership in the ruling coalition, or they feel that the ruling party is a sinking ship and remaining on it will undermine their ability to maintain power locally (Christia 2012; Roessler 2016). If and when provincial coalition partners defect, incumbents support dissident armed groups in that province for three reasons. First, incumbents rely on dissident groups to engage in violence and intimidation against provincial elites with the aim of projecting incumbents’ power and authority into the defecting province, weaken provincial elites’ local influence, and signal to potential defectors in other coalition provinces that exit will be punished. Second, outsourcing violence to armed groups provides incumbents plausible deniability with foreign donors and important domestic constituencies (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015; Kleinfeld and Barnham 2018; Mazzei 2009; Roessler 2005). Presidents have broad authority
over the state security apparatus in many countries; police or military violence against political opponents stands to receive national and international press attention and will almost certainly be attributed to incumbents. Third, dissident armed groups can engage in fraud and electoral manipulation, such as stealing and stuffing ballot boxes, to win the province for the incumbent and keep it in the coalition despite local elite opposition (Staniland 2021, 40).

In provinces firmly in or outside of the ruling coalition, whether incumbents tolerate or repress dissident armed groups depends on the nature of their ties with local communities; these ties are relevant because they have consequences for coalition maintenance. Predatory groups are those that bring violence upon communities and extract resources from them, without providing protection, goods, and services in return. These groups heavily rely on (the threat of) violence and little else when interacting with citizens. In contrast, protective groups extract resources from local communities and also rely on (threats of) violence, but provide protection, goods, and services in exchange (Metelits 2010, 4). To be sure, these are ideal types, and the reality is often messy; distinguishing between predatory and protective groups is no small task, and detailed qualitative data can offer important advantages here. The distinction is nevertheless important because the nature of armed group ties shapes how incumbent strategies play out locally with consequences for the integrity of the ruling coalition.

I expect incumbents to tolerate protective armed groups in provinces that are in or outside of the ruling coalition. In this scenario, dissident groups leverage their ties and influence over local communities to fight back, mobilize protests and riots, and generate political instability. Some citizens may support dissident groups out of genuine support, others out of fear of losing access to protection and other services as punishment for refraining, and still others as some combination of the two (Auyero 2007). Protective groups thus possess the power to “disrupt”
and generate political disorder locally; this in turn threatens the ruling coalition because it motivates and provides provincial elites with leverage to renegotiate their position in the coalition, seeking to extract more resources from the capital, or to exit it altogether. Both scenarios handicap incumbents’ ability to maintain the ruling coalition.

In the first scenario, provincial elites use local political instability as an opportunity to demand more resources and influence from and over the center, in the form of public funds, high-level political appointments from their region, development and infrastructure projects, or personal bribes. Provincial elites highlight the difficulty of keeping the province in the ruling coalition given local challenges to the incumbent, and that their increased efforts will need to be compensated.

In the second scenario, provincial coalition partners calculate that political instability and local challenges to the center make it too costly to remain in the ruling coalition because it undermines their support and influence in the province, creating an opening for local opposition (Magaloni 2008). Provincial elites play a two-level game: they must manage their relations with the center, but they also must manage local opposition to their own authority as well (Gibson 2013). State repression in the province and dissident mobilization against generates political instability that can help to galvanize local opposition and public anger with the ruling party, threatening provincial elites’ hold on power. Witnessing local challenges to the center can thus motivate provincial elites to cut their losses and exit the ruling coalition in the hopes of holding onto power at the local level.

I expect incumbents to tolerate protective groups in opposition provinces as well. There is little to be gained from a protracted fight with such groups. Doing so drives up popular disapproval of the ruling party, providing new material for the opposition to criticize national
incumbents. It can also help rally support for the opposition, helping it consolidate power locally and launch a more effective challenge to the ruling coalition (LeVan 2018). Political instability in opposition provinces does little to project incumbent authority, instead weakening what local support they might enjoy (Gibson 2013).

Finally, I theorize that incumbents will repress predatory dissident groups in provinces both in and outside the ruling coalition. Unlike their protective counterparts, predatory groups have limited capacity for mass mobilization and protest, and therefore should be unable to engage in the “political disruption” that protective groups are able to (Auyero 2007). Moreover, cracking down on such groups is likely to be met with popular relief and a boost in citizen goodwill, helping to strengthen local elite support in coalition provinces and project incumbent authority into opposition provinces. Figure 1, below, summarizes the argument.

Figure 1: Incumbent Strategies Toward Dissident Armed Groups
Scope Conditions

I expect my argument to work where (1) patronage is the primary tool of generating political order, (2) multiparty elections are regularly held, and (3) civilian incumbents have authority over state security agencies.

First, previous research shows that shared military experiences and protracted independence struggles forge strong bonds among the ruling elite and are an important source of regime durability, in addition to patronage (Levitsky and Way 2012). Armed groups that challenge the political ideas infused in these bonds regarding ethnic inclusion or exclusion and who the state serves to protect, redistribution, or the role of religion of politics, shape incumbents’ responses to them (Staniland 2021; Straus 2015). Conversely, where patronage is the primary glue that holds together ruling coalitions, armed groups’ political ideologies are likely less of a concern for incumbents given that ideas about ethnic inclusion, redistribution, and religion in politics are less important for maintaining the ruling coalition. Instead, armed groups that challenge incumbents’ control over patronage resources should be seen as more threatening by incumbents (Day and Reno 2014). In sum, incumbent responses to armed groups are shaped by the political context and the tools political elites have at their disposal to generate political order (de Waal 2015; Driscoll 2014; Reno 2011; Utas 2012). I therefore expect my argument to do well where patronage is the primary tool for constructing ruling coalitions and maintaining power, and less well where political elites rely on other resources such as political ideas about who the state serves to protect. In those instances, armed group ideology will be an important factor in government responses (Staniland 2021).

Second, I limit the argument to contexts where multiparty elections are regularly held. Prior research shows that incumbents are more likely to outsource violence to nonstate armed
groups where they must regularly present themselves to voters in order to maintain plausible
deniability with important domestic constituencies and foreign donors (Kleinfeld and Barham
2018). In contrast, incumbents have shown a greater willingness to engage in state repression
where multiparty elections are not regularly held (Carey, Colaresi, and Mitchell 2015). To be
sure, mass mobilization and voter support are important concerns of authoritarian regimes as
well as their international reputations (Magaloni 2008). Existing research suggests however that
regime type likely shapes the costs and benefits of different incumbent strategies toward nonstate
armed groups.

Finally, I expect the argument to work where civilian incumbents exert control over state
security agencies, and break down where the military, surveillance agencies, and the police have
more autonomy and can defy executive orders. My argument assumes that national incumbents
can deploy or withhold state repression. Where this is not the case, understanding how
government actors respond to armed groups will require theorizing and studying the interests and
capacity of state security agencies.

Why Nigeria and Kenya?

I examine incumbent strategies in Nigeria and Kenya because they meet the argument’s
scope conditions, there is substantial variation in incumbent strategies in both countries, and their
comparison helps to probe the theory’s generalizability. Moreover, Nigeria and Kenya are not
unique in terms of different country conditions that might influence the outcome of interest.

Patronage is arguably the primary tool for generating political order in both countries, the
argument’s first scope condition (Levitsky and Way 2012; Joseph 1987). Political parties are
weak in Nigeria (LeVan 2019) and Kenya (Branch and Cheeseman 2006), and political elites
regularly circle in and out of political parties as new bargains over the allocation of state patronage are struck (Utas 2012). Two, Kenya has regularly held multiparty elections since 1992 and Nigeria since 1999. Three, the military and police in both countries generally follow presidential orders, and military repression of several societal actors demonstrates that incumbents in Nigeria and Kenya have the capacity to repress dissident armed groups when they want to (Hazen 2009; Kagwanja 2006). Finally, as the case studies demonstrate, presidents in both countries have cultivated different relationships with dissident armed groups and changed their strategies over time, making them useful contexts to study the outcome of interest.

To be sure, Nigeria and Kenya differ in theoretically relevant ways, making their comparison useful as a first step in probing the argument’s generalizability. For one, the Kenyan bureaucratic authoritarian state has much greater capacity to project government authority into the periphery (Branch and Cheeseman 2006) relative to Nigeria where state infrastructure is comparatively limited (Falola and Heaton 2008). Two, Nigeria being a major oil exporter (Watts 2008) in contrast to Kenya’s predominately agricultural economy (Hornsby 2013) could shape the likelihood of dissident armed groups forming, incumbent incentives to respond to them, and the reaction of influential international actors and donors (Carey et al. 2022; Reno 1998). Third, differences in class structure could shape incumbent responses. Kenya’s middle class is bigger than Nigeria’s (Cheeseman 2015; Rodas, Molini, and Oseni 2019); previous work finds that the middle class is more likely to demand that the government repress nonstate armed groups (Kleinfeld and Barham 2018). Despite these important differences, I nevertheless find evidence for the argument in both countries. To be sure, this is far from a rigorous test of the argument’s generalizability; examining the theory in two countries is merely meant to demonstrate that it is worthwhile to subject the argument to future empirical tests.
Finally, these country conditions are not unique. Many governments have substantial military capacity for repression as well as nonstate armed groups in their territory; incumbents make deliberate calculations about how to respond to them, including whether to use lethal force against them (Kleinfeld and Barham 2018; Staniland 2021). More countries than ever hold multiparty elections, although increasingly, many are characterized by fraud, manipulation, and violence (Alizada 2021). Patronage is an important tool for generating political order in many parts of the world, including Africa (Day and Reno 2014; de Waal 2015; Reno 2011; Utas 2012), Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Driscoll 2015), Southeast Asia (Quimpo 2007), and Latin America (Auyero 2007). Lastly, national incumbents almost everywhere must build ruling coalitions of provincial political elites (Gibson 2013; Lacina 2014; Migdal 1988). In short, Nigeria and Kenya share much in common with other countries that could theoretically shape incumbent strategies toward dissident armed groups.

**Research Design**

The paper combines most similar and most different case studies to empirically support the argument. I compare changes in incumbent responses to the same dissident armed group over time to build most similar cases; these help to address questions about rival explanations by holding constant a range of theoretically relevant variables across time. By comparing incumbent responses across groups, I create most different cases; these help to address questions about generalizability by demonstrating the power of the argument in different contexts. Together, most similar and most different case studies are powerful tools for developing an empirically grounded theory (Seawright and Gerring 2008).
There are three rival explanations I aim to address with most similar case studies. The first argues that incumbents are likely to support or tolerate coethnic groups, and repress non-coethnic groups. Where access to resources and representation are organized around membership in an ethnic group, as in Nigeria (Joseph 1987) and Kenya (Hornsby 2013), and because shared social networks facilitate in-group communication and policing (Habyarimana et al. 2011), incumbents likely view coethnic groups as natural allies, supporting them when they help them advance their political interests, and turn a blind eye to them when they do not. In contrast, incumbents likely view non-coethnic groups as unlikely allies or beyond their control, and thus respond with repression.

Second, the province’s economy may shape incumbent responses to dissident armed groups, though how is ambiguous. On the one hand, incumbents may be likely to repress groups in regions that generate substantial government revenue to protect economic activity and maintain government control. Conversely, incumbents are willing to tolerate or support armed groups in regions that contribute little to government revenue and projecting state authority is thus not a priority (Carey et al. 2022; Boone 2003). On the other hand, incumbents may find dissident armed groups in economically important regions especially threatening because their access to local economic resources better enables them to challenge government authority. Previous work finds that rather than repress such groups, incumbents respond by seeking to incorporate them into patronage networks or strike deals of mutual toleration with them. In contrast, groups in economically unimportant regions are perceived as less threatening, and targeted with swift repression (Day and Reno 2014).

Finally, local resistance capacity offers a third, though again ambiguous, rival explanation. I conceptualize local resistance capacity as a bundle of factors, including difficult
geographic terrain, small arms proliferation, recent history of anti-government mobilization, and illicit resource flows. This environment should provide dissident armed groups with greater capacity to challenge the government, though how this might shape incumbent responses is unclear. Similar to the above, incumbents may repress such groups because they find them more threatening, and tolerate or support groups with limited resistance capacity because they find them less threatening and easier to control (Carey et al. 2022). Conversely, groups with greater fighting resources may be targeted for incorporation into patronage networks precisely because incumbents find them threatening, and those with fewer resources suffer government repression (Day and Reno 2014).

Table 1, below, shows how the above three rival explanations are held constant over time in terms of incumbent-dissident armed group pairs, creating most similar cases, and vary across pairs to build most different cases. The first column lists the cases; the next three columns display the rival explanatory variables and the value they take in each case; the second column from the right shows my argument; and the right-most column displays the outcome of interest (national incumbent response).

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4 To save space in the table, the national incumbent, which is the country president in all cases, is not listed next to the dissident armed group.
Table 1: Most Similar and Most Different Cases (bolded cells are correct predictions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Economic Importance</th>
<th>Local Resistance Capacity</th>
<th>Coalition Management</th>
<th>Incumbent Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IYC, 2001-2003</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Provincial Defection</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IYC/NDPVF, 2003-2004</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Protective Group</td>
<td>Toleration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDPVF, 2004-2005</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakassi Boys, 1999-2002</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Protective Group</td>
<td>Toleration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakassi Boys, late 2002</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPC, 1999-2002</td>
<td>Coethnics</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Opposition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPC, 2003-2007</td>
<td>Coethnics</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Opposition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Toleration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mungiki, 1990s-2001</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mungiki, 2002</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Provincial Defection</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that although some rival explanations accurately predict incumbent responses in some cases, they do a poor job when looking across the larger set. In the interest of space, a larger discussion of them can be found in Appendix A.

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5 This version does not include the O’odua People’s Congress (OPC) case study.
Data and Measurement

To recap, my first explanatory variable is the province’s relationship with the national incumbent. I code provincial defection as (1) when provincial political elites exit the ruling party and (2) the loss of the province from the ruling party coalition jeopardizes the national incumbent’s ability to remain office.

Nigeria is a federal system of 36 states; I code states with governors in the national ruling party as inside the ruling coalition, and those with opposition party governors as outside of it. Informally, Nigeria is divided into six geo-political zones, and governors and other powerful regional elites within each zone often operate as bloc, providing them with more leverage vis-à-vis the center. The dissident armed groups under study here also operated across more than one state. I therefore focus not on individual states, but on the informal geo-political zones and zonal elites’ place in the ruling coalition, and what their exit from the ruling party coalition would mean for the president’s ability to remain in office.

The president must win a majority of the popular vote in a two-person contest (or a plurality in a contest of three or more candidates) plus at least 25% of the vote in a minimum of 24 (or two-thirds) of 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja. Nigerian presidents must thus build large coalitions with elites from the country’s geo-political zones to come and remain in power. To constitute a coalitional threat, the defection of elites that dominate a given geo-political zone must leave the ruling party coalition with less than 24 states.

During the 1992, 1997, and 2002 elections, Kenya was divided into eight provinces. The president was required to win a plurality and at least 25% of the vote in five provinces.

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6 The six geo-political zones are the southwest, the south-south (the Niger Delta), the southeast, northwest, north central, and northeast.
7 The Bakassi Boys had operations in Abia and Anambra states (Ukiwo 2002), the IYC in Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers (Hazen and Horner 2007), and the OPC predominately in Lagos and Oyo states (Guichaoua 2010).
constitute a coalitional threat, the defection of provincial elites from the ruling party coalition must leave the president with less than five provinces. Similar to Nigeria, I assume that powerful provincial elites are key to making sure that provinces remain in the ruling party coalition through a toolkit of electoral clientelism, ethnic politics, and intimidation (Hornsby 2013, 511). Provincial political elites in the ruling party coalition who have not defected are coded as in the coalition, and opposition provinces are coded as outside the ruling party coalition.

My second explanatory variable – the nature of dissident armed groups’ ties with local communities – is coded as either predatory or protective. Predatory groups are those that violently extort local communities and provide little to no protection, goods, or other services in return. In contrast, protective groups rely on violence or the threat thereof to extract resources from and influence local communities, but provide protection and other basic goods in return (Auyero 2007; Metelits 2010, 4).

The outcome of interest – national incumbent responses to armed groups – can take the form of repression, toleration, or collusion. I operationalize repression as when the incumbent orders the police or the military to deploy lethal violence against the group with the aim of weakening or eliminating them. Toleration is measured as when incumbents withhold the state security agencies from using lethal and non-lethal force against dissident armed groups, but also do not provide those groups with material resources. Support occurs when incumbents provide material resources, such as weapons, money, vehicles, or other equipment, to the group.

I draw on and corroborate across a wide array of qualitative data to assess my argument (Bennett and Checkel 2014). The case studies rely on local newspaper media, NGO publications, election observer reports, and richly detailed ethnographies. I also draw on 98 semi-structured in Nigeria, specifically in Jos in 2011, Awka, Lagos, and Ibadan in 2012, Abuja in 2013, Lagos and
In 2014, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews in Nairobi. Interviewees included academics, journalists, human rights lawyers, activists, civil servants, policy analysts, civil society organization (CSO) members, community leaders, citizens, and former IYC members. Collectively, I marshal these different forms of data to cross-check and confirm key political development and provide multiple sources wherever possible (Waldner 2014). In addition to increasing internal validity, the data also helps me to assess the causal mechanisms and assumptions of my argument regarding how periphery management and groups’ community ties shape incumbents’ calculations about whether to repress, tolerate, or support dissident armed groups.

The research design and data have distinct strengths and limitations. In terms of the former, comparative case studies and fine-grained qualitative data help to build an empirically ground theory, enhance internal validity, and rigorously assess alternative explanations (Bennett and Checkel 2014; George and Bennett 2005). There are clear limitations to this approach however. Generalizability is an inherent challenge for small-n research designs. Although I seek to address questions about the argument’s generalizability by building most different case studies from two countries, a rigorous assessment of whether the theory holds up in other contexts is beyond the scope of the paper. While I aim to increase confidence in the findings by corroborating across multiple sources, researchers that rely on field research and interview data must consider how their positionality, global hierarchies and inequities, and the country and local context, shape their data collection and analysis. I discuss these, and other ethical and logistical challenges of fieldwork in Nigeria and Kenya in Appendix B. Journalistic sources can be found in Appendix C; non-academic reports in Appendix D.
The Ijaw Youth Council/Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force

*Incumbent Support of the IYC, July 2001-April 2003*

President Obasanjo came to power in 1999 by building a ruling party coalition of 21 states from the south-south, southeast, and north central zones, and striking deals with provincial political elites in enough opposition states that ensured he would win at least 25% of the votes in those states through fraud and manipulation (The Carter Center and National Democratic Institute for International Affairs 1999). The six Niger Delta states were a core component of the 21-state coalition (Falola and Heaton 2008, 209-242; LeVan 2019). In March 2001 however (two years before the April 2003 election), powerful provincial elites in the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) in the south-south zone defected from the party, led by the PDP chairman for the Niger Delta region, and began mobilizing for a presidential candidate from the Niger Delta. The campaign became known as the Campaign for the Realization of a South-South Presidency (CRESSOP) (Bassey 2001). Over the next two years, the campaign gathered steam as an increasing number of provincial PDP elites joined the call for President Obasanjo to step aside in 2003 to make way for a Niger Delta candidate (Igbokwe 2001; Ighodaro 2002; Ofiebor 2001).

This was an elite-led campaign, but it was also widely popular in the Niger Delta (Abubakar 2002; Amaize 2001). There is a history of military violence, state repression, and severe environmental damage from the oil industry in the region dating back to the 1960s. President Obasanjo was particularly unpopular because he gutted local control over oil and other natural resources, shifting authority to the federal government when he was military dictator between 1976 and 1979, and because of military repression during his first term (United Nations

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8 The six Niger Delta states are Awka Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. All had PDP governors after the 1999 election.
Development Programme 2006, 15). Many citizens in the Niger Delta were thus eager to see Obasanjo replaced with someone from the region.

The defection of Niger Delta ruling party elites posed a significant threat to Obasanjo’s second term, leaving him with 15 states under PDP control. Additionally, the opposition of powerful Niger Delta political elites meant that he would face an uphill battle in securing at least 25% of the vote in those states (Abubakar 2002; Adegbamigbe 2001; Ajani and Owuemeodo 2001; Ofiebor 2001; Ojeifo 2003; and Orinya 1998).

The CRESSOP threat motivated the president to recruit the IYC for election violence and manipulation via local agents, including then Federal Transportation Minister, Abiye Sekibo, a Niger Delta native, Governor Peter Odili of Rivers State, and PDP party members elsewhere in the Niger Delta (DonPedro 2006; Hazen 2009). In exchange, the IYC was provided weapons, funding, vehicles, and political cover (Human Rights Watch 2005).

The IYC was originally a nonviolent group, founded in December 1998 to mobilize for regional autonomy and local control over the region’s oil (Adunbi 2015; Eberlein 2006, 586-590; “Ijaws Condemn Court Action” 2001; Ukiwo 2011; United Nations Development Programme 2006, 87). Earlier movements dating back to the 1960’s pursued similar demands, but the creation of the IYC “marked a watershed moment and became the vehicle through which a new generation of youth leaders took up the struggle” (Watts 2008, 30). Organizing local communities was a priority for IYC leaders who felt that mass mobilization was essential for their success (Author Interview 937, Port Harcourt, May 22, 2019). To this end, the IYC traveled across the region, holding “mobile parliaments” to connect with community leaders, listen to

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9 The same elites behind the CRESSOP campaign were also mobilizing to defeat Governor Odili in 2003, who was politically weak and unpopular. The governor thus allied himself with the president in the hopes of securing his re-election (Abubakar 2002).
their concerns, encourage them to join or support the IYC, and build a mass, grass-roots movement (Onwuemeodo 2000). Over 500 community leaders and 25 civil society organizations endorsed the Kaiama Declaration, the IYC’s founding document, signaling that “sentiments for greater resource control” were “deeply popular across all sectors of Niger Delta society” (Kew and Phillips 2007, 160). By building strong ties with local communities (Author Interview 937, Port Harcourt, May 22, 2019; Author Interview 867, Port Harcourt, May 25, 2019; Onwuemeodo 2000), the IYC was able to successfully organize mass rallies and peaceful marches in the late 1990s in support of its cause (“Ijaws Condemn Court Action” 2001; Oyadongha 2000).

Around 2000, a militant faction led by IYC Vice President Asari Dokubo (hereafter, Asari) gained popularity with IYC members and local communities. According to Hazen, “Asari become something of a folk hero in the Niger Delta based on his charismatic nature, proclaimed political ideology (e.g. promoting Ijaw rights through demanding control over the Delta’s oil resources), and his ability to tap into widespread local grievances” (2009, 290-291). In light of military repression of peaceful protesters in the late 1990s, the Asari faction maintained that nonviolence resistance was ineffective, and insisted on taking up arms against the government to fight for their political goals as well as to defend local communities from state violence (DonPedro 2006).

The debate over violent vs. nonviolent resistance factionalized the IYC into two camps between Vice President Asari and President Felix Tuodolo (who was in favor of nonviolence) (Author Interview 937, Port Harcourt, May 22, 2019; Author Interview 867, Port Harcourt, May 25, 2019). In July 2001, Asari violently took over the IYC after arriving to internal elections with weapons and vehicles to oust his rivals. He declared himself IYC President and chased out the nonviolent Tuodolo faction (Okonta 2006, 23; Oyadongha 2001a). Despite his violent takeover,
Asari remained a widely popular figure in the region and was viewed as a protector and advocate of community interests (Hazen 2009).

According to scholars, Asari “held great sway as a political figure, and as such became sought after by politicians as a source of support and, ultimately, electoral victory” in 2003, specifically those in the PDP (Hazen and Horner 2007, 77). The president provided money, weapons, and vehicles to the IYC beginning in 2001 (assisting Asari’s takeover) in exchange for violence and intimidation against CRESSOP leaders and supporters, as well as election violence and fraud as the April 2003 election approached (Adegbamigbe 2001; Agbaegbu 2002; Obi 2003). Different reports document that president did so primarily via two agents to maintain plausible deniability with foreign donors and influential domestic actors: then Federal Transportation Minister Abiye Sekibo, a native from the Niger Delta, and Governor Odili (Human Rights Watch 2005; International Crisis Group 2006, 21). Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that “during the run-up to the 2003 elections, Dokubo (Asari) was recruited by PDP officials to organize electoral violence and ensure the successful rigging of the polls” (Albin-Lackey 2008, 57). HRW further maintains that Asari and the IYC were the “primary instrument” that “worked on behalf of…PDP candidates for office to intimidate voters, attack their sponsors’ opponents or rig the voting directly in favor of then-Governor Peter Odili and the PDP” (Albin-Lackey and Rawlence 2007, 81). Scholars corroborate this, noting that the ruling party implemented a “strategy of violent vote-rigging in favour of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) with the help of Asari Dokubo” (Bøås 2011, 119). Reflecting on the 2003 election, local journalists wrote that “Dokubo-Asari was the bride of the contending political forces…As the leader of IYC, he wielded enormous influence. Many big politicians rode on Asari’s popularity
to achieve electoral victory,” including President Obasanjo, who was deeply unpopular in the region and faced strong opposition from regional elites (DonPedro 2006, 32).

Interviews reveal the president’s fear of the breakdown of the ruling coalition and the loss of the Niger Delta region. According to a journalist, “whoever wants to be president needs to get regional elites to back him. They are the ones who control local politics and decide who their states are going to support. CRESSOP threatened Obasanjo’s re-election. If the Niger Delta left the PDP, Obasanjo was in real danger” (Author Interview 193, Lagos, August 11, 2012). A local activist explained that unlike in 1999, Obasanjo could not count on provincial elites to deliver the Niger Delta for him in 2003. Although a few elites stood by his side, such as Governor Odili, they were lacked the political influence and authority to secure the Niger Delta for him (Author Interview 743, Port Harcourt, May 22, 2019). The weakness of the president’s remaining allies in the region is confirmed by numerous news media reports (Abubakar 2002; Adegbamigbe 2001; Ajani and Owuemeodo 2001; Ofiebor 2001; Ojeifo 2003). As a result of the president’s support of the IYC, he won the Niger Delta in a landslide and secured a second term – a victory that was largely decried as fraudulent by election observers and condemned for its violence (European Union 2003; International Republican Institute 2003).

**Incumbent Tolerance of the IYC/NDPVF, May 2003-April 2004**

The CRESSOP threat was eliminated after the 2003 election. A prominent campaign leader, Marshal Harry, was murdered in his Abuja residence weeks before the April election, a significant loss for CRESSOP. Police maintained that he was killed by armed robbers, but many insisted his murder was political (Agande, Omonobi, and Ighodaro 2003; Elijah 2003). The violence and manipulation engaged in by the IYC ensured the president’s victory in the region as
well as his allies. Following the 2003 election, many provincial political elites returned to the PDP fold (Ofiebor and Mukwuzi 2004).

The IYC-PDP alliance collapsed in the weeks after the election. Publicly, Asari maintained that the IYC only supported local PDP politicians, and not President Obasanjo, who, again, was deeply unpopular in the region; Asari regularly expressed his contempt for the president in media interviews (Hazen 2009). Asari insisted that local PDP politicians rigged the election for Obasanjo, and that as a result, the IYC would no longer support them. The IYC’s claims that it did not support the president are difficult to sustain however given that they violently attacked the president’s opponents leading up to the election, and were involved in violence during both state and presidential elections, which were held weeks apart (Ofiebor 2004a, 2004b). In late 2003, Asari and IYC members created a new armed group, the NDPVF, looking to distance themselves from the IYC’s association with the PDP and President Obasanjo (Hazen 2009; Human Rights Watch 2005; International Crisis Group 2006).

With the CRESSOP threat eliminated, and the IYC (now NDPVF) no longer interested in supporting the PDP, the president shifted from supporting to tolerating the NDPVF. Asari maintained his popularity after the election, skillfully using the media to persuade local communities that he “aided” local PDP politicians in exchange for their promise that they would fight for resource control, that he was betrayed by the PDP, and that he founded the NDPVF to refocus his efforts on regional autonomy and resource control, which continued to be immensely popular (Hazen 2009; Hazen and Horner 2007). Initially, the NDPVF was widely viewed as a protector and advocate of Niger Delta communities (Author Interview 762, July 25, 2012, Ibadan). In addition to its popular political demands, the group tapped into pipelines and siphoned off oil to generate revenue to purchase weapons, pay a stipend to group members, and
distribute funds to local communities. It was also seen as a defender against the federal government (International Crisis Group 2006).

From May 2003 until April 2004, NGO reports document that the military and the police (both federal institutions in Nigeria) not only refrained from going after the NDPVF, but stood by as the group violently fought a local gang, the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV) for territorial control and access to oil pipelines, which was key funding source for both groups (Human Rights Watch 2005; Okonta 2006). Dozens of eyewitnesses reported to human rights advocates that the police failed to show up or arrived well after the fighting between the NDPVF and NDV, or when they did show up, literally stood by and did nothing. Additionally, few arrests were made between late 2003 and April 2004, and those that were arrested were low-level NDPVF fighters and were released quickly (Human Rights Watch 2005, 17-18). Scholars also maintain that state security agencies refused to act on orders of the president (Joab-Peterside 2007; Okonta 2006).

Although there was no longer an elite-led campaign to exit the ruling coalition, President Obasanjo remained deeply unpopular in the region. Cracking down on the NDPVF would generate public anger and a political backlash, which could be used by provincial political elites to extract more resources from and influence over the president, and possibly a second attempt to defect (Author Interview 948, May 27, 2019, Port Harcourt). According to a local scholar, “Obasanjo won [the Niger Delta region] in a landslide, but everyone knew the election was rigged. Yes, the Niger Delta was a PDP region, but this was only through brute force. Obasanjo had to tread lightly there.” Referring to provincial elites, he continued, “they mobilized against him once, and they could do it again.” (Author Interview 285, Abuja, September 10, 2013).
Incumbent Repression of the NDPVF, May 2004-September 2005

The president’s strategy towards the NDPVF shifted yet again in May 2004, from toleration to repression. As noted above, shortly after the April 2003 election, the NDPVF became engaged in a violent conflict with the NDV. Its moniker is misleading; the NDV was not a vigilante group, and did not provide protection to local communities (quite the opposite). It was a local gang that siphoned off oil from pipelines and sold its violent services to local politicians during elections. In fact, both the IYC and the NDV engaged in election violence and fraud for the PDP in 2003. Afterwards, the two groups became engaged in a violent conflict over territorial control and the oil pipeline network that snakes through the Niger Delta region (Human Rights Watch 2005; International Crisis Group 2006; Joab-Peterside 2007).

The NDPVF’s violent battles with the NDV over the course of a year all but eliminated the NDPVF’s societal support. The conflict resulted in the deaths of dozens of civilians and devastated local communities. Homes were destroyed, community infrastructure decimated, schools closed, and thousands were displaced (Human Rights Watch 2005, 10-16). As one community after another was affected by the violence, support across the Niger Delta region for the NDPVF weakened over time. By mid-2004, local communities began to form vigilante groups to defend themselves against the NDV as well as the NDPVF (Author Interview 308, Port Harcourt, May 24, 2019; Human Rights Watch 2005, 10-16).

After a year of violence and reports from journalists, local activists, and human rights groups on the impact of the NDV-NDPVF conflict on local communities, the president finally deployed the police, the army, and the navy in a joint task force to quell the violence (International Crisis Group 2006). The NDPVF and the NDV were both targeted as the joint task force launched operations across the Niger Delta to arrest and incarcerate members of both
groups; many members were killed in the process (Albin-Lackey and Rawlence 2007). Although the task force was ordered to target and arrest members of both groups, NGO reports and scholars maintain that the NDPVF received the bulk of the task force’s repression (Hazen 2009; Human Rights Watch 2005). In September 2005, the joint task force captured and arrested Asari, and he was imprisoned. By that point, the NDPVF was all but decimated. Members who survived the military operations either retreated to civilian life or left to join either local gangs or sign onto a rebellion that entered the political scene in late 2005, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) (Joab-Peterside 2007; Okonta 2006).

According to CSO member, the NDPVF devastation of local communities over the course of a year eventually created a window of opportunity for the president to repress the group: “Asari finally gave Obasanjo the opportunity to target him. Neighborhoods were forming their own vigilantes to try to protect themselves from Asari and Tom. It was hell. This gave Obasanjo the justification he was waiting for to target Asari” (Author Interview 308, Port Harcourt, May 24, 2019). From 2003-2004, the NDPVF transformed from a protective group with widespread societal support to a predatory one responsible for civilian deaths, displacement, and damaged infrastructure (Human Rights Watch 2005, 10-16). As a result, repression no longer risked public anger and political backlash; instead, it allowed the president to project authority into a region and cast himself as committed to local security (Author Interview 491, Ibadan, May 10, 2019.).

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10 Ateke Tom was the leader of the NDV.
The Bakassi Boys

*Incumbent Toleration, May 1999-August 2002*

The five southeastern states belonged to the ruling party coalition, electing all PDP governors in 1999. Powerful and influential provincial political elites were essential to delivering the region for Obasanjo (Falola and Heaton 2008, 202-242). Despite rumblings from some southeastern elites for a PDP presidential nominee from their region, which I discuss in greater detail below, regional elites did not defect from the PDP coalition and supported Obasanjo in 2003.

The Bakassi Boys vigilante group was founded in Abia State in southeastern Nigeria in November 1998, shortly before transitional elections and the inauguration of the new civilian regime in May 1999. Increases in armed robbery in the 1990s had taken a severe toll on local markets and communities. Frustration among traders over violent crime and extortion had been growing for years but the incident that is said to have sparked the creation of the vigilante group was the murder of a pregnant women and two shoemakers in November 1998. Shortly thereafter, traders recruited young men from surrounding communities and provided them with machetes and cutlasses to patrol the market and pursue, arrest, and try suspected criminals (Baker 2002; Meagher 2007; Smith 2004; Tertsakian 2002; Ukiwo 2002). The group’s original leadership was composed of local traders responsible for recruitment and raising money to purchase weapons and provide stipends to the vigilantes. Ethnographic accounts document that in its early years, the original leadership conducted background checks on “applicants,” asking neighbors about applicants’ character and behavior, and took steps to prevent predation by instituting training and monitoring programs (Meagher 2007; Ukiwo 2002).
To be sure, the Bakassi Boys were violent, but anthropologists note that they largely targeted criminals in their early years. After capturing a suspect, the Bakassi Boys conducted a trial at their headquarters, and following a guilty verdict, carried out a public execution by hacking the victim to death or decapitating them, and then often lighting the body on fire. Their victims’ bodies were commonly left in public for days as a message to criminals (Smith 2004; Tertsakian 2002). These methods inspired fear in the population, but they were also perceived as immensely effective. As a local businessman put it, “killing human beings is not good. The Bakassi Boys will go to Hell, but we thank God they’re here” (Quoted in Meagher 2007, 100).

The Bakassi Boys’ reputation for providing security earned them “enormous popular support” (Meagher 2007, 97). While they were feared for their brutal executions, they were also respected for their perceived impartiality and incorruptibility (Baker 2002; Guttschuss 2010; Meagher 2007; Smith 2004). Residents of Awka, Anambra’s capital, declared that they supported the vigilantes “because they dared to do what politicians and the police refused or couldn’t do” (Author Interview 321, Awka, July 28, 2012) and that because of their crime-fighting abilities, it “was impossible to find anyone back then who had anything bad to say about Bakassi” (Author Interview 227, Awka, July 30, 2012). Citizens, but “especially traders in the commercial towns” were said to “hail their presence” (“A Gun a Day” 2000). William Reno describes how the Bakassi Boys “tapped into widespread grassroots grievances about corrupt and irresponsible government. Colourful posters appeared in markets with titles like ‘The face up between the Bakassi Boys and Federal Government troops at Onitsha,’ depicting machete-wielding fighters defying federal authorities” (2005, 138).

The Bakassi Boys began as a municipal-level vigilante group and spread to a regional crime-fighting force operating across multiple southeastern states by mid-2000. The group’s
expansion was largely driven by popular demand (Edike 2000a; Owolabi 2002). Local governors quickly moved to align themselves with the group, hoping to boost their own goodwill among voters as well as gain influence over the vigilantes and use them against their political opponents (Meagher 2007).

Interestingly, in July 2000, the president ordered the police to arrest, incarcerate, and disband the Bakassi Boys, suggesting the president’s preference to eliminate the vigilantes.¹¹ Yet, the move to repress the vigilantes was quickly met with a large popular backlash (Harnischfeger 2003, 29-30; Smith 2004, 443). Anthropologist Daniel Jordan Smith writes that “local public reaction to the federal government’s announcement was swift and strong, with public opinion in the southeast clearly favoring the preservation of the Bakassi Boys” (2004, 444). Close followers of local politics commented that “in Anambra, opposition to Bakassi is tantamount to inviting the wrath of the citizenry on oneself” (“Bakassi Boys: Politics and Intrigues of a Security Outfit” 2001) and that opposing the crime-fighting outfit would be “political suicide” (Baker 2002, 228). Hundreds of traders marched in protest of the police order (Smith 2004, 446). Journalists reported on widespread public anger in reaction to the president’s move to repress the vigilantes and threats from traders of “reprisals” if the president did not back down (Edike 2000b)

The president quickly rescinded the order in the face of mass protests and shifted to a strategy of toleration for the next three years (Smith 2004, 446). According to Smith, “the federal government’s tolerance of the Bakassi Boys reflected its reluctance to challenge powerful idioms of accountability when its own legitimacy seemed so precarious” (Smith 2004, 443, emphasis added). He continues: “federal authorities faced a dilemma. Allowing such groups to exist posed

¹¹ This was separate from a sweeping 1999 executive order banning ethnic militias. The July 2000 order specifically targeted the Bakassi Boys.
the risk that they could be mobilized for political purposes, but banning them might stoke the very ethnic and regional polarization they hoped to avoid” (2004, 445). Specifically, repressing the popular vigilantes would jeopardize the southeast’s continued membership in the PDP coalition.

Provincial political elites in the southeast reacted to the president’s order with anger as well, calling the president “anti-Igbo” (Mamah and Ajani 2000). Some local governors sought to use popular anger with the president as leverage to extract more resources from the federal government whereas others publicly announced that the southeast should demand a presidential nominee from the region in 2003, threatening defection from the PDP coalition (Anyagafu 2000; Odion 2000). Calls for an Igbo nominee quieted in 2002 and never materialized into a serious campaign as provincial elites expressed their support for Obasanjo’s re-election (Ogbru 2002; Okocha 2002). Scholars maintain that the president’s revoking of the order to repress the Bakassi Boys was strategic; had he gone through with the order, the result would be political instability in the southeast (Smith 2004). The president’s toleration over the previous two years was “a mark, not of weakness,” but of careful political calculations regarding the maintenance of the PDP coalition (Meagher 2007, 107-108).

*Incumbent Repression of the Bakassi Boys, August 2002-November 2002*

The Bakassi Boys role as a protective group did not last. Beginning in 2001, political opponents of the governors in Abia and Anambra states were harassed, assaulted, and murdered, allegedly by the Bakassi Boys (Baker 2002, 231, Harnischfeger 2003, 45). But it was not until stories began to circulate of the Bakassi Boys preying upon innocent civilians that local community leaders and journalists began to speak out. In mid-2002, journalists began reporting
stories of the Bakassi Boys arresting and torturing individuals despite protests from their family, friends, and colleagues that they were not criminals (Smith 2004, 443-449). Such stories created a concern that the vigilantes were “spiraling out of control” (Omonijo 2002). Others noted that “many people had started losing faith in the Bakassi Boys or what had become of it,” pointing to a clear “slip of public support for the Boys” (“Bashing in the Bakassi Boys” 2002). A policy analyst working on security explained that “they were very effective and I mean very effective, but… after some time it became more of a cult of fear” (Author Interview 379, Abuja, November 22, 2013). Eventually, “the populace cried out against this, prompting the federal government to proscribe the group which had clearly outlived its usefulness” (Nnobi 2010).

Anthropologists argue that it wasn’t the Bakassi Boys’ attacks on local politicians that tarnished their reputation, so much as their violence against law-abiding civilians (Smith 2004, 443-444). The murder of a prominent human rights lawyer and his wife by the Bakassi Boys triggered local public outrage and protests among traders (Okoli 2002). In response, the president swiftly cracked down. In August and September 2002, the Bakassi Boys were arrested, imprisoned, and many extra-judicially executed by the Nigerian police. In one raid on the group’s headquarters, the police arrested approximately 100 members and released dozens of their prisoners. In raids in Abia State, the police arrested dozens of vigilantes, confiscated their weapons, destroyed their headquarters, and released dozens of civilians they had detained (Meagher 2007, 109; Taiwo 2002). The crackdowns continued over the next few months and by early 2003, the vigilantes were eliminated (Baker 2002; Meagher 2007; Smith 2004).

Anthropologists explain that, “rising popular discontent with the abuses of the vigilantes led to the federal government’s decision in late 2002 to disband the group” (Smith 2004, 442). The vigilantes’ predation created the political opportunity for the president to repress the group—
not necessarily in the interest of law and order, but to project presidential authority into the southeast and silence any lingering criticism among local elites (Emereuwa 2002; Ujumadu 2002). A policy analyst maintained that the popular downfall of the Bakassi Boys gave Obasanjo the chance to consolidate PDP in the southeast and eliminate rumblings of an Igbo presidential nominee (Author Interview 379, Abuja, November 22, 2013).

Mungiki

_Incumbent Repression of Mungiki, 1990s_

By the end of 1991, growing domestic and foreign pressure compelled President Moi to hold multiparty elections. Although there was widespread early enthusiasm for the opposition, Moi easily won the 1992 and 1997 elections through a combination of electoral rules that heavily favored the ruling party, the Kenyan African National Union (KANU), institutional manipulation, fraud, and violence (Hornsby 2013, 466-611). Prior to the December 1992 elections, Moi passed electoral laws that included the prohibition of a coalition government – a significant hurdle for the divided opposition – and that the presidential election would go into a run-off if one candidate did not win a plurality of the vote plus at least 25% of the vote in a minimum of five provinces. Moi, a Kalenjin, had built a multiethnic ruling party coalition over the past decade that under these rules would easily allow him to win the Rift Valley, North Eastern, and the Coast provinces, as well as handily clear the 25% minimum in Western and Eastern. Moi could safely lose Central and Nyanza provinces, where he had the weakest support (Hornsby 2013, 511). In contrast, the opposition, which was a conglomeration of political elites whose support was circumscribed to a single province, was plagued by factionalism, and failed to unite around a single candidate (Barkan 2004; Hornsby 2013, 466-502; 528-539; Nyhan and
Epstein 2002; Throup and Hornsby 1998, 92-111). To be clear, several factors account for Moi’s 1992 victory, but important among them and relevant for the argument here is his ability to hold together the KANU coalition.

The 1997 elections were a repeat of 1992; if anything, the ruling party coalition was arguably stronger. The opposition remained divided; additionally, many had defected to the ruling party, persuaded by a combination of state patronage and KANU’s dominance in the face of a weak opposition (Throup and Hornsby 1998, 539-549). Not only did the president maintain the KANU ruling coalition, he expanded it after the 1992, and the 1997, elections (Hornsby 2013, 539-611). This political environment “virtually guaranteed Moi’s presidential re-election” in 1997 (Hornsby 2013, 592).

Mungiki was founded in 1987 in rural Laikipia district in the Rift Valley. It was originally a nonviolent organization that advocated a return to traditional Kikuyu religious beliefs and practices. From the beginning, it was heavily critical of systemic corruption and the ruling party, maintaining that it was the mere puppet of foreign donors (Gecaga 2007; Rasmussen 2012a; Wamue 2001). In the early 1990s, Mungiki moved into informal settlements in Nairobi and became a violent and predatory group. During this period, scholars maintain that Mungiki largely shed its religious orientation, maintained its criticism of the government and corruption, and began to engage in violent activities. It came into violent conflict with local gangs over control of the lucrative matatu economy, killing civilians in the cross-fire and disrupting transportation. Mungiki also violently displaced service providers, taking over public toilets, electricity, and other services, in informal settlements, while raising fees (Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2006; Katumanga 2005; LeBas 2013). A Mathare resident describes how in 2000, Mungiki demanded that the manager of a public toilet turn over his business. When he refused,
Mungiki beheaded the manager, and hung his body from the public toilet for weeks as a message to Mathare’s resident that their authority was not to be challenged (Author Interview 713, Nairobi, June 30, 2019). Others also recount their Kikuyu neighbors being forced to join the group (Author Interviews 444, July 2, 2019, Nairobi; 128, July 6, 2019, Nairobi; 189, July 11, 2019, Nairobi).

After moving into Nairobi, Mungiki quickly gained a “sinister reputation” and “overwhelming popular hatred” (Ruteere 2008, 10). Scholars maintain that ordinary Kenyans referred to the group as the “Mungiki menace” (Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2006). One scholar noted that “Mungiki’s involvement in criminal activities drew the wrath of the public. Consequently, Kenyans began to call upon the state to deal ruthlessly with the group” (Gecaga 2007, 79). Another scholar corroborates Mungiki’s deep unpopularity, arguing that “most Kenyans shun the sect” (Wamue 2001, 454).

Throughout the 1990s, Mungiki suffered heavy repression from state security agencies upon orders of the president. Thousands of (suspected) members were arrested, imprisoned, or murdered in the streets during police raids (Kagwanja 2003, 40-41; Rasmussen 2010b, 437). Moi justified violent repression on the grounds that Mungiki was a dissident armed group seeking to spread chaos and political disorder (Wamue 2001, 464-465). By the mid-1990s, extra-judicial killings of alleged Mungiki members led local and international NGOs and the US government to criticize Moi’s heavy hand. Such criticism was met with a public anger however, as many Kenyans were incredulous that the rights of a violent, predatory group should be respected, reflecting the group’s widespread disdain among ordinary citizens (Kagwanja 2003, 40-41; Rasmussen 2010b; 2012, 2014). By 2001, not a month went by without the arrest of Mungiki members (Kagwanja 2003). In sum, “the story of Mungiki right from the time the movement was
formed is one of persecution, intimidation, jailing of its followers, and gross human rights abuses.” (Kagwanja 2003, 40-41).

The fact that the president was able to maintain the ruling party coalition and did not face a serious threat to his hold on power combined with the group’s predation and violence upon citizens helps to make sense of the president’s repression of Mungiki. Because Moi dominated national politics and his continued rule was all but certain in the 1990s, there was little incentive to tolerate, much less support, the group (Kagwanja 2005, 2006). Moreover, many Kenyans, including those who lived under Mungiki’s control in Nairobi, were heavily in favor of the group’s repression (Katumaunga 2005). According to a Kenyan scholar, “people hated Mungiki, they wanted the government to get rid of them. Cracking down on them also served to project Moi’s power and authority” (Author Interview 144, July 6, 2019, Nairobi).

*Incumbent Support of Mungiki, 2002*

The ruling party coalition collapsed in 2002. In July, President Moi announced that the young and inexperienced Uhuru Kenyatta would be his successor. The decision angered older and prominent KANU politicians who had been passed over, including Vice President Saitoti and Minister of Energy Raila Odinga, who was previously a prominent Luo opposition politician but had joined KANU with the hopes of winning the presidency in 2002 (Hornsby 2013, 662-671). Shortly after Moi’s announcement, Saitoti, Odinga, and other senior KANU politicians defected to the opposition, weakening Moi’s ability to hang onto the provinces under their control. In the months leading up to the December elections, the opposition united around a single candidate for the first time since 1992, Mwai Kibaki (Hornsby 2013, 679-680; Nyhan and Epstein 2002, 4-6). In sum, “KANU did not lose the 2002 elections because of economic decline,
insecurity, corruption or administrative incompetence. It lost because its coalition was torn apart by a factional and personal dispute over the presidency” (Hornsby 2013, 696).

As the ruling party coalition collapsed in late 2002, “KANU’s policy towards Mungiki roller-coastered between the old formal repression by state security agents and a new comprehensive and more effective tactic of penetrating the movement and using it to serve its electoral agenda in Kikuyu-dominated parts of Nairobi, Central and Rift Valley provinces” (Kagwanja 2003, 41). No longer the target of repression, Mungiki became the “pawns in the elite struggle for state power” and the presidency (Kagwanja 2006, 53). Mungiki members were deployed in the Rift Valley and Central provinces and Nairobi – territories were the opposition was expected to do well and Mungiki had a significant presence. On the day of Kenyatta’s official nomination in August 2002, “hundreds of thousands of Mungiki youths came in buses and mini-buses, donkey carts and on foot, descending on Nairobi streets in all directions…these Mungiki youths wielded machetes, clubs or sticks, in a dramatic parade” (Kagwanja 2006, 63). In late 2002, Mungiki violently attacked suspected opposition supporters, conducting “raids” in opposition strongholds, (Ruteere 2008, 18), intimidated Kikuyus into supporting Kenyatta, violently disrupted opposition rallies, and lethally attacked voters in opposition strongholds (Nyhan and Epstein 2002, 13). While Kenyatta lost overwhelmingly to Kibaki in December 2002, he performed far better than expected in areas where Mungiki had a strong presence, specifically winning over 30% in Central Province, 53% in the Rift Valley, and 21% in Nairobi (Hornsby 2013, 618-696). To be clear, Moi was not on the ballot in 2002. Yet Moi was “vigorously campaigning on behalf of his preferred successor,” hoping to continue his political influence after leaving office (Nyhan and Epstein 2002, 6).
Conclusion

Under what conditions do incumbents support, tolerate, or repress armed groups in their territory? I have offered a theory of coalition maintenance that takes seriously periphery management and armed groups’ ties with local communities. Most similar and most different case studies of dissident armed groups in Nigeria and Kenya have provided initial support for the argument while taking into account three rival explanations. The findings contribute to a small but growing literature that theorizes and studies government-armed group relationships and their implications for political order and violence (Day and Reno 2014; Staniland 2021; Thaler 2022).

The paper’s limitations point to several avenues for future research. One, under what conditions do armed groups support, tolerate, or violently engage incumbents and government actors? Theorizing and studying armed group strategies toward governments is essential for understanding government-armed group relationships and the political orders they constitute (Staniland 2017). This task is beyond the scope of the paper; however, the rebel group literature offers a promising foundation upon which to theorize, particularly studies of side-switching in civil war (Kalyvas 2008; Otto 2018; Seymour 2014; Staniland 2012). Explanations of government and armed group strategies vis-à-vis one another, their capacity and resources, and when their preferences (mis)align are key to understanding outcomes such as cooptation, delegation, sponsorship, (covert) collusion, mutual toleration, containment, and sustained conflict (Thaler 2022).

Two, future work might unpack the state to examine a web of government-armed group relationships that includes not just national incumbents, but subnational incumbents, political parties, the military, and the police, among other actors. I have sought to pull in center-provincial dynamics to explain national incumbent strategies toward dissident armed groups. How
relationships among other political actors shape government responses to armed groups is an important research agenda.

Third, the case studies reveal mistakes, miscalculations, and learning processes with incumbents, echoing previous scholarship (Rosenzweig 2021; Treisman 2020). President Obasanjo initially moved to repress the Bakassi Boys, then retreated following mass protests and political disruption. President Moi supported Mungiki in the hopes of putting his successor in office in 2002, a strategy which failed in the end. Similar to work on other political outcomes (Rosenzweig 2021; Treisman 2020), scholarship on government-armed group relations will need to take seriously miscalculations and learning moving forward. Doing so will yield a more complete and accurate picture of armed politics and incumbent strategies to remain in power.
References


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Supplementary Materials

“Support, Toleration, and Repression: Incumbent Responses to Dissident Armed Groups in Nigeria and Kenya”

Table of Contents

A. Alternative Explanations

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Appendix A. Alternative Explanations

Table 1, below, shows how the three rival explanations discussed in the manuscript are held constant over time in terms of incumbent-dissident armed group pairs, creating most similar cases, and vary across pairs to build most different cases. The first column lists the cases; the next three columns display the rival explanatory variables and the value they take in each case; the second column from the right shows my argument; and the right-most column displays the outcome of interest (national incumbent response).

Table 1: Most Similar and Most Different Cases (bolded cells are correct predictions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Economic Importance</th>
<th>Local Resistance Capacity</th>
<th>Coalition Management</th>
<th>Incumbent Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IYC, 2001-2003</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Provincial Defection</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IYC/NDPVF, 2003-2004</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Protective Group</td>
<td>Toleration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDPVF, 2004-2005</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakassi Boys, 1999-2002</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Protective Group</td>
<td>Toleration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bakassi Boys, late 2002</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPC, 1999-2002</td>
<td>Coethnics</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Opposition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Repression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPC, 2003-2007</td>
<td>Coethnics</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Opposition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Toleration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mungiki, 1990s-2001</td>
<td>Non-coethnics</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Coalition Province + Predatory Group</td>
<td>Repression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 To save space in the table, the national incumbent, which is the country president in all cases, is not listed next to the dissident armed group.
2 This version does not include the O’odua People’s Congress (OPC) case study.
The first rival explanation has limited support in Nigeria given that President Olusegun Obasanjo’s ethnicity (Yoruba) and that of the leaders and members of the IYC (Ijaw), the Bakassi Boys (Igbo), and the OPC (Yoruba) remain constant over time. Similarly in Kenya, the argument correctly predicts President Daniel arap Moi’s (Kalenjin) repression of Mungiki, a Kikuyu group; however, it falls to explain Moi’s support in 2002.

The second and third rival explanations are not bolded in Table 1 because their predictions are ambiguous; instead, I aim to address them by holding them constant across cases. In Nigeria, approximately 85% of federal government revenue comes from the oil industry (International Crisis Group 2006). I thus code oil-producing states as high economic importance, and all others as low economic importance. Although the economic importance of the region does not change, incumbent strategies to dissident groups do. Kenya’s most fertile and productive farmland is found in the Rift Valley and agriculture is an important economic sector for the country (Hornsby 2013, 20). Mungiki was founded in the Rift Valley and later expanded into Nairobi, the country’s capital, another economically important region (Kagwanja 2003). As in Nigeria, the region’s importance is held constant over time, and thus does a poor job of explaining changes in incumbent strategies.

The third rival explanation – local resistance capacity – also fails to explain changes in incumbent responses to dissident armed groups in Nigeria and Kenya. The Niger Delta and southwestern Nigeria were the sites of a robust, grassroots pro-democracy movement in the 1990s (Falola and Heaton 2008). There is a proliferation of small arms in both regions, and dissident armed groups in the Niger Delta had access to oil pipelines to fund their operations.
(Hazen and Horner 2007) and the OPC received donations from wealthy political and societal elites in Lagos, the country’s commercial capital (Guichaoua 2010). The Niger Delta is also characterized by difficult geographic terrain. Given the recent history of mass mobilization and available resources, I code the resistance capacity of both regions as high. Southeastern Nigeria, the site of the Bakassi Boys, is poor in resources and has limited economic activity. A secessionist movement that led to civil war from 1967-1970 devastated the southeast, and calls from pro-secessionist groups in the 1990s and 2000s, such as the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) have been locally unpopular and rejected by provincial political and economic elites (Falola and Heaton 2008). I thus code the southeast as having limited resistance capacity.

Resistance capacity in the Kenyan case is relatively low, and also stable over time. Mungiki had operations in the Rift Valley and informal settlements in Nairobi, both areas with a strong government presence (Branch and Cheeseman 2006; Hornsby 2013). Although Mungiki sought to cast itself as the inheritors of the Mau Mau Rebellion, it was widely despised among citizens and enjoyed limited to no support among wealthy or middle-class Kenyans (Rasmussen 2014). Much of Mungiki’s revenue in the 1990s relied on controlling transportation in and around Nairobi and extorting local communities but scholars maintain that its resources were not so significant as to pose a serious threat to the Kenyan government (Kagwanja 2006).

**Appendix B: Field Research and Semi-Structured Interviews in Nigeria and Kenya**

The paper draws on different types of qualitative data to empirically trace how and why national incumbents support, tolerate, violently repress dissident armed groups, leveraging most similar and most different case studies from Nigeria and Kenya. The case studies rely on a rich scholarship of the Bakassi Boys, the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and its
Nigeria

For my dissertation, I wanted to study the different types of relationships that provincial incumbents cultivate with various armed actors, and why. One reason I settled on Nigeria to examine these questions is that there are several different kinds of armed groups across the country, including vigilantes, ethnic militias, criminal organizations, and insurgents. Moreover, Nigeria is
a federal system of 36 states, and governors wield substantial power and influence; they have also interacted with armed groups in wide ranging ways that vary across space and over time, from support to violent conflict and everything in between (Hazen and Horner 2007; Watts 2008). This within-country variation would allow me to construct a subnational research design that would help to account for rival explanations while inductively building a theory of provincial incumbent responses to armed groups (Snyder 2001). Although my dissertation would focus on Nigerian governors, I had learned well before my first trip in July 2011 that it was not only governors that built different relationships with armed groups; there was clear variation in how Nigerian presidents responded to various armed groups as well. This paper is the result of my sustained interest in national-level incumbent strategies toward armed actors, beginning in Nigeria and later taking me to Kenya.

I made five trips to Nigeria between 2011 and 2019: July 2011, July-August 2012 (preliminary fieldwork), September-December 2013, March-May 2014 (dissertation fieldwork), and May 2019 (post-dissertation fieldwork). During these trips, my overarching goal was to gain an understanding of armed politics more broadly (Staniland 2017), and (sub)national incumbent responses to armed groups more specifically by (1) collecting written material that was not available online, such as some local scholarship and reports, (2) informal conversations with different actors on the ground, and (3) and semi-structured interviews. Fortunately, a wealth of Nigerian newspaper articles is available online via All Africa, and I was able to access a good deal of local scholarship through my university’s library, which was essential in preparing for fieldwork. The bulk of my field research was devoted to scheduling, conducting, and typing up my interview notes and reflecting on them in my daily field notes, as well as hundreds of informal conversations that over time shaped my understanding of armed politics in Nigeria.
Because I was (1) interested in how national and subnational incumbents respond to multiple types of armed groups across Nigeria, (2) using a subnational research design in my dissertation and related projects, and (3) speaking with knowledgeable and close followers of Nigeria’s national, regional, and local politics who were physically scattered across the country, I made a deliberate decision to travel widely across Nigeria, as much as time and funding would allow. I thought traveling widely would be the best strategy to gain the broad understanding of regional security issues in Nigeria that I was looking for. In deciding to travel widely rather than remain in one location however, I ultimately sacrificed depth for breadth. That is, I am confident that had I embedded myself in one location for a year or more, I would have gleaned more nuanced and richer insights about armed group politics in a single location (Barnes 2021). Yet, I would have sacrificed the subnational comparisons that allow me to argue how and why (sub)national incumbents support armed groups in one location, tolerate them somewhere else, and still violently crackdown on them in other regions. Because the armed groups under study operate across regions that include more than one state (the Bakassi Boys were based in multiple states in the southeast, the IYC/NDPVF across Niger Delta states, and Mungiki emerged in the rural Rift Valley and later expanded into Nairobi), focusing on and comparing across regions was the appropriate level of analysis. My fieldwork and travels across Nigeria reflect this.

One challenge to traveling so extensively over a relatively short amount of time is that in seeking to gain breadth, we lose any insights we might gain by failing to develop the relationships and networks essential to acquiring those insights to begin with (Shesterinina 2019; Wood 2006, 2009). I was cognizant of this challenge and took steps to mitigate it. First, I asked for feedback on my interview protocol from Nigerian scholars who had studied either these groups or conflict and violence in the Nigerian context, to make sure I was asking questions that were relevant and
would make sense to my interviewees. One potential pitfall of not being embedded in a local community for an extensive period is that foreign researchers find themselves asking questions that do not resonate with local populations (Wood 2009). I was aware that my interview protocol reflected my training as a political scientist in the US, in terms of my coursework and the literatures on state failure, state capacity, and civil war that I had been engaging with as a graduate student. It quickly became clear that some of my interview questions were entirely missing the point, and I am eternally grateful to the Nigerian scholars who pointed this out.

Second, I made efforts to return when time and money allowed (specifically, Abuja, Ibadan, and Lagos), and relied on email and WhatsApp to stay connected over the years. I hoped that maintaining these virtual connections (which became even more important when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down international travel), as well as return visits would help to deepen my ties with some of my interviewees and make clear that I was not a parachute academic looking to only spend a few weeks in a country, extract what information she needed, and leave, never to return.

Finally, because many of my interviewees were researchers themselves, or highly educated and knowledge practitioners, many of them had traveled and conducted their own interviews and field research. Because of this, I was hopeful that at least this subgroup of my interview population would be relatively open to granting an interview and expressing themselves sincerely, even though I was a foreigner and one that had limited time to spend in their community.

**Interview Protocol**

For this project, I relied on semi-structured interviews to 1) help corroborate information provided by other sources, and 2) offer nuanced insight into the logic of national incumbent responses (my outcome of interest), political maneuverings between the presidency and regional
elites, and the nature of armed groups’ ties (predatory or protective) with local communities. The
interviews thus do more than help to increase our confidence in internal validity; the interviews
are also an invaluable resource for understanding how national and regional political elites aim to
gain leverage vis-à-vis one another, and how armed actors help them do so (Martin 2013). I
conducted a total of 98 interviews that were relevant for this project, averaging 90 minutes in
length (the shortest being 45 minutes and the longest three hours). These interviews, in addition to
thousands of informal conversations I had with Nigerians between 2011 and 2019, were critical
for gaining insight into government-armed group relations.

Multiple discussions with the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at University A (where I
was a graduate student) and University B (where I am an assistant professor at the time of writing)
were critical in thinking through ethical considerations and challenges in my fieldwork and
interviews. 3 Through these conversations, it became clear that I was not so much interested in
personal information and experiences, but rather, broad, political processes. Moreover, my
exchanges with IRB representatives and Nigerian academics led me to the conclusion that given
political violence and insecurity in Nigeria and the fact that answering my research questions did
not require interviewees to divulge personal information, asking for personal information
constituted an unnecessary risk for my interviewees. I was looking to better understand how and
why presidents and governors respond the way they do to armed groups, rather than people’s lived
experiences. After going back and forth over the interview protocol with University A’s IRB, they
determined that the final protocol did not constitute human subjects research. At University B, I
submitted an updated interview protocol for my 2019 field research in Nigeria and Kenya. The

3 University names withheld to maintain author anonymity during the peer review process.
IRB reviewed it and determined that it did not constitute human subjects research (IRB number withheld for anonymous review).

Of course, the fact that my research did not constitute human subjects research as defined by IRBs based in the US did not mean that there were not major ethical considerations and challenges that needed to be thoughtfully addressed. To be clear, while I do not think that having an IRB approved project means that all ethical concerns have been taken care of (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018), the fact that my research was viewed as not constituting human subjects research made me more wary of proceeding in a way, given that I was ultimately responsible for all decisions regarding research ethics – decisions which would not have an IRB stamp of approval. Again, conversations with the IRB at my home institutions and Nigerian academics were essential in making design and data decisions about the consent and interview protocols as well as data management. I discuss each of these in turn.

In Nigeria as elsewhere, there is a history of governing authorities using violence to come to and maintain power, including the British during colonial rule, different military governments that dominated the country’s politics from the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 until the return to multiparty elections in 1999, and more recent civilian administrations (Amnesty International 2019, 2020; Falola and Heaton 2008). Over the course of this history, those in power have violently cracked down on dissent, including those mobilizing for self-determination from the 1960s until today; the pro-democracy movement in the 1990s; those agitating for secession in the southeast; Islamic groups in the north demanding accountability in government; and most recently, Nigerians protesting police violence and brutality (Amnesty International 2019).\(^4\) Certainly not all, but many people I was interested in interviewing have been vocal in their

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\(^4\) For a broad overview of Nigeria’s recent political history, see Falola and Heaton 2008.
opposition to different administrations and their policies, and had been active at one time or another in different movements. Sadly, some of those I interviewed revealed that they had experienced police harassment and physical assaults, which they suspected were related to their political views and activities.

Nigeria’s recent political history and our inability as researchers to predict the future (Knott 2019) led me to make several decisions regarding the interview protocol, all with the aim of minimizing as much as possible the risks to interviewees and myself. First, I opted not to ask for written consent because I was wary of having documentation that interviewees had spoken to me on topics that tend to cast Nigerian political elites in a particularly poor light. I instead read a consent protocol that noted that they could end the interview at any point, that they could opt to skip over any questions they did not wish to answer, and that they could contact me after the interview and request that I destroy my notes and/or recording. I provided each interviewee with my Nigerian and US telephone numbers as well as my email. I would not continue with the interview if I did not feel confident that the interviewee understood the consent protocol; fortunately, I never encountered such an incident. To date, nobody has contacted me requesting that I destroy their interview data.

I told interviewees that I was happy to conduct the interview wherever they felt most comfortable (Shesterinina 2016, 4; Wood 2006, 280). This was either their private (home) office or a room in their office building where we wouldn’t be disturbed. Before the start of the interview, I also explained what steps I would take to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. In addition to not asking for written consent, I shared that they would be assigned a pseudonym in my interview and field notes as well as a randomly generated three-digit ID number. In writing up my findings, I would only include the ID number plus the date and location of the interview, as well
as a general description of them, such as “journalist,” “activist,” “academic/scholar,” “CSO member,” or “policy analyst,” for example.

Between 2011 and 2013, I audio-recorded interviews after gaining consent. However, I stopped doing so in 2014, and have not audio-recorded interviews since then. The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria and their ability to carry out attacks in the federal capital, polarizing and violent rhetoric as the 2015 elections approached, and learning from some interviewees that they had already experienced harassment and assault from state-affiliated actors, made me decide that audio-recordings were an unnecessary risk. From 2014 onward, I opted to take copious notes (sometimes on a laptop, sometimes by hand), and if hand-written, type them up immediately after the interview. I kept my interview notes, field notes, and recordings on an encrypted hard drive. A list of my interviews and this general information is provided in Table 1, below.

During the interviews, I asked about the history of the Bakassi Boys and the Ijaw Youth Council (as well as other armed groups in Nigeria), their organizational structure, political goals and strategy, leadership structure, membership, broader activities (such as security or welfare provision to local communities), relationships with different actors, such as political parties, government officials, civil society actors, and individual politicians, and the group’s role in local politics. I also asked about how state-level and federal political and government actors responded to these groups, how their strategies evolved, if at all, over time, and what political elites hoped to gain from these relationships. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, they often ventured into ideas and perspectives that interviewees found important, but I had not considered (Wood 2009). For instance, I had thought that armed groups that provided welfare were by definition protective groups, and enjoyed positive ties and support with local communities as a
result. Several interviewees questioned this, pointing out the nuances in the Bakassi Boys’ relations with local communities, how many people both feared them but also felt relieved by their presence, and how these perceptions and views evolved over time. In Kenya, nearly everyone I spoke to agreed that Mungiki engaged in service provision in informal settlements in Nairobi, but the way they went about it and terrorized local communities made them a predatory group. The fact that the interviews were semi-structured were essential to my own learning, and allowed me to absorb new perspectives, reconsider my argument, and ask follow-up, probing questions.

**Sampling Strategy**

Given my interview questions and that I wanted to use the interviews to (1) corroborate information provided by other sources but more importantly, (2) to deepen my understanding of armed politics in Nigeria and the logic of government-armed group relationships, I decided that ideally, I wanted to interview local academics; practitioners broadly working on security; political activists; journalists; human rights lawyers; civil servants in the federal and state governments; legislators in the National Assembly and their staff; members of civil society organizations (CSOs); former affiliates of the Bakassi Boys and the IYC; and former or active police officers and members of the military. I successfully interviewed each type of actor except for former affiliates of the Bakassi Boys and members of the military. Given the violent repression of the Bakassi Boys at the hands of the federal government in 2003, I was not hopeful about finding surviving former affiliates or members willing to speak with me. I was also unable to gain access to former or active-duty military personnel. Only a handful of interviewees or contacts had a military connection that they were willing to share with me, and my interview requests with
military personnel were ignored or rejected. As a result, a clear blind spot in my research is a military perspective as well as former members of the Bakassi Boys.

To conduct interviews, I ended up traveling to Jos, Plateau State (July 2011), Awka, Anambra State (July 2012), Lagos, Lagos State (July-August 2012, March-April 2014, May 2019), Abuja, the federal capital (September-December 2013, March 2014), Enugu, Enugu State (May 2014), and Port Harcourt, Rivers State (May 2019). During my 2012 and 2019 stays in Lagos, I also made brief, approximately 1-week trips to Ibadan, Oyo State. As a point of entry, I reached out to Nigerian academics based at universities in the places I visited, including University of Jos; National Defence College in Abuja; University of Lagos and Lagos State University; University of Ibadan; Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka; and University of Port Harcourt.

As part of my fieldwork preparation, I read as widely as possible scholarship produced by Nigerian academics on the topics and armed groups I was interested in (and whose work is cited in this paper). To my mind, reaching out to Nigerian scholars as a first point of contact seemed smart, given that I had learned so much from their research, first as a graduate student and later as an assistant professor. I will never be able to repay the generosity of these scholars and teachers for meeting with me, answering my numerous questions, providing tough and constructive feedback on my research proposals and interview questionnaire, connecting me with potential interviewees, and giving me essential advice for safely navigating Nigeria. I am forever indebted to them, and I hope that they will not think that they have wasted their time when they read my work.

The support I received from local academics and their willingness to vouch for me was crucial in finding people to interview. I relied on snowball sampling to expand my pool of interviewees, asking at the end of the interview whether there was anyone else they thought I
should speak with. With few exceptions, interviewees recommended at least one other person. From there, I reached out to potential interviewees to introduce myself, provide a summary of the project, and why I wished to speak with them. Overwhelmingly, and much to my benefit, people were willing to make time for me; only two people declined.

When contacting potential interviewees, I introduced myself, briefly summarized the project, and explained why I wished to speak with them. Because being a white American cisgender woman granted me privileged access to certain spaces and actors (I discuss my positionality in greater detail below), I emphasized that I did not work for an international organization or foreign government, that I was unable to provide any kind of compensation for an interview, and that there were little to no personal benefits to be had from speaking with me.\footnote{For a broader discussion of research ethics, see Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018.}

**Positionality**

As a white, American, cisgender woman, my foreignness was obvious and shaped numerous aspects of my research. For one, being white granted me significant privilege in gaining access to important people and offices in Nigeria. Overwhelmingly, I was greeted warmly by campus guards and university staff; legislators and their staff in the National Assembly; the staff of civil servants and important bureaucrats; CSOs; and other prominent Nigerians. People generally believed me when I explained who I was and what I was doing in Nigeria, and made time for me. I would like to think that part of my experience stems from Nigerians generally being warm and welcoming, but white privilege also paved my way into the offices of several busy and important people. To be sure, there were many occasions when I was told that I would have to reschedule or that my appointment had been delayed and I would have to wait (sometimes an hour
or more), but I was generally able to schedule appointments for interviews and later successfully complete them.

Being white also shaped the interview dynamics. Early on, it seemed to me that some interviewees were defensive and hesitant to answer questions about political violence in Nigeria. I worried that I was presenting as an arrogant American researcher who had come to study “African problems,” specifically civil war, corruption, and state violence. When I sensed this dynamic, I would try to assure the interviewee that this was not my intention or perspective with comments such as, “I know the US has its own problems with violence as well; there was another school shooting just last week.” I think such comments generally helped to convey my (sincere) frustrations with gun violence in my country of origin as well as a sense of humility, and helped to put interviewees at ease. On a few occasions, however, such comments seemed to annoy the person I was interviewing. I think they found my comments patronizing and would reply with something like, “don’t compare decades of military massacres in the Niger Delta to random shootings in a school.” I would turn red with embarrassment and feel stupid as I fumbled through a reply about how they were absolutely correct (which they are) and that I did not mean to minimize the violence of a military massacre of unarmed civilians. Sometimes I think the interview continued just fine, but on other occasions, I worry that the interviewee came away thinking that I was a silly and arrogant researcher. In these cases, I did my best to express my gratitude for their time and how much I appreciated their views.

In addition to my race, my gender also shaped my research and travels through Nigeria. My sense is the fact that I was a cisgender woman traveling alone often earned me a degree of

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6 Sadly, mass shootings happen often enough in the US that this statement wasn’t too far from the truth. In 2019, many Nigerian friends began to express their concern for my safety given my employment as a college professor in a country with a high frequency of school shootings. I do not have children, but many asked how anyone could handle the stress of raising children in the US given significant gun violence.
respect. Many Nigerians shared with me that they think of their country as a tough place to navigate, and in many ways, it is, especially for outsiders. Several roads in and between cities are in dire need of repair; armed robbery is a major security concern, along with an increase in kidnapping in recent years; the electricity is unreliable; the air quality is generally poor largely thanks to generators that households and businesses rely on for electricity; one must be careful with the water they drink and the fruits and vegetables they consume; the police can be intimidating and sometimes demand bribes at road checkpoints; and one can expect to sit in traffic for hours in Lagos. In addition to these challenges however, I have also been regularly overwhelmed by the generosity of many Nigerians and their willingness to go out of their way to help me and offer their advice. Given these very real challenges though, I think being a cisgender woman researcher along with gender stereotypes about women as the weaker sex and norms and practices that put women in more vulnerable positions in many spaces, sometimes gave me an air of toughness that led some interviewees to take me more seriously than if I had been a cisgender man.

Being a cisgender woman had drawbacks as well, specifically unwanted romantic attention and comments about my appearance. Thankfully, these were rare, and I decided early on that if such comments continued after I made clear that I did not appreciate them, that I would cease contact. I should also add that the few comments I received in Nigeria pale in comparison to the years of vulgar street harassment I have experienced in the US.

All of the Nigerians I interviewed were middle or upper class, many highly educated and several with more resource and assets than myself. I certainly benefitted from this fact. Specifically, it meant that many had their own, air-conditioned office where they were able to meet me, and I was often offered snacks and beverages, which I always said yes to. I would also like to think that because many interviewees carried significant influence and had substantial resources,
they felt relatively free to share their views with an unimportant outsider. In other words, my hope is that the education and income levels of many interviewees put us on more equal footing during the interview (Kvale 2006; MacLean 2013); though my white privilege was clearly at play throughout my travels in Nigeria, I hoped that most interviewees felt comfortable dismissing me and ending the interview if they so wished given their class status.

Reciprocity

Interviews are inherently extractive in that interviewees volunteer their time and insights to the benefit of researchers. To be sure, some interviewees may find sharing their experiences and perspectives beneficial, along with the fact that they have contributed to scholarly knowledge and that their perspectives are valuable. Yet the extractive nature of interviews, combined with colonial legacies, global racial hierarchies, academic institutions that empower white, western researchers with resources and authority while marginalizing African scholars, raise urgent and pressing questions about the ethics of field research, who benefits, and who academic research is meant to serve (Davis 2020; Kvale 2006; MacLean 2013).

Building off the insights of other scholars engaged in qualitative work in violent contexts (Barnes 2021; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Shesterinina 2019; Wood 2006) I have sought to center reciprocity and transparency in my field research.7 Conversations over the years with Nigerian scholars, practitioners, and activists, were important in this endeavor. When I asked how I might return the generosity of those who granted me an interview or supported my field work in other ways, I received a number of responses, including reporting back my findings either in the

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7 The Bukuvu Series, an online exhibition led by the Conflict Research Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Governance in Conflict Network explores some of these questions related to power dynamics, colonial legacies, and knowledge production. https://bukavuseries.com/
form of a presentation or a working paper, or both; organizing conference panels that included Nigerian scholars as presenters; providing feedback on works in progress and grant applications; writing letters of support for fellowships and travel funding; and sharing advice on applying to graduate programs in the US and reviewing draft applications. These responses reflect the needs and interests of the people I was interviewing, who were largely middle or upper class and highly educated, or seeking a graduate degree.

After defending my dissertation in May 2017, I circulated chapters to scholars and practitioners who were researching or working on similar topics. In May 2019 I returned to Nigeria to present a paper based on previous fieldwork at Lagos State University, a campus where I received numerous warm welcomes from several faculty and graduate students, as well as invaluable advice and feedback over the years. I’ve also sought to return the support I received from Nigerian academics over the years by organizing conference panels for the African Studies Association and inviting Nigerian scholars to present, offering feedback on working papers and grant applications, writing letters of support for fellowship applications, and sharing my experience and advice for applying to and navigating Ph.D. programs in the United States.

There were several instances where interviewees weren’t sure how I could repay them for their time, beyond reporting back my research findings. This was particularly the case for practitioners, activists, and journalists, who weren’t very much interested in any resources or connections I could marshal as an academic. These exchanges served as an important and necessary reminder about the extractive nature of interview research, and continuing to work towards increasing reciprocity in field research.
Kenya

I have spent far less time in Kenya (June-July 2019) than in Nigeria. Being an assistant professor with teaching obligations during the academic year meant that I had three months during the summer for fieldwork. I felt it was important to return to Nigeria for at least one month in 2019 to reconnect with key contacts and advance other works in progress. I decided to devote the final six weeks of my summer to field work in Nairobi, before returning to campus for the start of the fall semester in mid-August 2019. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted my plans to return to Kenya in Summer 2020.

I became interested in extending my research to Kenya after reading about government-armed group relations in different countries and thinking about the scope conditions and generalizability of my argument. Scholarship on Mungiki documented dramatic shifts in national incumbent responses, from sustained, lethal repression that resulted in extra-judicial killings and arrests of alleged Mungiki members, to covert support. Although Kenya would not appear in the dissertation, the more I read about Kenyan politics, the more convinced I became that comparing national incumbent responses to armed groups in Kenya and Nigeria would yield important insights. To be sure, there are clear differences between the two countries in terms of their colonial history and legacies (Falola and Heaton 2008; Hornsby 2013), state reach and capacity (Branch and Cheeseman 2006; Joseph 1987); international ties (Hornsby 2013; Watts 2008), and ethnic demography (Falola and Heaton 2008; Hornsby 2013), among others. Yet my read of Mungiki’s history and Kenyan politics was threats to the ruling coalition and the nature of the group’s ties with local communities were key to understanding how and why national incumbents responded to Mungiki.
After landing a tenure-track position in 2018 that came along with a research funds, I traveled to Nairobi, Kenya the following summer. The overarching goals of my trip were similar to my fieldwork in Nigeria: (1) collect reports and scholarship that were unavailable online; (2) have informal conversations with people on the ground to gain a better understanding of armed politics in Kenya; and (3) conduct semi-structured interviews with individuals who were knowledgeable about Mungiki’s history and relations with different government actors. As in Nigeria, I prepared for fieldwork by reading everything I could on Mungiki and reached out to scholars and practitioners based in Nairobi who had studied the group. Although I had a more difficult time securing interviews with Kenyan scholars and practitioners, which I reflect on more below when discussing reciprocity, I was again fortunate in that many were both willing to grant me an interview and recommend other potential interviewees. Given that I wanted to draw comparisons with Nigeria, I did not want to depart too much from the interview protocol I had developed, and so I did not ask for the same extensive feedback that I received in Nigeria. I did my best to gauge through a few informal conversations whether I was asking questions that resonated in the Kenyan context as well as pay careful attention to my first handful of interviews to whether my questions were “landing” well.

During my second week in Nairobi, I attended an event at an international research institute on local security in urban Africa where I met members of a local civil society organization (CSO) in that worked in informal settlements in Nairobi, including those where Mungiki had operated. I explained the purpose of my trip and after the event, followed up to see if they would be willing to meet with me. They agreed, and at our second meeting, I went into further detail about what I

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8 For instance, rather than ask about the history of the IYC and its relationship with local communities and different government actors, I inquired by Mungiki’s history and its ties with local communities and different government actors in Kenya.

9 To protect interviewees’ anonymity, I withhold the name of the international research institute.
hoped to learn about Mungiki and how incumbent responses toward the group changed over time. At the end of this second meeting, they agreed to help me.

As my first points of contact, Kenyan scholars and practitioners as well as the CSO were critical in facilitating my interviews and my understanding of political violence in Kenya. They not only recommended people to interview, but they also provided invaluable advice for navigating Nairobi when it came to the city’s political geography, local norms and practices, and what kinds of activities, and at what times and places, were safe to engage in, and what were not. I am forever indebted to them for their time, insights, and generosity.

Interview Protocol

Prior to traveling to Kenya, I submitted the interview protocol to my university’s IRB and received a letter that my research did not constitute human subjects research.\(^{10}\) Again, this of course does not mean that there are not serious ethical considerations and challenges that responsible researchers must grapple with, including consent, recording and protecting interview data, protocols to protect interviewees’ anonymity and confidentiality, and potential risks to interviewees as well as myself. I discuss each of these in turn.

A recent history of human rights violations, government repression, lethal police violence (especially in informal settlements), political assassinations (Burke 2017), and reoccurring election violence and intimidation, led me to take what I thought to be the utmost caution in handling interview data (Mutahi and Ruteere 2019). There is a vibrant and robust community of activists and CSOs regularly speaking out against political violence and human rights violations; given the intimidation, harassment, and arrests that such actors have endured over the years from the police

\(^{10}\) IRB number withheld during peer review.
and government actors, combined with the fact that my research and interviews asked critical questions about those in power, I decided before my trip that interviewees would remain anonymous. As in Nigeria, each interview was assigned a randomly generated three-digit ID number as well a pseudonym. I never recorded the name or other identifying information in my interview or field notes, and only use general descriptors when discussing the interview data, such as the time and location of the interview and terms such as “academic/scholar,” “CSO member,” or “community leader.” A list of my 23 interviews can be found in Table 2, below.

I also opted to gain oral rather than written consent, worried that having paper documentation was an unnecessary risk for interviewees. The consent protocol was similar to the one I read at the beginning of each interview in Nigeria: the steps I would take to protect their identity, that they could stop the interview at any time and refuse to answer any question, that I would not provide monetary compensation for the interview, and that they could contact me via my Kenyan or US telephone or email with any questions or to request that I destroy my interview notes. I also explained that I would not audio-record the interview and would only take notes (by hand or by computer) with their permission that would be stored on an encrypted hard drive, and that they could ask that I stop taking notes at any time. To date, nobody was had contacted me to request that I destroy the interview notes.

I only proceeded with the interview when I was confident that the interviewee understood the consent protocol. Occasionally, interviewees refused to answer a question, which I interpreted as a positive sign that they felt that they were free to continue or exit the interview at any time. On three occasions at the start of an interview, I sensed that the interviewee felt pressured or uncomfortable, and I ended the interview after about 10 minutes. I felt it was unethical to continue given that the interviewee appeared anxious, pressured, and/or stressed.
The interview protocol largely followed the one I had relied on in Nigeria, replacing key actors and names as well as making minor adjustments to the phrasing where appropriate. I asked about Mungiki’s history, their origins, organizational structure, membership, leadership structure, overarching goals, activities, and their ties with local communities as well as a range of government or government affiliated actors. I also included questions about how different government actors, including the president, his administration, members of the ruling party, opposition parties, the police and the military, responded to Mungiki, and why. The fact that the interviews were semi-structured allowed for the conversation to take unexpected turns and tangents, pursue perspectives I had previously not considered, and ask follow-up questions.

**Sampling Strategy**

My interview population was similar to that of Nigeria, with the exception that I interviewed more people who had far fewer resources than me, notably CSO members. Because I was interested in gathering interview data to (1) corroborate key facts provided by other sources and (2) gain a nuanced understanding into the logic of government-armed group relations and armed politics more broadly in the Kenyan context, I was especially interested in speaking with people with deep knowledge on these topics. This included local scholars, practitioners, human rights lawyers and activists, journalists, CSO members, civil servants, political elites, and former and active-duty members of the police and the military.

During my six weeks stay, I was able to interview each type of actor except for civil servants, political elites, and police and military officers. My hope was to conduct interviews with these actors during a second, longer trip in Summer 2020 but I have been unable to return to Kenya since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, all of my interviews are with actors
that have high levels of political knowledge and are close followers of Kenyan politics, but are outside of the Kenyan government.

On the one hand, this is a blind spot in the paper. I cannot know what information interviews with government actors would reveal. Would they challenge the views I was exposed to in other interviews, illustrating a different logic of national incumbent responses? On the other hand, I am skeptical about how forthcoming civil servants, political elites, and police and military officers would be about colluding with a group such as Mungiki, especially during such a short trip and the fact that I had not yet built rapport or trust with such actors. In light of this blind spot, I provide at least two references to support key claims and developments in the Kenyan case study in the paper.

I began with Kenyan scholars, practitioners, and the CSO that agreed to help me, and relied on a snowball sampling strategy from there. When requesting an interview, I explained my background and summarized the research project, that the interview would take approximately one hour, that I would not provide compensation, and that I was happy to answer any questions they had. I was careful to emphasize that I was a university professor, and did not work for or have any affiliation with a government or development agency. I told potential interviewees that I would be happy to conduct the interview at a location of their choice. Interviews were conducted in the interviewee’s private office or a private room in their office building where we would not be disturbed, or their home or a home of a trusted relative. Generally, people were overwhelmingly willing to speak with me. In addition to the three interviews I ended early, four other people declined to interview or ignored my interview requests.
Positionality

As in Nigeria, my race, gender, country of origin, and class shaped my fieldwork and interview data, in ways similar and different. White privilege continued to play a clear role in terms of gaining access to certain spaces and people, from universities, to think-tanks, and to CSOs. My sense is that many people made time for me in no small part because I was a white academic from the US. At the same time, I also found that more people than in Nigeria turned down or ignored my requests to meet with them. I suspect this is because Kenya is “research saturated” in the sense that it is over-represented in studies of African politics given its population and English is the national language (Briggs 2017). It is also a major development hub and many donor agencies and INGOs have a significant presence in the country. When in Nairobi, I felt that the pool of white western researchers making demands on the time and energy of Kenyans was much bigger compared to Nigeria. During one interview, I was told point blank that they wished western researchers would stop descending on Kenya and find another country to study.

I also encountered greater skepticism and critical questions (and rightly so) about my research in Nairobi. Practitioners asked about the policy implications of my research and how I expected my research findings to benefit Kenyans. Members and affiliates of CSOs I interviewed had similar questions: how was my research going to help them and their families? One interviewee expressed frustration with western researchers and NGOs, specifically that people like him repeatedly give their time and energy to foreign academics, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, and similar organizations, and get nothing in return. How were their lives better off, he wanted to know? These conversations led me to revisit questions about who academia serves, institutions and power, and racial hierarchies, and whether I wanted to remain in the profession. The fundamentally extractive nature of interview research coupled with an array of
global inequities that intersect to empower researchers in wealthy countries and marginalize local scholars and communities in developing countries has also made me question the moral foundations of US academia.

In contrast to Nigeria, I never got the sense that anyone thought I was brave for traveling to Kenya as a cisgender woman. I think this likely has to do with the fact that Kenya is saturated with foreign researchers, development agencies, and INGOs, and white, cisgender women researchers and aid workers are a common sight. I suspect that some interviewees were willing to be vulnerable with me, because of my gender, and share personal stories of trauma and violence. My interview protocol did not ask about personal experiences; however, some interviewees had personal experiences with Mungiki as well as election-related sexual violence, and shared them with me. When this happened, I stopped taking notes and just listened. As a researcher, I did not set out to collect personal stories of trauma and violence, though I knew it was a possibility that people might share such information with me on their own accord (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Shesterinina 2019). I did my best to be as clear as possible with interviewees what kinds of topics I was interested in prior to the interview, and it felt morally problematic to collect data on questions that were deeply personal in nature and beyond the scope of my research questions. As a human being, sitting there and listening seemed to be the least I could do. I offered to take a break or end the interview after the person seemed to be done sharing. Two people opted to take a break, and one person decided to end the interview.

Presenting as a cisgender woman influenced my research in other ways. When working in informal settlements, I suspect my gender (and likely my race as well) sometimes led people to mistake me for someone affiliated with a development agency or an international NGO, and that I had access to organizational resources to help them. During one exchange between a member of a
local CSO I was working with and a resident of Nairobi, the former expressed that I was like “just like Sarah,” referring to a foreign white cisgender woman who had spent several years working with CSOs in informal settlements.\footnote{Sarah is a pseudonym.} I immediately stepped in to clarify that I was not at all like Sarah. While I always sought to be as transparent as possible about who I was, and who I was not, I took extra care to clear about this after this exchange. I got the sense that because of my gender identity, some people originally took me for a foreign aid worker seeking to help them, rather than a researcher. I felt it critical to clarify this not just in the interest of transparency, but also to make clear that there was nothing to be gained from granting me an interview in terms of compensation or resources (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018).

As for my class and coming from a wealthy country, it certainly gave me the resources to live in a safe and comfortable environment. Although I spent a good deal of time visiting different informal settlements under the guidance of the local CSO that was helping me, I did not live in an informal settlement for several reasons. Most importantly, it felt unethical to move into a poor neighborhood where I lacked strong social ties and was uncertain how my presence would influence that community in terms of their security. Would my presence attract unwanted attention from actors or groups, such as the police or gangs, that residents preferred to not interact with? Would it put further pressure on residents to grant me an interview? The fact that I lacked clear answers to these questions and more, as well as that I only had six weeks to spend in Nairobi before returning to my university in the US to teach, meant that it would be highly irresponsible to reside in an informal settlement at that point in time. Instead, I stayed in a middle-class neighborhood in Nairobi. The ability to travel in and out of informal settlements is a clear privilege. To be clear, Nairobi’s informal settlements are teeming with art, community activities, political engagement,
markets, music, and friendship and families. They are also difficult places to live. Informal settlements have significant police violence in the form of harassment, arbitrary arrests, and extra-judicial killings, poor sanitation and lack of clean water, and poor air quality. Being able to enter these places with the help and direction of a local CSO, and then return to a middle-class neighborhood in the evening with clean, running water, security, and other goods, was a glaring privilege that highlighted the global economic injustices that enable my research.

My class and country of origin and the disparity in resources between myself and members and affiliates of CSOs inevitably raised questions about compensation and reciprocity. I was up front that I would not compensate interviewees for their time, though I am honestly torn on this issue like other scholars (Barnes 2021). On the one hand, it seems reasonable and justifiable to compensate interviewees for their time, especially when considering the larger context of western researchers, with significantly more resources, extracting information and knowledge from those with far fewer resources, to advance their careers back home. On the other hand, I did not want anyone to feel pressured to speak with me. I was never asked for money for an interview, and this is perhaps because I was clear about the lack of compensation.

Reciprocity

Throughout my six weeks stay in Kenya, I had several conversations about what reciprocity as a research practice would look like. Academics, policy analysts, practitioners, and CSO members seemed most interested in my conclusions, and asked that I share my findings with them. For Kenyan researchers, I also expressed that I would like to keep in touch and would be eager to help facilitate their own research if they thought I could be useful. Overall, these conversations largely echoed the ones I had with many interviewees in Nigeria.
Many of the members and affiliates of CSOs I interviewed in informal settlements also expressed an interest in seeing my findings, but had additional suggestions for how I could repay them for their time and energy. The informal conversations and encounters I had in informal settlements during my stay in Nairobi left me with the impression that many residents have grown tired of the parade of foreign researchers and INGOs coming through and requesting interviews, including those that ask interviewees to share personal stories about trauma and violence. Again, several expressed that they saw little benefit to speaking with outside aid workers, INGOs, and researchers.

CSO members asked that I participate in a major event that was going to take place during my visit, the Saba Saba March for Our Lives on July 7. The march takes place every year to both commemorate the mass demonstrations for multiparty elections on July 7, 1990, at the Kamukunji grounds in Nairobi as well as to protest police violence, violations of political rights and civil liberties, and environmental injustice, among other issues (Hornsby 2013). The CSO and similar groups clearly viewed this as an important and meaningful event that receives national attention and gives them a platform to articulate their political grievances and express their demands for reforms. In the past, peaceful protesters participating in the march have endured police violence in the form of tear-gas and rubber bullets. CSO members expressed that they would like my support at the march and moreover, they thought that the more white people present, the less likely the police would use violence. I agreed to attend. I sincerely wanted to show my support for people I felt I had developed a friendship with over the past few weeks and their communities, and I also felt I had an obligation given how much they had helped me. I had traveled to Nairobi to study political violence, and it seemed egregiously extractive and cold-hearted to rely on the CSO’s help
to facilitate my research, but refuse to show up when they were fighting against the very political violence I had come to study.

Fortunately, the 2019 march was overwhelmingly peaceful. I was saddened to read about the tear-gassing of peaceful protesters and arrests during the 2020 (Muraya 2020) and 2021 marches (Mutinda 2021). I checked in my contacts in Nairobi over WhatsApp and was glad to hear that they were okay. I asked how I could help from abroad and they recommended donating to the bond and bail fund at the Defenders Coalition, which was working to get those arrested during the marches quickly released. Since leaving Kenya, I have also made regular donations to CSOs based in Nairobi working on human rights issues.

I planned to return to Kenya in Summer 2020, but unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic upended those plans. I hoped to return in summer 2021 but decided that doing so carried unjustifiable risks considering local conditions and government restrictions.12 Since leaving Nairobi in 2019, I have remained in regular contact with CSO members and other people I established a relationship with in 2019, exchanging updates about how we’re doing and what’s going on around us. I’m uncertain when I’ll be able to return to Nairobi, and know that decision will entail grappling with several questions. What steps or safeguards can be put in place to lower the level of risk to an acceptable level when engaging in semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, international and domestic travel, and archival research during the pandemic? What is an acceptable level of risk to begin with? How has the pandemic shifted the political landscape, and what new ethical and security considerations do these changes entail for field research (Grasse et al. 2021)? These are questions I do not have the answer to at the time of

12 I have been regularly following Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) country dashboard (http://country-status.poverty-action.org/) and communicating with my contacts in Nairobi over WhatsApp to gain an understanding of local conditions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.
writing, but they will need to be thoughtfully engaged with, include input from the people and the communities that we want to work with and study, and have implications for reciprocity in our field research.

**Interview Data**

Table 1: Semi-Structured Interviews in Nigeria, 2011-2019

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13 National Union of Road Transport Workers
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Table 2: Semi-Structured Interviews in Kenya, 2019

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<td>July 11, 2019</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Nairobi</td>
<td>CSO member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>646</td>
<td>July 11, 2019</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Nairobi</td>
<td>CSO member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>874</td>
<td>July 12, 2019</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nairobi</td>
<td>CSO member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>933</td>
<td>July 13, 2019</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Nairobi</td>
<td>CSO member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
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<td>July 16, 2019</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Nairobi</td>
<td>Activist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Journalistic Sources

The below articles were collected through All Africa, an online database of thousands of newspapers in African countries from 1996 until the present. Importantly, it includes a wide range of different Nigerian newspapers, including Daily Trust, The Sun, This Day, Vanguard, Tempo, and Premium News. After limiting the results to Nigerian newspapers, I searched for the following phrases:

- Bakassi Boys
- Ijaw Youth Council
- Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force
- Niger Delta Vigilantes
- O’odua People’s Congress

The results turned up thousands of newspaper articles that were invaluable for gaining a deeper understanding of each group’s history and trajectory, their role in local and national politics, and different popular perspectives. After learning about each group’s history, I went back and conducted more limited searches that included the group’s name and “President Obasanjo.” These searches yielded articles that focused on the president’s responses to these groups. Local news media was an important resource in building a timeline for each case study and answering “who, what, where, when, why, and how” questions in each case, as well as corroborating information from other sources.

Nigeria Journalistic Sources


Ogbu, Ahamefula. 2002. “South East, South South Coalition Vows to Produce President.” *This Day*, June 8, 2002.


Appendix D: List of Nongovernmental Organization (NGO), Election Observation, and Think-Tank Reports Cited in the Main Text


International Republican Institute. 


https://www.cartercenter.org/documents/1152.pdf


**References**


Amnesty International. 2020. “Nigeria: Killing of #EndSARS Protesters By the Military Must Be Investigated,” October 21, 2020, 


https://doi.org/10.1177/0010410211036035

https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b60-nigeria-seizing-the-moment-in-the-niger-delta.pdf


