Academic Journal of Current Research
Vol.13, No. 01; January-2026;
ISSN (2837-3707);
p –ISSN 3244 –5621
Impact factor: 6.37

RIVERS STATE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND SUSTAINABLE PEACE: STATE OF EMERGENCY AS A CASE STUDY.

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18509223

Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between the political system of Rivers State (Nigeria) and prospects for sustainable peace, using the March 18, 2025 state of emergency declaration as a focused case study. Drawing on primary news reports, academic literature on Niger Delta politics, human-rights documentation, and governance theory, the study situates the 2025 federal intervention within the longer history of political contestation, resource-related violence, and institutional fragility in Rivers State. It asks: (1) What structural features of Rivers State's political system predispose it to instability? (2) How did the 2025 state of emergency unfold, what were its stated justifications and immediate effects, and how did it affect governance and peace? (3) What are the implications of such federal emergency interventions for sustainable peace-building in oil-rich subnational contexts? The paper argues that while emergency measures can produce short-term order, they risk undermining democratic legitimacy, local accountability, and long-term conflict transformation unless paired with inclusive political reforms and community-centered peacebuilding. Recommendations include legal and institutional safeguards for emergency powers, mechanisms to restore and strengthen local democratic institutions after emergencies, and targeted socio-economic and environmental remediation programs for affected communities.

Keywords: Rivers State; Niger Delta; state of emergency; sustainable peace; governance; resource conflict; federal intervention; Nigeria

Introduction

Rivers State, located in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta, has long been shaped by the interaction of natural resource wealth, contested political authority, and recurring insecurity (Watts, 2008). Political competition in the state is closely tied to access to oil revenues and state patronage, resulting in high-stakes struggles for power, elite factionalism, and periodic violence (Ikelegbe, 2013). These dynamics have weakened governance institutions and contributed to persistent instability.

Federal intervention through emergency powers has historically been used in Nigeria during moments of acute political or security crisis. However, such interventions often generate controversy due to their implications for federalism, democratic accountability, and local autonomy (Suberu, 2001). On 18 March 2025, the President of Nigeria declared a state of emergency in Rivers State, suspending elected officials and appointing a sole administrator. The action was justified on grounds of escalating attacks on oil infrastructure and a prolonged political stalemate between the executive and the legislature (Reuters, 2025; Financial Times, 2025). This paper uses the 2025 emergency to interrogate the relationship between centralized security interventions and sustainable peace in Rivers State.

This paper develops an analytical account that links Rivers State's political system (its institutions, incentives, and political economy) to patterns of instability, then dissects the 2025 emergency, and finally

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assesses the intervention's implications for sustainable peace. It combines desk-based empirical material from journalistic and policy reports with theoretical literatures on conflict, resource politics, governance, and emergency powers.

Literature review

Resource conflicts and the political economy of peace

Scholars of natural-resource conflict emphasize how mineral rents (especially oil) create rentier dynamics that shape incentives for violence and elite capture. Resource wealth can distort state capacity, generate predatory competition among elites, and incentivize non-state armed groups to target infrastructure for rents or political leverage. The Niger Delta has been a classic case of these dynamics: sustained environmental degradation, local grievances over revenues and livelihoods, and violent contestation over access to resource flows.

Subnational governance and federal intervention

Scholars have consistently linked natural resource abundance, particularly oil, with governance challenges and conflict in developing states (Auty, 2001; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). In rentier economies, political office becomes a primary route to accessing resource rents, thereby intensifying elite competition and incentivizing violence (Watts, 2008). The Niger Delta exemplifies this pattern, where environmental degradation, economic marginalization, and inequitable revenue distribution have fueled militancy and communal unrest (Human Rights Watch, 2000; Ikelegbe, 2013).

The tension between subnational autonomy and federal authority is central to federal polities confronting localized crises. Emergency powers enshrined in many constitutions are designed for extraordinary circumstances, but their use is politically fraught. Literature highlights risks: erosion of democratic accountability, politicization of security forces, and the potential for emergency measures to be used for partisan advantage. Conversely, when used sparingly and transparently, interventions can stabilize critical situations. Comparative studies stress the importance of post-emergency restoration of democratic governance and reparative measures to sustain peace (Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), 2025).

Political institutions, patronage, and violence in Rivers State

Research on Rivers State locates recurrent instability in the interaction of patron-client networks, party godfatherism, and the high stakes of control over oil rent distribution. Multiple studies document how contested party nominations, intra-party schisms, and clientelist mobilization produce local leaders' incentives to use private coercion or proxies to influence outcomes. The Ogoni crisis of the 1990s and subsequent shifts in the center of violence to Rivers State in the 2000s illustrate that both state repression and militancy have historical roots.

Theory and analytical framework

This paper uses a political-economy lens combined with conflict transformation theory.

1. Political-economy of rentier states (subnational variant). The presence of high resource rents alters incentives at the subnational level: political office becomes a vehicle for access to rents, increasing stakes of office and likelihood of violent contestation. Institutions that mediate resource distribution (state executive, legislature, local government, and informal brokers) are critical variables.
2. Legitimacy and procedural justice. Sustainable peace depends on the perceived legitimacy of institutions; heavy-handed interventions that sideline local democratic actors risk undermining legitimacy unless they are transparently justified and followed by inclusive reconciliation and restoration processes.
3. Security–development synergy. Security interventions that ignore socio-economic and environmental grievances (water/land contamination, youth unemployment) fail to address root causes of conflict; sustainable peace requires parallel developmental and environmental remediation programs.

The paper examines the 2025 emergency against these theoretical frames: immediate security stabilization vs. longer-term legitimacy and structural grievances.

Methodology

This is a qualitative, single case study with process tracing. Data sources include contemporaneous news reporting (Reuters, AP, Financial Times), human rights

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and historical accounts (Human Rights Watch), official documents (Rivers State government website), and scholarly analyses of Niger Delta politics. The study traces events leading to the emergency, public rationale and actions taken by federal authorities, reactions by civil society and legal institutions, and short-term outcomes. Where possible, factual claims about the emergency are supported by primary reporting. The method emphasizes narrative explanation to evaluate causal mechanisms between emergency intervention and prospects for peace.

Rivers State political system: structure and dynamics
Institutional architecture
Rivers State operates a tripartite system executive (Governor and cabinet of commissioners), unicameral House of Assembly (32 members), and state judiciary. Elections follow Nigeria's federal rules, and the state contributes representatives to the national legislature. The governor wields significant patronage power including appointments to parastatals, ministries, and contracts levers relevant to local elites (Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), 2025).

Political culture and elite competition
Political competition in Rivers State is highly personalized and often mediated by powerful "godfathers," business interests, and control over oil sector spillovers. Party loyalties can be fluid; intra-party battles frequently escalate into legislative standoffs or public crises. These dynamics increase the fragility of democratic governance by incentivizing extra-constitutional responses (blockades, selective legislation, or threats of impeachment) when actors perceive exclusion from resource rents.

Security environment and non-state actors
Rivers State's geography rivers, creeks, and oil installations facilitates clandestine sabotage and mobilization. Historically, armed groups and community militias in the Niger Delta have targeted oil infrastructure to press for compensation or political demands; this pattern has at times migrated into Rivers State proper, increasing the stakes of security management. Prior waves of violence in the mid-2000s shifted from Warri/Delta to Port Harcourt and environs.

Source: Academic sources on Rivers State political economy and godfatherism (2024).

The 2025 state of emergency: chronology and official rationale
Triggering events
In early 2025 a wave of attacks and unexplained fires on pipelines and oil infrastructure in the Niger Delta, including incidents linked to the Trans-Niger pipeline, prompted national concern. Government statements argued that persistent pipeline vandalism, coupled with political paralysis in Rivers State (a stalemate between the governor and state legislature with impeachment threats), created an environment where federal action was needed to restore order. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu declared a state of emergency in Rivers State on 18 March 2025, suspending elected state officials and appointing a retired vice-admiral as administrator for an initial six-month period.

Constitutional and legal mechanism
The Nigerian constitution permits the president to declare a state of emergency under extraordinary circumstances; such proclamations must be laid before the National Assembly for approval and are time-limited. The 2025 proclamation followed these procedures formally, but its practical effect temporary removal of elected executives generated intense legal and normative debate about the proper scope of federal power and the independence of subnational institutions. Legal critics emphasized that emergency rule should not become a mechanism to dissolve elected government or to short-circuit constitutional processes.

Reactions and domestic debate
The emergency drew mixed reactions. Supporters largely in federal circles and among security proponents argued it was necessary to stop the sabotage that threatened national oil revenues and to prevent further breakdown. Opponents, including parts of the Nigerian Bar Association, civil society groups, and some national figures, criticized the suspension of elected officials as unconstitutional and warned of setting a dangerous precedent for federal overreach. Analysts cautioned that heavy security-first responses often neglect root causes and can inflame grievances, particularly when local

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populations perceive selective enforcement or politicized motives.
Source: Financial Times (2025).

Immediate effects of the emergency (security, governance, and civic space)

Security posture and operations

Following the declaration, federal security assets were mobilized to secure pipelines and oil facilities, and a retired navy vice-admiral was installed as administrator. Media reporting indicated a reduction in headline pipeline attacks in some weeks after the intervention, and the federal government reported operational successes in preventing further large-scale disruptions to exports. However, precise attribution and the durability of these gains were contested; insurgent groups historically adapt tactics or shift targeting.

Governance and public administration

Suspension of elected state executives resulted in a temporary reconfiguration of administrative authority. While the stated objective was stabilization, bureaucratic continuity faced stress: political appointees loyal to suspended officials were sidelined; legislative oversight functions were on hold; and decision-making flowed through the caretaker administrator aligned with federal priorities. This arrangement raised concerns about accountability, transparency, and the representation of local interests in policy decisions during the emergency.

Civic and legal responses

Civil society and legal bodies, including the Nigerian Bar Association, publicly challenged the constitutionality and necessity of some components of the emergency. Courts remained formally unaffected in structure, but access to justice and judicial review faced practical pressures as the political stakes were high and contested. The public debate illuminated the classic trade-off between swift security measures and protection of democratic norms.

Assessing the emergency's impact on sustainable peace

To evaluate the emergency's implications for sustainable peace, we consider three criteria: (A) immediate security stabilization; (B) preservation or erosion of institutional legitimacy; and (C) attention to structural grievances and development needs.

Immediate security stabilization (short term)

The evidence suggests the emergency contributed to short-term containment of large-scale attacks on major pipelines through heightened security presence and disruption of sabotage networks. However, historical patterns in the Niger Delta indicate that tactical suppression without political accommodation often yields relapse or displacement of violence. Thus, while short-term stability is plausible, it is insufficient alone for durable peace (The Associated Press, 2025).

Institutional legitimacy and democratic accountability (medium term)

Suspending democratically elected officials undercuts accountability mechanisms that anchor legitimacy. Even when emergencies are legally warranted, their misuse or perceived political motivation can deepen mistrust in institutions. The Nigerian Bar Association's critique reflects this concern. The pathway from temporary executive suspension back to legitimate, locally-owned governance is critical: if restoration is rapid, transparent, and accompanied by remedial processes, damage can be limited; if not, the intervention risks institutional erosion.

Structural grievances, socio-economic conditions and environmental remediation (long term)

Sustainable peace in Rivers State necessarily requires addressing environmental degradation (oil spillages, pollution), economic marginalization, youth exclusion, and inequitable revenue sharing. Emergency security measures do not automatically remediate these drivers. In the Niger Delta's history, absence of robust post-conflict development and remediation has contributed to cyclical unrest. Unless emergency rule is paired with commitments to environmental cleanup, inclusive development, and meaningful community engagement, it risks being a temporary fix that leaves root causes intact (Financial Times (2025).

Discussion: trade-offs and pathways to sustainable peace

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Trade-offs inherent in emergency interventions

Emergency measures can provide breathing space to reassert a minimum level of public order, protect critical national infrastructure, and prevent state collapse in a crisis. Yet they entail trade-offs: curtailed local autonomy, weakened legislative oversight, and potential misuse for partisan ends. In resource-rich subnational contexts, these trade-offs are acute because the federal center has strong incentives to secure revenue streams creating suspicion among local actors about the motives for intervention.

Conditions under which emergencies can support peace

For emergency interventions to contribute to sustainable peace, the following conditions should be met:

1. Strict adherence to legal procedure and transparency. Declarations and their justification must be public, narrowly tailored, time-limited, and subject to legislative and judicial oversight.
2. Clear benchmarks for restoration of democratic governance. A roadmap with specific criteria and timelines for handing authority back to elected institutions reduces uncertainty and signals commitment to democracy.
3. Parallel political dialogue and inclusion. Security operations should be accompanied by mediated dialogues with aggrieved political actors, community leaders, and civil society to address governance disputes.
4. Integrated security-development programs. Investment in environmental remediation, livelihood programs, youth employment, and revenue-sharing reforms to remove core grievances.

Source: Reuters (2025).

Risks of neglecting legitimacy and reparative measures

If emergency rule focuses narrowly on repression, or if it becomes protracted without addressing root causes, it risks delegitimizing the state in the eyes of local communities—producing long-term instability and undermining investment and development outcomes.

Conclusion

The Rivers State case illustrates the tension between immediate security imperatives and the requirements of sustainable peace. Although the 2025 state of emergency may have reduced violence in the short term, its long-term effectiveness depends on restoring democratic governance, strengthening institutions, and addressing underlying socio-economic and environmental grievances (CDD, 2025; Watts, 2008). Emergency rule should therefore remain a temporary and carefully regulated measure within a broader peacebuilding strategy. Federal interventions may sometimes be necessary to prevent anarchy; however, they should be treated as a last resort, strictly delimited in time and scope, and embedded within comprehensive strategies for restorative governance and community-driven development. Only by combining security, justice, environmental remediation, and inclusive political reforms can Rivers State move toward durable and equitable peace.

Recommendations

Drawing on the analysis above, the paper proposes the following practical recommendations for policymakers, civil society, and international partners seeking sustainable peace in Rivers State and similar contexts:

- Codify narrow triggers and proportionality principles so emergencies are only used for genuine, verifiable threats to public safety or order.
- Mandate legislative review and periodic renewal with clear public reporting requirements.
- Enshrine judicial oversight to allow timely challenge of emergency measures.
- Publish a public roadmap with benchmarks for returning authority to elected institutions, including a timetable and measurable conditions.
- Create temporary oversight bodies (including civil society) to monitor the administrator's actions during emergencies to safeguard transparency.
- Prioritize protection of civilians and avoid tactics that disproportionately harm non-combatant communities.
- Invest in clean-up and environmental remediation programs for oil-affected communities, financed jointly by federal, state, and oil-industry stakeholders.
- Strengthen internal party democracy and candidate selection processes to reduce the influence of informal godfathers.

- Enhance transparency in public procurement and state contracting to cut channels of patronage.

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