



THE "SARA-SUKA" PHENOMENON AND VOTER APATHY: A STUDY OF BAUCHI METROPOLIS

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Abstract

This study examines the "Sara-Suka" phenomenon and its implications for voter apathy in Bauchi Metropolis, Nigeria. "Sara-Suka," a form of organized youth gang violence characterized by street clashes, political thuggery, intimidation, and criminality, has increasingly become a major threat to democratic participation and electoral credibility in Bauchi State. The study argues that the persistent involvement of youth gangs in electoral violence has significantly eroded public trust in democratic institutions, thereby discouraging political participation and increasing voter apathy among citizens. Drawing on empirical evidence, electoral statistics from the 2023 general elections, and relevant scholarly literature, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques, to analyze the relationship between gang violence and voter disengagement in Bauchi Metropolis. The study is anchored in Marxist Conflict Theory and Social Disorganisation Theory, which provide analytical explanations for the structural inequalities, socio-economic deprivation, and institutional weaknesses that sustain youth violence and political manipulation. Findings reveal that widespread youth unemployment, poverty, political patronage of violent groups, weak law enforcement, and the failure to prosecute electoral offenders are among the major factors fuelling the "Sara-Suka" phenomenon and deepening voter apathy in the study area. The study further finds that fear of violence, intimidation during elections, and declining confidence in the electoral process have discouraged many eligible voters from participating in democratic activities. The paper concludes that the persistence of gang-related electoral violence poses a serious threat to democratic consolidation in Bauchi State and Nigeria's Fourth Republic. It recommends comprehensive security sector reforms, effective enforcement of electoral laws, political accountability, and sustainable youth empowerment programs as critical measures to reduce electoral violence, rebuild public confidence, and enhance citizens' participation in democratic governance.

Keywords: Sara-Suka, Voter Apathy, Electoral Violence, Political Thuggery, Bauchi Metropolis, Youth Gangs, Democratic Governance

1. Introduction

Elections are the cornerstone of democratic governance, serving as the primary institutional mechanism through which citizens exercise sovereignty and hold governments accountable (Nwankwo & Ojo, 2022). However, across sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria, elections have paradoxically become occasions of fear, intimidation, and organized violence rather than civic celebrations. Nigeria's democratic journey since 1999 has been

punctuated by successive electoral cycles marked by dwindling voter participation, widespread malpractice, and the entrenchment of violent non-state actors as decisive electoral agents (Ajayi, 2020; Aleyemi & Atom, 2025).

Nigeria's Fourth Republic, inaugurated in 1999 after decades of military dictatorship, was hailed as a new dawn for democratic governance in Africa's most populous nation. However, nearly three decades later, the republic remains beset by persistent electoral

violence, political thuggery, and declining citizen participation in the democratic process (Yakubu & Ali, 2016). The 2023 general elections, though technologically advanced with the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), revealed a troubling paradox: despite innovations aimed at curbing electoral fraud, voter turnout plummeted to a historic low of 26.7% nationally, with Bauchi State recording a turnout of approximately 32.10%, a significant decline from 43.28% in 2019 (Abagen & Yusuf, 2023).

At the heart of this democratic crisis lies youth gang violence, locally known as "Sara-Suka" in the Bauchi metropolis and across northern Nigeria. The term, derived from Hausa linguistic roots meaning "cutting and stabbing," refers to organized groups of unemployed youth who engage in street violence, extortion, drug trafficking, and, critically, political thuggery during election cycles (Yusuf, 2023). These groups represent a perverse manifestation of civil society, in which disaffected youth, marginalized by economic exclusion and political alienation, become instruments of electoral manipulation in the hands of political elites.

Bauchi State, in Nigeria's North-East geopolitical zone, offers a compelling case study of the nexus between urban gang violence and electoral participation. The state, with approximately 2.75 million registered voters and 5,423 polling units, experienced significant electoral violence during the 2011 elections, prompting the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to postpone the gubernatorial and state assembly elections over security concerns. The 2023 elections, though less violent, still saw post-election clashes between supporters of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in March 2023, alongside persistent urban gang activity that intimidated voters and disrupted campaign activities (INEC, 2024).

The central problem this paper addresses is the causal relationship between the Sara-Suka phenomenon and voter apathy in Bauchi Metropolis. Despite the state's relatively high Permanent Voter Card (PVC) collection rate of 99%, the highest nationwide, actual voter turnout remained disappointing, particularly in

urban centers where gang violence is most prevalent. This disconnect between voter registration and participation suggests that structural violence and insecurity, rather than mere indifference, drive electoral abstention.

The persistence of political thuggery in Northern Nigeria, as documented by Kushee (2008), has created "implications for electoral democracy" that extend beyond immediate physical violence to include psychological disengagement from democratic processes. When citizens perceive elections as violent contests between armed factions rather than as civic rituals of collective decision-making, rational abstention becomes a survival strategy. This phenomenon is particularly acute in Bauchi Metropolis, where urban density, youth unemployment (estimated at 33.3% pre-election), and porous borders with conflict-affected states create fertile ground for gang recruitment and electoral manipulation.

Objectives of the Study

This paper seeks to:

- i. Examine the socio-economic and political origins of the Sara-Suka phenomenon in Bauchi Metropolis.
- ii. Analyze the mechanisms by which gang violence translates into voter apathy and electoral abstention.
- iii. Evaluate the effectiveness of current security and electoral frameworks in reducing violence and enhancing participation.
- iv. Propose policy recommendations for a broader security architecture to address these interconnected challenges.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- i. What are the socio-economic and political factors responsible for the emergence of the Sara-Suka phenomenon in Bauchi Metropolis?
- ii. How does Sara-Suka gang violence influence voter apathy and electoral abstention in Bauchi Metropolis?
- iii. To what extent are existing security and electoral frameworks effective in curbing

gang-related violence and promoting electoral participation in Bauchi Metropolis?

- iv. What policy measures and security strategies can be adopted to address the Sara-Suka phenomenon and enhance democratic participation in Bauchi Metropolis?

This study is particularly significant. Nigeria's law must account for the local dynamics of gang violence and its electoral implications to inform curriculum development, operational training, and community policing strategies. The paper contributes to academic discourse and to existing law by providing evidence-based insights into one of Nigeria's most pressing internal security challenges and by helping to produce "police officers who are professionally competent, morally upright, and socially responsible."

The study focuses on Bauchi Metropolis, the capital of Bauchi State, from 2019 to 2024, with particular emphasis on the 2023 general elections as a critical case study. While recognizing that gang violence and voter apathy are national phenomena, the localized focus enables granular analysis of context-specific factors, including ethnic composition (predominantly the Fulani and Sayawa communities), urban poverty dynamics, and state-level political competition.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Issues

Sara-Suka Phenomenon

The Sara-Suka phenomenon represents a localized variant of urban gang violence that has proliferated across Northern Nigerian cities. While scholarly literature specifically addressing "Sara-Suka" remains limited, the phenomenon shares characteristics with documented street gangs in other Nigerian urban centers (Yakubu & Ali, 2016). In Lagos, "area boys" have been described as youths who "graduate from petty thievery to drug pushing" and are subsequently "used for extortion, organized street violence, political campaigns, and enforcers by operators of nightclubs, restaurants, and brothels." Similarly, in Kano, the "Yandaba" groups have been analyzed as products of "social conditions and criminality" linked to poverty

and political manipulation (Okafor, 2019; Alphonsus, 2015).

The Sara-Suka groups in Bauchi Metropolis operate within this broader typology but exhibit distinct characteristics shaped by local political economy. Unlike the ethnically based militias documented in the Niger Delta or the religiously inflected violence of Boko Haram, Sara-Suka groups are primarily economically motivated, offering their services to the highest political bidder during elections while engaging in independent criminal enterprises during off-cycle periods. This dual functionality makes them particularly challenging for law enforcement, as their political connections often provide immunity from prosecution (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Voter Apathy

Voter apathy refers to the lack of interest or concern among eligible citizens toward electoral processes and democratic participation. In the Nigerian context, apathy must be distinguished from active boycott or voter suppression. While a boycott represents a conscious political strategy, suppression involves external coercion, and apathy often emerges from cumulative experiences of electoral violence, fraud, and unfulfilled promises that render democratic participation seem futile (Abagen & Yusuf, 2023).

The 2023 elections in Bauchi State clearly illustrated this distinction. Despite impressive PVC collection rates suggesting initial enthusiasm, the actual turnout of 32.10%, while above the national average, represented a significant decline from previous cycles. Yiaga Africa observers noted that "urban delays occurred in Bauchi Local Government Area's Dan'iya Haro ward, where polling units... lacked officials and materials by 10:30 a.m., leading to minimal voter presence." Such logistical failures, compounded by fear of violence, transform registered voters into passive non-participants (INEC, 2023).

Electoral Violence and Political Thuggery

Electoral violence encompasses "acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arises in the context of electoral competition." Political thuggery, a specific

manifestation of electoral violence, involves the deployment of armed youth groups to intimidate opponents, disrupt rallies, snatch ballot boxes, and coerce voters. In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, thuggery has evolved from ad hoc mobilization to sophisticated networks with permanent organizational structures (Afolabi & Yusuf, 2022).

The Fund for Peace documented how "the use of armed thugs in 2003 contributed to a trend of increasing violence as disaffected youths whom political parties had armed evolved into well-armed criminals or anti-government militias by the time of the 2007 election". This evolutionary trajectory is evident in Bauchi, where post-election periods often witness spikes in armed robbery and communal violence as thugs, no longer sustained by political patronage, turn to independent criminal enterprises (Democracy in Africa, 2019). ACLED's (2023).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Marxist Theory of Conflict

This study adopts the Marxist theory of conflict as its primary analytical lens. Karl Marx's conceptualization of social classes as arising from relations of production under capitalism provides a robust framework for understanding the Sara-Suka phenomenon. In the Nigerian context, the "bourgeoisie" comprises the political ruling class that controls the state apparatus and economic resources. At the same time, the "proletariat" includes marginalized youth who possess only their labor and in the case of Sara-Suka members, their capacity for violence.

The theory illuminates how political elites exploit class contradictions by mobilizing unemployed youth as instruments of electoral violence. As Ainoko et al. (2024) observe, "the contest for the post of the president of the country is viewed as a do-or-die affair and a zero-sum game that must be won by all means." This zero-sum mentality drives politicians to recruit from the reservoir of desperate youth, offering immediate economic rewards (cash, drugs, weapons) in exchange for violent services that undermine democratic legitimacy.

The Marxist framework also explains voter apathy as a rational response to perceived futility. When citizens recognize that electoral outcomes are determined by violent coercion rather than popular will, participation becomes an irrational investment of time and personal security. The "double standard of the Nigerian political ruling class, whose key interest is to control the commonwealth to enhance their economic interest without necessarily pursuing the collective interest of all," creates a legitimacy crisis that manifests as electoral abstention.

Social Disorganization Theory

Complementing the Marxist framework, social disorganization theory, originating from the Chicago School of criminology, helps explain why Bauchi Metropolis specifically experiences concentrated gang violence. This theory posits that crime and delinquency emerge in communities characterized by poverty, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, and family disruption. Bauchi Metropolis exhibits these characteristics: rapid urbanization without corresponding economic opportunities, an influx of internally displaced persons from neighboring conflict zones, and weakening traditional social controls as extended family structures fragment under economic pressure.

2.3 Empirical Review

Gang Violence in Nigerian Urban Spaces

Omitoogun (1994) and Adisa (1994) provided foundational analyses of Lagos "area boys," establishing the template for understanding Nigerian street gangs as products of economic marginalization and political manipulation. More recent scholarship has expanded this analysis to Northern cities. Salaam (2011) examined "Yandaba on the Streets of Kano," identifying "social conditions and criminality" as interconnected phenomena. Aluko et al. (2015) conducted a comprehensive study of "Gang Violence in Nigeria: A Study of the Ilorin Species," finding that gang activities serve multiple functions, including economic survival, political enforcement, and social identity formation.

The Berkeley Geography Department's analysis of "Youth in Urban Violence in Nigeria" emphasized that "the genesis of violence is multi-causal", requiring analysis through "psychological, social and anthropological prisms". This multi-causality is evident in Bauchi, where Sara-Suka recruitment draws from Almajiri Qur'anic students, unemployed graduates, and street children demographics that share economic exclusion but differ in educational background and ideological orientation.

Electoral Violence and Democratic Governance

The scholarly consensus on electoral violence in Nigeria's Fourth Republic is overwhelmingly critical. Harry and Kalagbor (2021) found that "the pervasive violence at different elections has greatly discredited and emasculated democratic governance in the country". Igwe and Amadi (2021) explored how "democracy and political violence in Nigeria since multi-party politics in 1999" have undermined democratic consolidation.

Specific to voter participation, Iheanacho (2015) established that "electoral violence discourages the election of credible leaders and people's participation in the electoral process, thereby militating against democratic stability". This finding is corroborated by Afrobarometer data showing that Nigerians who experience or witness political violence are significantly less likely to vote in subsequent elections. The 2023 Bauchi gubernatorial election, which saw incumbent Governor Bala Mohammed retain power with 50.78% of the vote amid a 38.50% turnout, exemplifies this dynamic, mobilizing core supporters rather than securing a broad democratic mandate.

Security Sector Responses

Existing literature on security responses to electoral violence emphasizes institutional limitations. Aluko (2016a) examined "policing election and electoral violence in developing democracies," finding that security agencies often lack capacity, neutrality, or political will to prevent violence effectively. The Nigerian Police, despite numerical superiority (approximately 371,000 personnel nationwide), faces challenges including inadequate training in crowd control, politicization of command structures, and

equipment deficits that render them ineffective against armed political thugs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs an exploratory research design utilizing content analysis of publicly available archival documents, electoral data, and scholarly literature. The methodology aligns with established approaches in electoral violence research, as demonstrated by Ainoko et al. (2024) and others who have analyzed secondary data to generate insights into Nigerian democratic governance.

3.2 Data and Sources

The data sources include: INEC official reports on the 2023 general elections, including voter turnout statistics and incident reports, Yiaga Africa election observation reports documenting polling unit-level dynamics in Bauchi State, International observer mission reports (EU EOM, IRI/NDI) providing comparative assessments, Academic journals and conference papers on Nigerian electoral violence and urban gangs, as well as newspaper archives, human rights reports, and government security briefings.

3.3 Analytical Framework

Data analysis proceeds through thematic coding, identifying recurrent patterns in gang activities, electoral incidents, and voter behavior. Quantitative data on voter turnout, PVC collection rates, and violent incidents are correlated to establish statistical relationships. Qualitative data from observer reports and scholarly case studies provide contextual depth.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Sara-Suka Phenomenon: Origins and Manifestations

Historical Genesis

The Sara-Suka phenomenon in Bauchi Metropolis cannot be understood in isolation from broader transformations in the Northern Nigerian political economy. The collapse of traditional authority structures, accelerated by colonial disruption and post-

independence modernization, eroded the institutional mechanisms that previously absorbed unemployed youth. The Almajiri system, traditional Qur'anic education, once provided socialization and subsistence for millions of Northern youths. Still, economic decline has transformed it into a pathway to street life rather than to spiritual or economic advancement.

The specific emergence of Sara-Suka groups in Bauchi dates to the early 2000s, coinciding with the return to democratic governance and the consequent intensification of political competition. Unlike the ethnically based OPC or religiously motivated Boko Haram, Sara-Suka groups formed around economic survival and territorial control of urban spaces. Their initial activities, petty theft, extortion of market traders, and protection rackets, evolved into political violence as politicians recognized their utility for electoral mobilization.

Organizational Structure and Recruitment

Sara-Suka groups display fluid hierarchical structures that adapt to both criminal and political functions. At the apex are "commanders," typically older youth (ages 25-35) with established criminal records and political connections. Below them are "lieutenants" who manage territorial cells across the Bauchi Metropolis's neighborhoods. The rank-and-file comprises teenagers and young adults recruited from Almajiri schools, unemployed graduates, and street children.

Recruitment follows identifiable patterns. Economic desperation remains the primary motivator, with members reporting that gang participation provides income where legitimate employment is unavailable. However, social identity and protection also feature prominently among youth in violent neighborhoods who join gangs for physical security against rival groups. Political recruitment intensifies during election cycles, when politicians offer cash payments (ranging from ₦5,000 to ₦50,000, depending on the level of violence required), weapons, and promises of post-election patronage appointments.

Criminal and Political Activities

The dual functionality of Sara-Suka groups manifests in distinct activity patterns. During the criminal phase (Non-Election Periods), these include street robbery, such as phone snatchers and female bag snatchers; disrupting community peace; carjacking, particularly targeting government officials and business people; extortion of shop owners and market vendors in controlled territories; drug distribution networks, primarily cannabis and codeine-based cough syrups; and inter-gang territorial warfare, often resulting in public casualties. However, during the political phase in election periods, activities include disrupting opposition rallies and campaign activities; intimidating voters in polling units, particularly in contested neighborhoods; snatching ballot boxes and destroying voting materials; protecting "vote banks" for sponsoring politicians by coercing opposition supporters; and post-election celebratory violence targeting supporters of defeated opponents.

The 2023 elections in Bauchi witnessed these patterns, though technological innovations (BVAS) reduced opportunities for ballot-box snatching. Instead, gangs focused on voter intimidation at polling units and on post-election clashes between party supporters.

The Political Economy of Patronage

The persistence of Sara-Suka violence reflects a political economy of patronage that transcends individual election cycles. Politicians who utilize thugs during campaigns face structural incentives to maintain these relationships between elections, creating permanent violent constituencies. As documented in the Niger Delta amnesty experience, attempts to disarm and demobilize politically connected armed groups often fail because the underlying economic relationships remain intact.

In Bauchi, this dynamic is evident in the limited prosecution of electoral offenders. Despite documented violence during the 2011, 2019, and 2023 elections, no prominent politician has been convicted of thuggery-related offences. This impunity reinforces the perceived rationality of violence as an electoral strategy while undermining public confidence in legal institutions.

4.2 Voter Apathy: Manifestations and Mechanisms

Quantitative Dimensions

The decline in voter participation in Bauchi State presents a compelling empirical puzzle. With 99% PVC collection, the highest nationwide, the state showed strong initial enthusiasm for electoral participation. However, turnout was only 32.10% in the presidential election and 38.50% in the gubernatorial contest. This 60+ percentage-point gap between registration and participation cannot be explained solely by logistical factors.

Comparative analysis reveals urban-rural disparities. Rural polling units in Alkali, Bogoro, and Toro recorded "enthusiastic early participation," with voters queuing by 7:00 a.m. In contrast, the Bauchi Metropolis experienced "delays where polling units lacked officials and materials by 10:30 a.m., leading to minimal voter presence." While logistical failures contributed, the concentration of Sara-Suka activities in urban centers suggests that violence and intimidation disproportionately suppressed urban turnout.

Mechanisms of Apathy Production

The transformation of violence into apathy operates through multiple mechanisms. Direct intimidation, such as physical threats at polling units, deters participation. The EU EOM documented post-election clashes in Bauchi on March 8, 2023, between APC and PDP supporters, creating an atmosphere in which potential voters rationally calculate that the risks of participation outweigh the potential benefits. Anticipatory fear persists even in the absence of actual violence, as the reputation of Sara-Suka groups creates anxiety. Voters who witnessed or heard of violence during previous elections develop conditioned avoidance responses. This mechanism is particularly potent among women and elderly voters, who face heightened vulnerability to physical intimidation.

Hence, learned helplessness, cultivated by repeated experiences of electoral fraud and violence regardless of participation, breeds psychological helplessness. When citizens observe that elections are determined by rigging and thuggery rather than by vote counts, they

conclude that participation is futile. This "rational apathy" is an adaptive response to perceived institutional irrelevance. Social learning and community narratives about electoral violence are transmitted across generations. Parents who experienced the 2011 post-election violence in Bauchi and Kaduna States, where INEC postponed elections due to security concerns, discourage youth participation, creating intergenerational patterns of disengagement.

The Gender Dimension

Voter apathy shows significant gender variation. Women in the Bauchi metropolis face compounded vulnerabilities: cultural restrictions on public movement, heightened risk of sexual violence during electoral unrest, and economic dependence on male household heads who may prohibit participation. The 2023 elections saw "diverse groups including women and the elderly" participating in some rural areas, but urban women likely faced greater constraints due to Sara-Suka's presence in residential neighborhoods.

Youth Apathy Paradox

Perhaps the most troubling dimension is youth apathy among the very demographic from which Sara-Suka groups recruit. While young Nigerians (18-35 years) constitute the majority of the voting-age population, their turnout lags behind that of older cohorts. This paradox, in which youth are both perpetrators of electoral violence and abstainers from democratic participation, reflects deep alienation from institutional politics. For Sara-Suka members, elections are economic opportunities through political thuggery rather than civic rituals. For non-gang youth, the association of elections with violence perpetrated by their peers reinforces disengagement.

4.3 The Security-Apathy Nexus: Analysis and Synthesis

Institutional Failure and Legitimacy Crisis

The state's institutional capacity mediates the relationship between Sara-Suka violence and voter apathy. When security agencies fail to prevent electoral violence or to prosecute perpetrators, citizens infer that the state either cannot or will not protect

democratic rights. This inference transforms individual voting decisions into collective judgments about regime legitimacy.

The Nigerian Police face particular challenges in addressing politically connected gangs. As Aluko (2016a) notes, policing electoral violence in developing democracies requires "neutrality, capacity, and political will," qualities that are often compromised by partisan command influence. In Bauchi, police deployments during elections are substantial but often reactive rather than preventive. The presence of "security personnel, including police and Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps members, contributing to a generally peaceful atmosphere" in rural areas contrasts with urban scenarios where gangs operate with apparent impunity.

The Technology-Violence Paradox

The 2023 elections introduced BVAS technology to reduce fraud and enhance credibility. While successful in preventing ballot stuffing, BVAS could not address the extra-institutional violence that occurs before voters reach polling units. Sara-Suka groups shifted tactics from ballot box snatching (now technologically difficult) to voter intimidation and candidate suppression through rally disruption. This shift illustrates the "hydra effect" of security interventions, in which suppressing one manifestation of violence leads to others emerging.

Economic Structural Violence

Beneath the immediate violence lies structural economic violence that fuels both gang recruitment and voter apathy. Bauchi State's unemployment rate of 33.3% creates a reservoir of desperate youth susceptible to gang recruitment and political manipulation. Simultaneously, economic precarity renders democratic participation a luxury that struggling citizens cannot afford. Time spent queuing at polling units represents lost income, while the risk of violence threatens livelihoods.

The Marxist framework illuminates this structural dimension. Political elites who control economic resources through state patronage have a "key interest in controlling the commonwealth to enhance their

economic interests without necessarily pursuing the collective interest of all." The Sara-Suka phenomenon thus serves dual functions for the ruling class: as instruments of electoral violence and as safety valves that channel youth discontent away from organized political resistance into criminalized, containable forms.

Comparative Synthesis

Comparing Bauchi with other Northern states reveals contextual differences. Adamawa State's "Yan Shilla" gangs have faced a more aggressive government response, including gubernatorial warnings and security crackdowns. Kano's Yandaba groups have deeper historical roots in traditional authority structures, making them more susceptible to community-based interventions. Bauchi's Sara-Suka groups, which emerged more recently amid rapid urbanization and political competition, combine the organizational fluidity of Lagos-area boys with the political connectivity of Northern thuggery networks.

4.4 Policy Implications and Recommendations

Gang Dynamics and Electoral Violence: Cadets need training to identify the organizational structures, recruitment methods, and tactical changes of groups like Sara-Suka. This involves understanding the political economy behind thuggery and how gangs shift between criminal activities and political roles.

Community Intelligence Networks: Successful prevention depends on intelligence-led policing that infiltrates gang networks ahead of elections. Training should focus on community engagement, managing confidential informants, and digital intelligence collection.

Electoral Security Operations: Provide specialized training for election deployments, covering crowd psychology, de-escalation techniques, and coordination with INEC and civil society observers. The academy should also develop simulation exercises based on scenarios in the Bauchi metropolis.

Human Rights and Neutrality: Given the politicization of security agencies, cadets need comprehensive training in constitutional neutrality, human rights standards, and ethical decision-making under political pressure.

For the Nigerian Police Force

Preventive Deployment: Rather than responding reactively to violence, the police should establish permanent gang task forces in metropolitan areas with documented Sara-Suka presence. These units should operate independently of political command influence. With prosecutorial support, the police must build the evidentiary capacity to prosecute political sponsors of thuggery. This requires financial investigation capabilities to trace payments from politicians to gang leaders, as well as witness protection programs to secure testimony. Community policing to restore voter confidence requires a visible, continuous police presence in communities rather than election-period surge deployments. Community policing forums should include women's groups, religious leaders, and youth organizations to rebuild trust.

For INEC and Electoral Management

Security Risk Mapping: INEC should collaborate with security agencies to develop detailed risk assessments for each polling unit, enabling targeted security deployments. High-risk urban units in the Bauchi metropolis require enhanced protection. To reduce exposure to intimidation, INEC should pilot alternative voting arrangements, including early voting for vulnerable groups and the provision of secure "safe houses" for voters in high-risk areas. Voter education, including campaigns, must address the specific fears generated by Sara-Suka violence, emphasizing legal protections and reporting mechanisms. Messages should be delivered through trusted community channels rather than solely through mass media.

For Political Actors and Civil Society

Peace Accords with Enforcement. Although gubernatorial peace accords were signed in Bauchi before the 2023 elections, enforcement mechanisms remain weak. Accords should include specific sanctions for thuggery, including disqualification of candidates and criminal prosecution of sponsors. Economic alternatives for youth, addressing the root causes of gang recruitment, require large-scale youth employment programs. Civil society should advocate for targeted interventions in the Bauchi metropolis, including vocational training, microenterprise support,

and educational scholarships. Civil society observers should monitor gang-related intimidation, documenting incidents for legal prosecution and public accountability. The Yiaga Africa model of parallel vote tabulation should be expanded to include violence monitoring.

Legislative and Institutional Reforms

The Electoral Offences Commission, as required by law in Nigeria, should investigate and prosecute electoral violence independently of the police and INEC. This body should have subpoena powers, investigative authority over financial matters, and a protected budgetary status. Arms control is needed to prevent the proliferation of small arms, which fuels gang violence. This requires enhanced border control, weapons tracing, and mandatory sentencing for illegal possession. The Small Arms Survey has documented the relationship between political thuggery and the availability of weapons in Nigeria. Political finance reform, as recommended by Ainoko et al. (2024), could reduce the financial attractiveness of political office and diminish incentives for violent electoral competition. This requires campaign finance regulation, enforcement of asset declarations, and public funding of political parties.

5. Conclusion

The Sara-Suka phenomenon and voter apathy in Bauchi Metropolis are interconnected manifestations of Nigeria's democratic crisis. This study has demonstrated that youth gang violence, politically instrumentalized during elections, systematically erodes citizens' confidence and participation in democratic processes. The 2023 elections, despite technological innovations, revealed that physical insecurity remains the primary determinant of electoral abstention in urban centers where gangs operate with impunity.

The Marxist theory of conflict offers essential insights into this dynamic, revealing how political elites exploit economic marginalization to recruit violent agents while alienating the broader citizenry from democratic participation. The social disorganization of Bauchi Metropolis, characterized by rapid urbanization, youth unemployment, and weakening traditional controls,

creates the ecological conditions for gang proliferation.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond traditional law-enforcement training towards comprehensive education on gang dynamics, community intelligence, electoral security, and human rights. Security operatives must possess the analytical capacity to understand the political economy of violence and the ethical fortitude to resist partisan pressures.

Ultimately, restoring democratic participation in Bauchi and Nigeria requires simultaneous attention to both immediate security challenges and the underlying

structural conditions. Without effective prosecution of electoral offenders, technological innovations will remain vulnerable to violent subversion. Without economic opportunities for marginalised youth, gang recruitment will persist despite security crackdowns. Moreover, without institutional reforms that reduce the zero-sum character of Nigerian politics, the incentives for violent electoral competition will remain intact.

The path forward requires coordinated action across security, electoral, economic, and political domains, recognizing the Sara-Suka phenomenon not merely as a criminal problem but as a symptom of democratic dysfunction that threatens the very foundations of Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

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