



LEARNING FOR LIFE, OR LEARNING TO FIGHT?

Analysing the Dynamics of Organized Student Violence at West African Universities

Policy Analysis

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Executive Summary

Student activism has long played a pivotal role in shaping political landscapes across Africa, often driving democratic change. However, alongside traditions of peaceful protest, many universities have become highly militarized, with students resorting to violence to express collective grievances. This report examines the dynamics, scope, and underlying causes of organized student violence at public universities in West Africa from 2000 to 2022. The findings reveal significant geographical variation, with certain countries (e.g. Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire) and universities (e.g. Lagos State University, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and University of Liberia) being notably more susceptible to violence than others. The report identifies six key factors that heighten the risk of organized student violence: elite penetration of universities, large-scale student protests, abusive security forces, a broader culture of violence in society, militarized masculinities within student organizations, and economic shocks. These insights carry important policy implications. To mitigate student violence, policymakers can enforce codes of conduct for student organizations; promote gender, human rights and non-violent resistance training; pursue security sector reforms; and create university security committees. Additionally, strengthening student representation in university decision-making and expanding socioeconomic support programs can help address underlying grievances. By tackling these structural and contextual drivers, policymakers and educational institutions can foster safer, more resilient universities—empowering students and contributing to both democratic and economic development across the region.

1. Introduction¹

Historically, many African universities have functioned as beacons of political change. Across the continent, students have spearheaded non-violent protest movements against colonialism, apartheid and autocratic regimes (Nyamnjoh & Jua 2002). There is, however, also a darker side to student activism. Some African universities more resemble hotbeds of violence than beacons of democratic development. Armed clashes between student organizations, as well as students and security forces, have been reported in countries ranging from Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, to Sudan and South Africa (Fomunyan 2017; Konings 2002; Waghid et al. 2020). Such violence has been characterized by killings, rape, ethnic cleansing, destruction of property, and closure of universities. At times, student violence is integrated into larger dynamics of violent electoral contestation, whereby student unions and fraternities function as the armed auxiliaries of national political parties (Konings 2002; Wurie 2019). The escalation of university violence has been described as the most devastating challenge to higher education in Africa today (Fomunyan 2017: 38).

Such forms of student violence constitutes a serious impediment to overall development on the continent. Research has shown that there is a strong link between access to higher education on the one hand, and democracy and economic development on the other. Not only do many universities function as democratic nurseries stimulating critical thinking, investments in education have been defined as “one of the most powerful instruments societies have for reducing deprivation and vulnerability” (Thyne 2006: 735). Motivated by similar dividends, international donors are investing considerable resources in strengthening universities in Africa. In 2019 alone, 1.1 billion USD was channelled to higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2021: 470). University violence risks undermining the positive effects of these investments. First, the militarization of campuses can degenerate the quality of higher education and negatively affect marginalized youths’ ability to improve their socioeconomic situation. In fact, violent conflicts constitute a key reason for why youths interrupt their education in poor countries and even “minor shocks to educational access can lead to significant and long-lasting detrimental effects on individual human capital formation in terms of educational attainment, health outcomes and labour market opportunities” (Justino 2010: 1). Second, student violence may foster a new generation of leaders who employ violence, rather than elections, as a tool for political contestation.

Even if students have, at times, functioned as agents of change in many African countries, there is a tendency amongst practitioners and scholars to turn a blind eye to the violent agency of students and romanticize the role universities have for development. The purpose of this report is therefore to nuance this image by (a)

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mapping the dynamics and scope of organized student violence at African universities, (b) describing the settings in which such violence takes place, and (c) suggesting possible factors that generate student violence. More specifically, we focus on organized student violence at public universities in West Africa² (183 in total) during 2000-2022. The reason for concentrating on West Africa, is that this is a region with high levels of student activism. By comparing experiences at different West African universities, it is thereby possible to gain an initial understanding of why student activism sometimes takes the form of peaceful protests, and sometimes metamorphoses into collective violence. Ultimately, we hope that this report can help to inform policymakers engaged in supporting higher education on the African continent by beginning a dialogue on what can be done to mitigate the risk of student violence. It is only by finding ways to make universities more resilient against violence, that they can play a positive role in empowering marginalized youths and lay the foundation for more long-term economic growth.

2. The ‘Campus’ as a Source of Organized Student Violence

When approaching the topic of organized student violence, it is crucial to situate such acts in the context of the university campus. Studies have highlighted the role universities, as social and physical spaces, have in shaping contentious political dynamics (Dahlum & Wig 2019, 2021; Van Dyke 1998). At universities, students interact on a daily basis by taking part in lectures, seminars, and social activities, creating what are often dense social networks. What is more, students belonging to the same school often face similar grievances related to university specific problems, such as lack of housing, poor quality of teaching, and sudden increases in registration fees. The presence of shared networks and grievances entails that when students engage in violence, they tend to do so with their peers and employ the ‘campus’ as a vantage point for mobilization. The large concentration of young adults in a restricted space, also tends to attract the attention of external actors who can have an interest in harnessing (political elites) or subduing (security forces) the political agency of students, or extracting rents from them (criminal groups). The activities of such actors can further spur or inhibit the willingness of students to employ arms at specific universities. In this report, we therefore compare levels of violence between different universities in West Africa.

When we refer to *organized student violence*, we mean the collective use of violence by a student group either on or outside campus.³ What differentiates this type of violence from inter-personal violence (e.g. violence between two students), is that it is committed by an assemblage of students. This primarily concerns

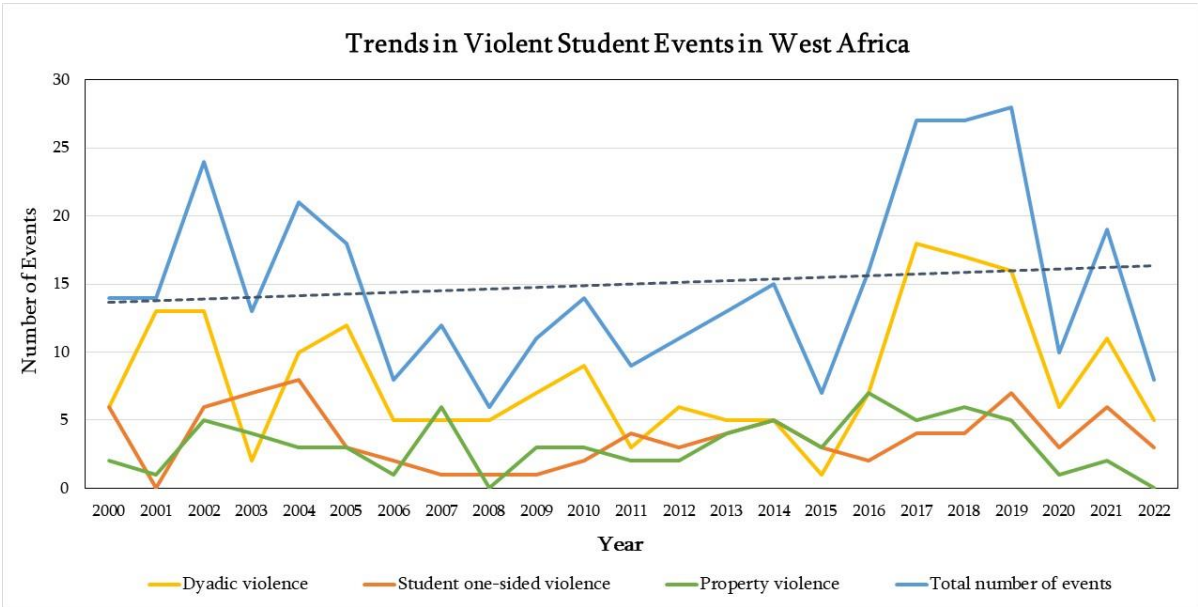
² We define West Africa as the member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) prior to the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the regional organization in 2024. This includes Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

³ Since the point of comparison (i.e. unit of analysis) is individual universities, we only include violent events where we can identify which university the students employing the violence come from.

officially organized entities, such as student unions, fraternities, political parties, cultural/religious associations and religious communities. However, it also includes instances when students—lacking a common organizational affiliation—temporarily band together to use force.⁴ For the purposes of this study, we further disaggregate organized student violence according to the target of the violence: other organized actors (dyadic violence), civilians (student one-sided violence), and property (property violence). *Dyadic violence* refers to the deliberate use of violence between two student groups or a student group and another organized actor. The latter can, for example, be the police, military, non-student political parties, criminal groups, rebel movements, pro-government militias, or peacekeepers. Meanwhile, *student-one sided violence* is held as the deliberate use of violence by a student group against civilians (e.g. other students, business owners, passers-by) who do not fight back. Finally, we define *property violence* as the deliberate use of violence by a student group against some kind of property or infrastructure. This concerns physical objects such as buildings, vehicles, equipment, and collections of books. For more information on how the data was collected, see the Appendix.

3. Regional Trends in West Africa

As can be discerned from graph 3.1 below, organized student violence is prevalent in West Africa and constitutes a challenge to higher education in the region. Between 2000 and 2022, there were no less than 345 violent events involving student groups. What is more, violence has been on the rise since 2008. Besides a peak of organized student violence between 2016 and 2021, the 2001-2005 period was also relatively violent.



Graph 3.1. Trends in violent student events in West Africa during 2000-2022.

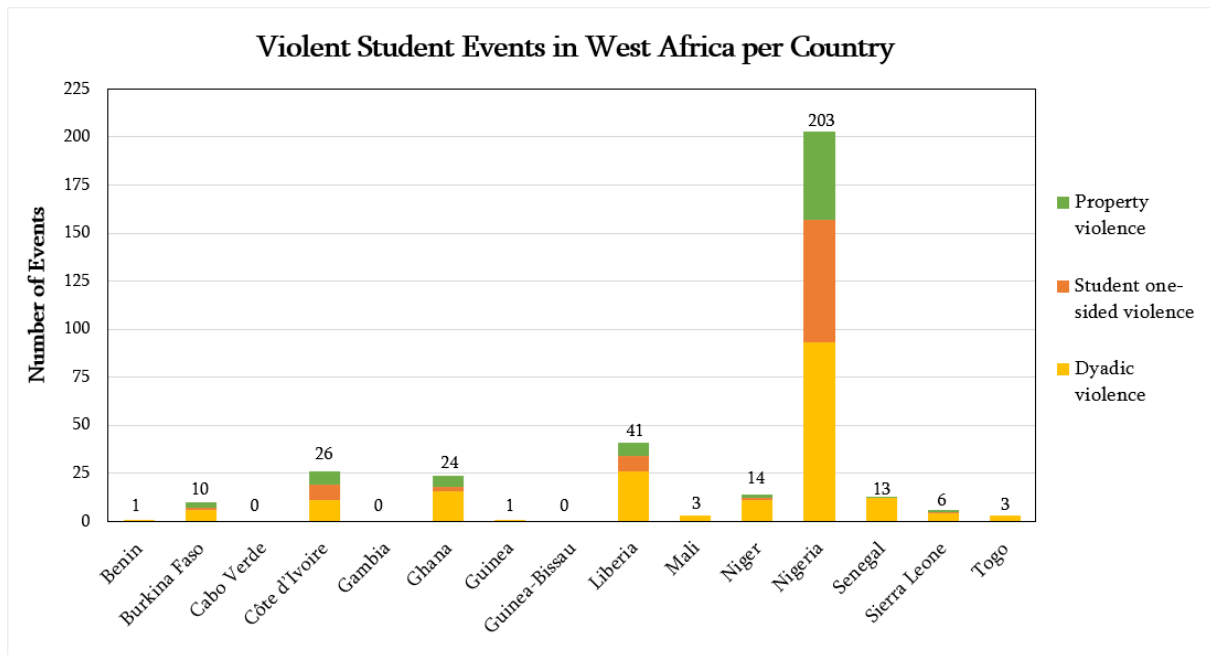
⁴ In such instances, the perpetrators are often simply referred to as ‘students’ in media reporting.

Dyadic violence has been the main form of violence that students have engaged in, followed by student one-sided violence and property violence. A large portion of the dyadic and property violence originated as student demonstrations that subsequently escalated into property destruction and clashes with police. The 2001-2005 and 2016-2021 spikes in dyadic and property violence can therefore partly be seen as an extension of the widespread student demonstrations in West Africa during these years. Meanwhile, student one-sided violence has been dominated by abuses and atrocities committed by illegal fraternities (so-called 'cults') at Nigerian universities. This type of violence was particularly prevalent during the first spike in organized student violence in 2001-2005. The latter also coincides with the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, where the student union FESCI (*Fédération estudiantine et scolaire de Côte d'Ivoire*, the Student Federation of Côte d'Ivoire) fought on behalf of President Laurent Gbagbo's regime.

There was also a clear decrease in organized student violence in 2020, attributable to lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, levels of violence have been volatile, with a sharp increase in 2021 followed by a distinct drop the following year.

4. Country Variations in Organized Student Violence

While organized student violence, in some form or another, is present in most countries in West Africa, there is great variation between states (see graph 4.1 below). Students are most prone to take to arms in Nigeria, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Of these, Nigeria is by far the country with the most extensive university violence, with 203 violent events during the studied period. This can be compared with 41, 26 and 24 for Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana respectively. Interestingly, Cabo Verde, the Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau did not experience any violence, while Benin and Guinea only had one violent event each. Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo hover somewhere in-between, with 3 to 14 violent student events.



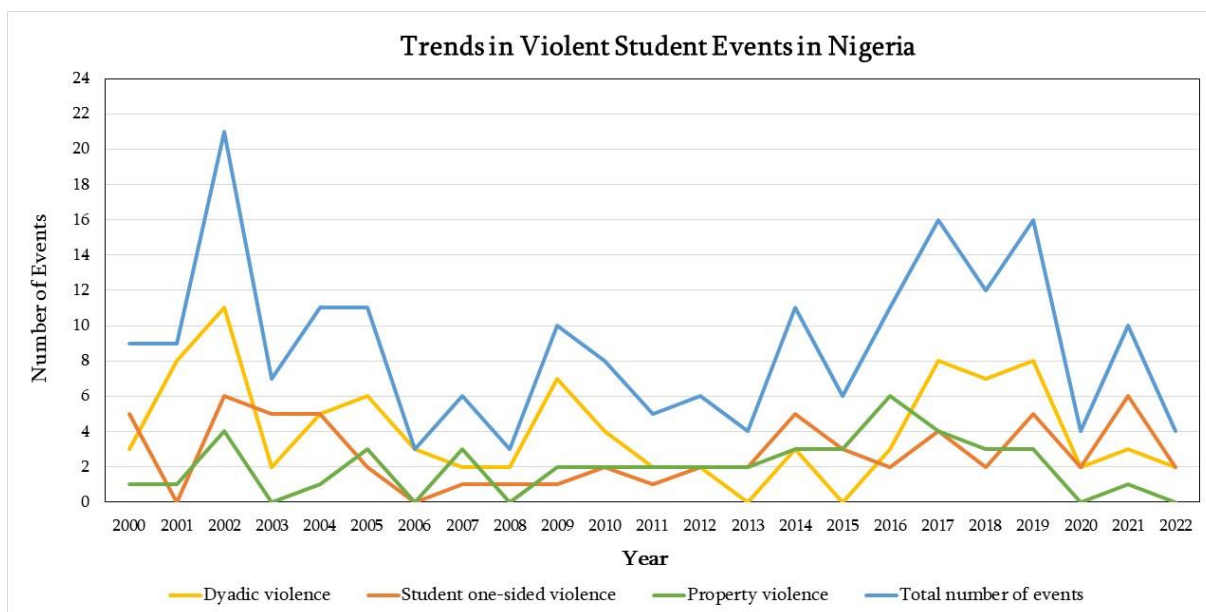
Graph 4.1. Variation in the number of violent student events per country in West Africa.

A common feature across all countries that experienced organized student violence, is the dominance of dyadic violence. A large portion of the latter was committed in the context of student demonstrations that escalated into violent clashes with police. It is important to keep in mind that the violence in such instances is not necessarily equal from both sides, or even proportional. For example, in Senegal on 3 March 2021, Students of Université Cheikh Anta Diop joined protests against what were seen as false accusations of rape levelled against the main opposition leader, Ousmane Sonko. Students threw rocks at and charged the police who responded by firing into the crowd (Reuters News 2021; Amnesty International 2022). Despite the imbalance in terms of the capacity for violence and the injuries sustained, both sides engaged in violence and the event is therefore seen as dyadic.

Dyadic violence not attributable to escalation from demonstrations, tends to be more closely rooted in factors that are unique to each national context. In fact, when looking at the top four countries when it comes to organized student violence—Nigeria, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana—they each display some interesting variations in the type of student actors involved and the logic that underpins the violence. In the following, we take a closer look at the dynamics and characteristics of organized student violence in these four countries. Such an exercise facilitates efforts to inductively identify factors that spur students to engage in violence.

Nigeria

Levels of organized student violence have remained more constant in Nigeria than in other West African countries. While surges in violence in other states can often be attributed to national political events—like elections, mass protests or civil wars—graph 4.2 below shows how violent events in Nigeria are fairly evenly distributed over time. This is, at least partly, due to the widespread presence of illegal student fraternities (or so-called ‘cult’ groups) on university campuses.



Graph 4.2. Trends in violent student events in Nigeria during 2000-2022.

Cult fraternities trace their historical roots to older universities, particularly in southern Nigeria, where they originally emerged as peaceful student communities. However, over time these fraternities have metamorphized into what can best be described as criminal gangs, with an undercurrent of esoterism, expressed through ritual initiations, ceremonies, and high degree of secrecy. Due to the criminal character of these fraternities, the Nigerian authorities have increasingly outlawed them (Rotini 2005).

Much of the dyadic violence that ‘cult’ fraternities engage in is clashes with other fraternities based at the same university. This violence often revolves around gaining informal political, economic and social control over campuses in general, and the student body in particular. Of particular importance is to monopolize the recruitment of more affluent and well-connected students, whose membership can ensure access to economic resources and inroads into the national political elite. Fraternities are therefore often fiercely territorial, since physical and social control is the safest strategy to attract valuable recruits. The most extreme outcome of this type of territorial competition are events like those which occurred between “the Maphite Confraternity” and “the Black Axe” on 21 October 2010. Over the course of one day, ten students of Ambrose Alli University were killed as the fraternities clashed at a number of locations in the city of Ekpoma, with one student dying in front of the main gate of the university (BBC Monitoring Africa 2010). The violence is not only used against other rival fraternities, but also as a means of forced recruitment. Consequently, fraternities also engage in the violent targeting of civilians to a much greater extent than in other countries. In 2021, one student of Osun State University who refused to join a fraternity was reportedly brutalized and set on fire (Bamigbola 2021).

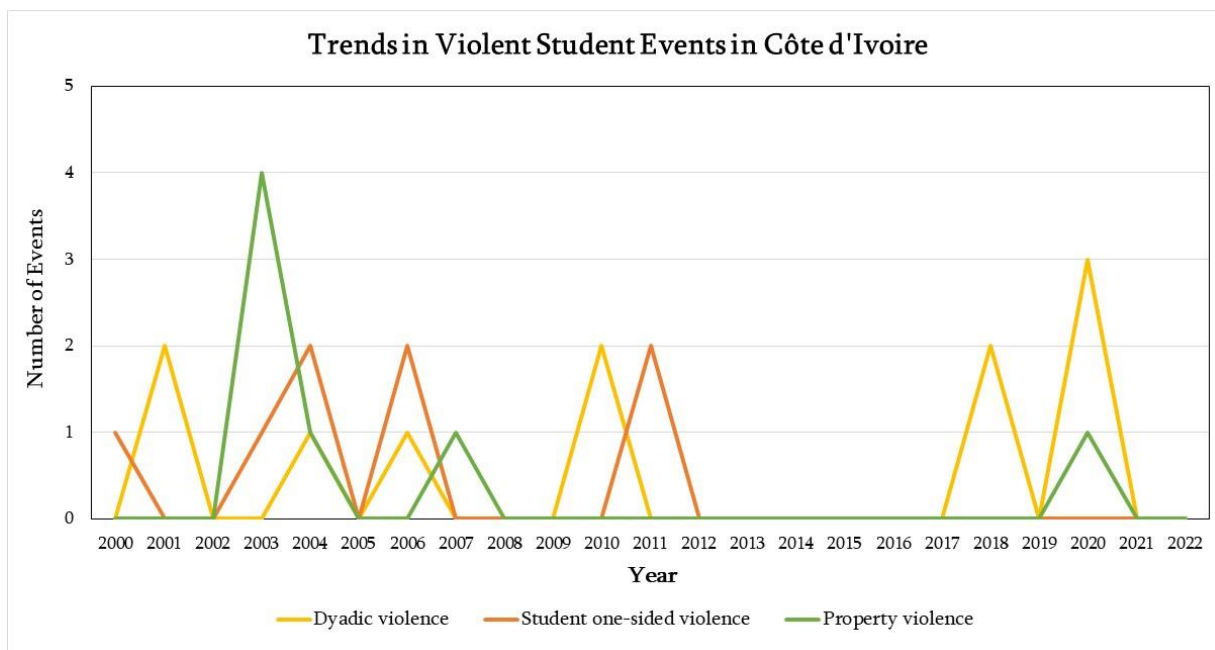
Because Nigerian fraternities often function as criminal enterprises, they—compared to other student organizations—commonly lack incentives to exercise

restraint. In fact, they often depend on violence to ensure a steady flow of recruits; either through forced recruitment or enlisting recruits who are attracted by the violent culture espoused by fraternities. This may not only explain why fraternity violence is so prevalent, but also elucidate why it is associated with higher death rates. Among the 64 events of organized student violence resulting in at least one casualty in Nigeria, fraternity students were involved in no less than 44, resulting in at least 114 deaths.

But why is organized student violence so prevalent in Nigeria, compared to the rest of West Africa? This discrepancy can partially be explained by the fact that Nigeria has a larger population than other states and that it hosts a total of 104 public universities. This is more than all other West African countries combined (see the Appendix for a breakdown of the number of universities per country). Another aspect is that Nigeria is a country that is permeated by a culture of violence that affects all levels of society. Not only is Nigeria the West African country most afflicted by organized crime (GIATO 2023), it also has a high prevalence of other types of violence. For example, the North is heavily affected by groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State (IS) that are fighting against Nigerian security forces, each other and repeatedly employs violence against civilians. Meanwhile, non-state conflicts are widespread across Nigeria, such as disputes between ethnic or communal groups, with some groups having created their own militias (UCDP, 2024). Hence, considering that many of Nigeria's universities operate in such a violent setting, it is not surprising that there is a spill-over effect onto campuses.

Côte d'Ivoire

Organized student violence in Côte d'Ivoire is largely connected to one actor, the student union FESCI. The violence committed by FESCI is divided roughly equally between dyadic, student-one sided and property violence (see Graph 4.3 below). FESCI's most active period coincided with the first Ivorian civil war (2002-2007), as the organization became drawn into the country's national political crisis. During 2000-2001, FESCI experienced divisions amongst its leadership resulting in dyadic violence between different groupings of the union. The faction that emerged victorious was composed of supporters of President Laurent Gbagbo. After FESCI's internal struggles were settled, FESCI turned to targeting political enemies of Gbagbo, often acting in consort with *Congrès Panafricain des Jeunes et des Patriotes* (commonly referred to as Young Patriots), Gbagbo's youth supporters (HRW 2008). After the end of second Ivorian civil war (2011), Côte d'Ivoire did not experience any university violence for five years (2012-2017). This coincided with the military defeat of Gbagbo, who was replaced by Alassane Ouattara as President in 2011. Without the political backing of Gbagbo, FESCI embarked on a more peaceful political strategy.



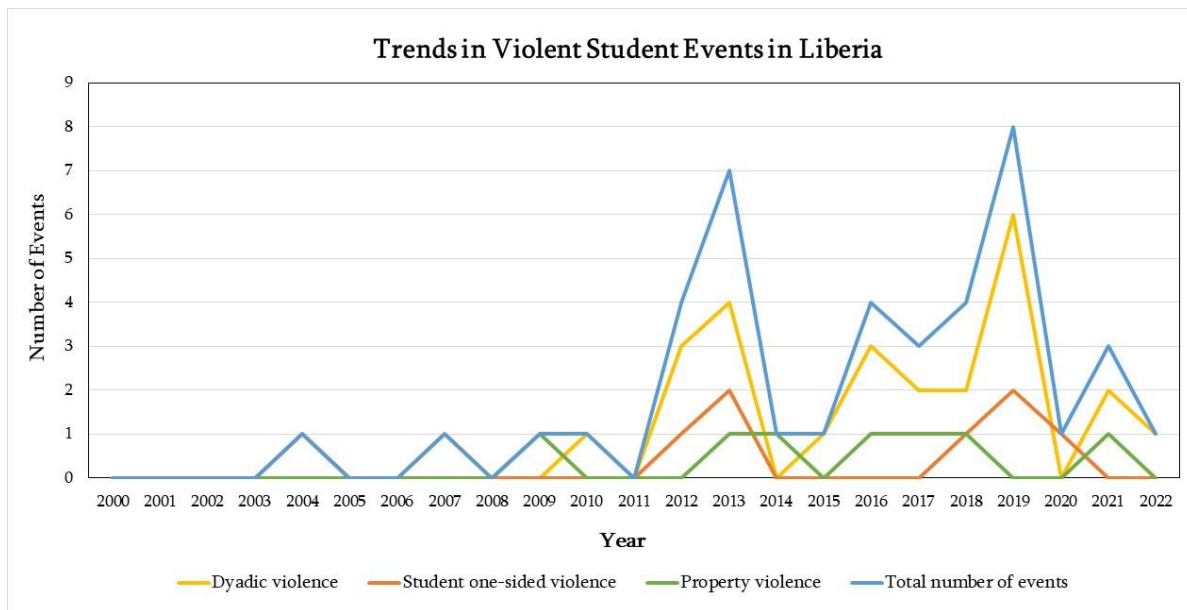
Graph 4.3. Trends in violent student events in Côte d'Ivoire during 2000-2022.⁵

FESCI’s violence in more recent years is limited to activities occurring in 2018 and 2020. They played a role in organizing protests preceding the 2020 election and participated in clashes with police, though the union claimed their demonstrations were “not political and were only to protest against financial contributions demanded [by the police] from students” (AFP 2020). Whether this is true or not is difficult to discern, but the framing of the issue is at the very least notable. What can be observed, however, is that despite the controversy surrounding Ouattara aspiring to be elected President for a third term, FESCI’s activities remained limited, possibly indicating their waning strength at Ivorian universities.

Liberia

Despite its small size, population and relatively few universities (three), Liberia has experienced the second highest number of violent student events in West Africa. Also noteworthy is that this violence has not result in any deaths, is dominated by dyadic violence, and is almost completely concentrated to the last ten years. The most significant spikes occurred in 2010-2013 and again in 2015-2019 (see graph 4.4 below). The lull in student violence during 2014-2015 was presumably caused by the West African Ebola epidemic, which severely restricted social movement in the country.

⁵ To increase the readability of the graph, we have excluded the line for “total number of events” (blue) for Côte d'Ivoire.



Graph 4.4. Trends in violent student events in Liberia during 2000–2022.

Much of the organized student violence in Liberia involves the Vanguard Student Unification Party (SUP), which—unlike FESCI in Côte d’Ivoire—is not connected to any specific national political party or politician. Instead, they see themselves as pivotal to the struggle for equality and democracy in Liberia, acting as a counterpoint to authoritarianism. The self-image which SUP seeks to project is that they are “our [students] soul, sword, strength, and shield” (Kollie 2017). As such, SUP is perhaps the clearest example in West Africa of an actor adopting violence as a bottom-up approach to politics.

The first violence attributed to SUP, carried out in 2012, concerned internal power struggles for the party leadership. After that the violence changed character, as SUP began clashing with rival student parties, like the Student Integration Movement (SIM), Student Democratic Alliance (STUDA), and Fendall Students Association (FENSA). For example, on 6 July, 2018, SUP students interrupted the 26th anniversary of STUDA, throwing rocks at the event building and resulting in a clash which left several students wounded (Webster Clayeh 2018).

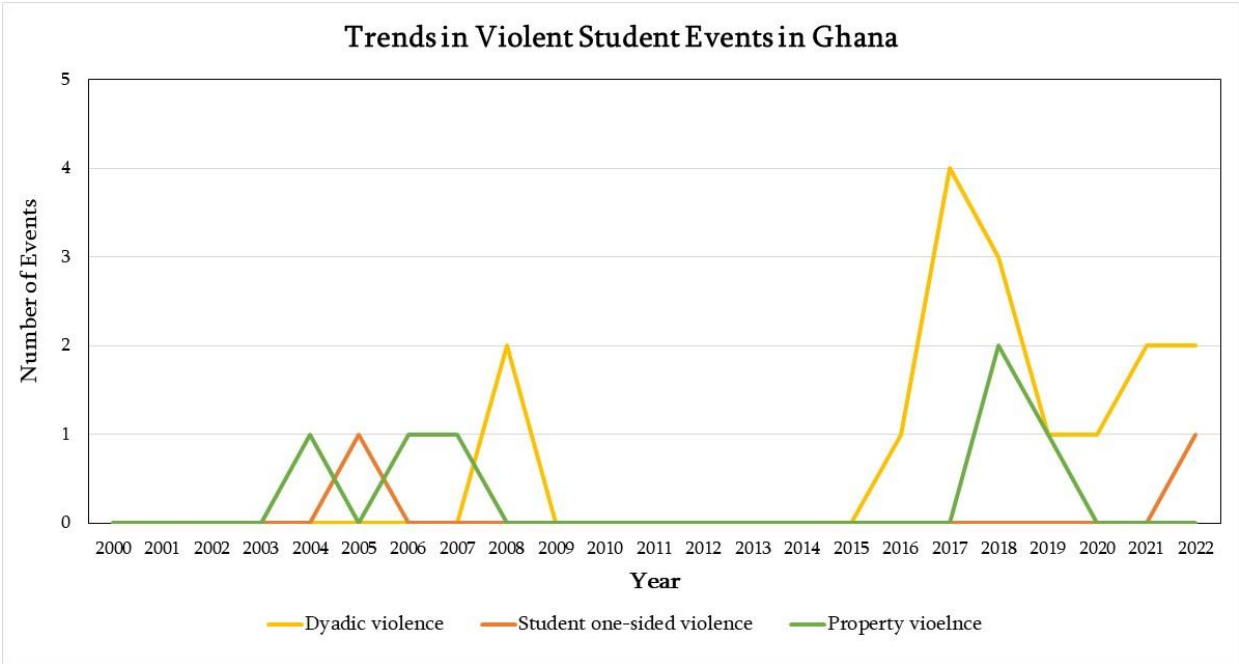
What is more, about a third of the dyadic violence in Liberia was a direct result of demonstrations that escalated into violence between students and police deployed to break up the protests. Many of these protests were organized by SUP and concerned controversial university related issues, such as fees, suspensions of students, or student elections. When students were met by riot police armed with tear gas, they oftentimes answered with stone-throwing. The clashes generally resulted in student arrests and sometimes restrictions on student activities that created a tense atmosphere. Evidence suggests that the distrust generated by such repeated interactions between students and police, increased the risk of subsequent demonstrations turning violent.

Interestingly, student violence was more or less absent in Liberia before 2012. How can we understand this relatively peaceful period? One plausible explanation is that Liberia was recovering from over a decade of civil war (1989–2003). Not only

did this entail that domestic attention (including student activism) and resources were funnelled towards consolidating the peace process, but the presence of a massive UN-peacebuilding mission put limits on how ‘abusive’ the domestic security forces could be vis-à-vis public dissent (including students).

Ghana

As can be discerned from graph 4.5 below, organized student violence in Ghana has been dominated by dyadic violence that escalated after 2015. This violence has its origin in rivalries between sorority student halls—a type of local fraternities. There are three features that make sorority halls distinct compared to other fraternities in the region. First, unlike Nigerian ‘cult’ fraternities, the collective identity of sorority halls is tied to the residences of university students. They thereby have legal legitimacy. Second, there is no obvious connection between the sorority halls and the political or socioeconomic landscape outside campus life. Although notable alumni have graduated from the respective halls, it is not evident that subsequent hall members benefit from such ties by, for instance, providing access to patronage networks. Third, sorority halls do not appear to compete for recruits. The founding principal of the fraternities is rather the construction of ‘exclusive’ social identities, which obliges prospective members to compete with each other to be selected.



Graph 4.5. Trends in violent student events in Ghana during 2000-2022.⁶

As a result of these traits, violence is mainly rooted in strong collective identities which are, to some extent, definitionally opposed to each other. This dynamic is comparable to that of the most ardent fans of sports teams. Certain observable identity markers are illustrative of this comparison. The members of Commonwealth

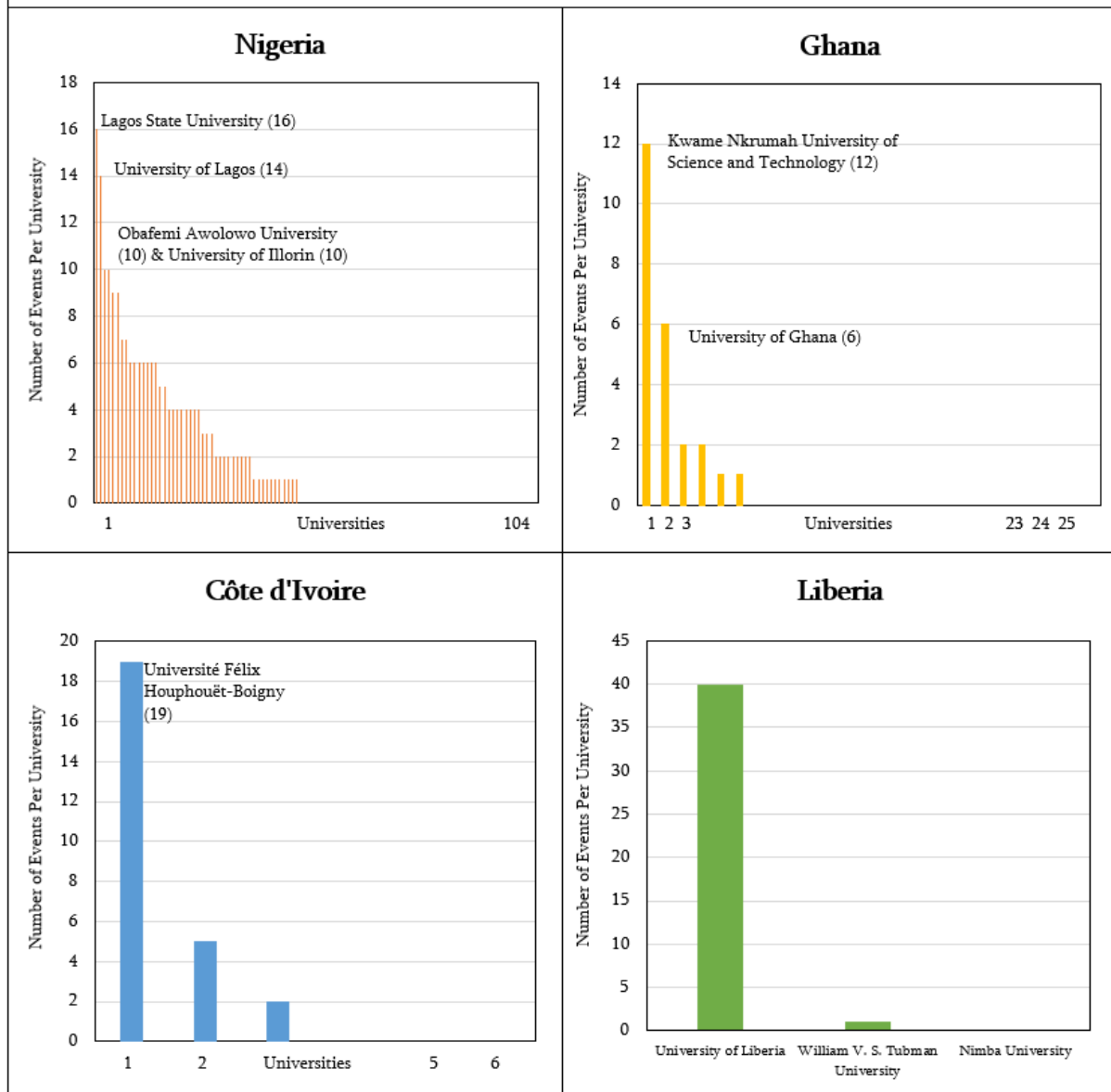
⁶ To increase the readability of the graph, we have excluded the line for “total number of events” (blue) for Ghana.

Hall of University of Ghana, the ‘Vandals’, are associated with the colour red, while the ‘Mariners’ of University of Cape Coast’s Atlantic Hall are associated with the colour blue. There is enough antagonism towards students of rival halls for violence to escalate to serious bodily harm. This was evident on 15 February 2016, when a double stabbing occurred as part of a clash between Katanga and Conti Halls, both fraternities of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (All Africa 2016). Such actions tend to lead to cycles of violence motivated by reprisals.

5. The Clustering of Campus Violence

Levels of organized student violence do not only diverge between states in West Africa. There is also a startling variation when it comes to how extensive such violence is between universities within the same country. In fact, student clashes tend to be clustered to a few campuses in each state. The discrepancy becomes visible when analysing graph 5.1 below. The latter consists of four sub-graphs illustrating the distribution of organized student violent events between universities within Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia. The points on the x-axis represent all universities within the country and the values on the y-axis denotes the number of violent events at each university. For example, the graph demonstrating the variation in Ghana has 25 points on the x-axis, each point representing a specific university, and when a university has value 0 on the y-axis, it has no recorded violent events. Therefore, in Ghana, our findings suggest that 6 out of 25 universities experienced organized student violence. As can be seen in the graph, there is also an uneven distribution of violence between public universities in Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, and Liberia.

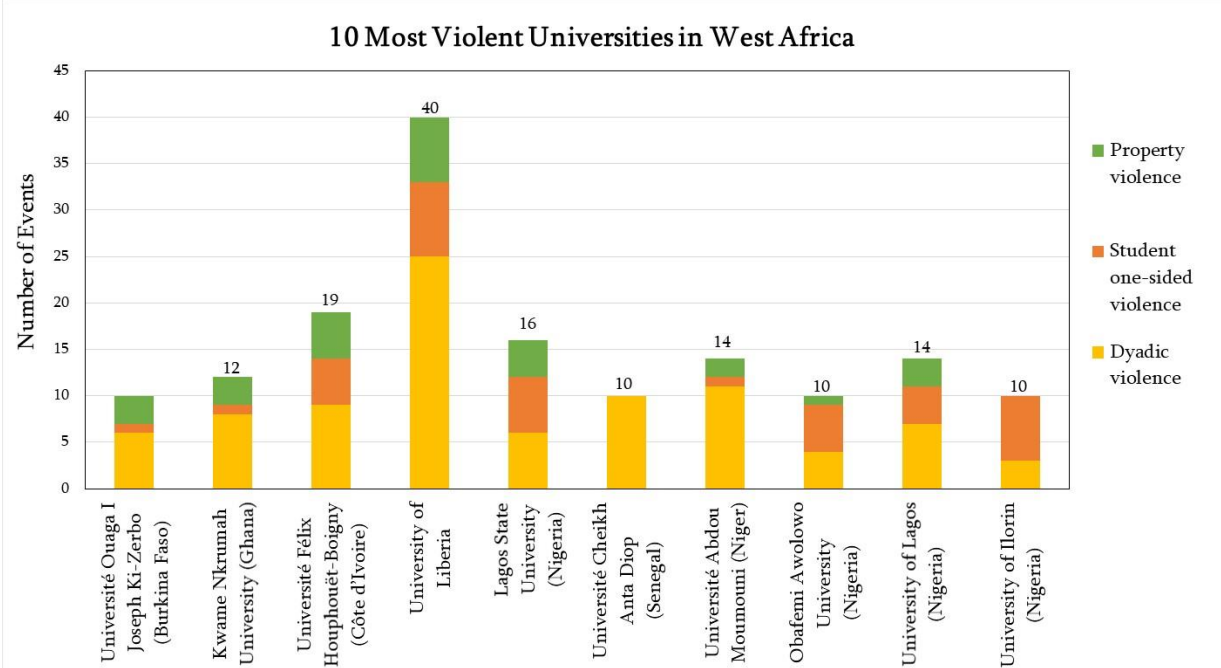
Violent Student Events for Each Public University in Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia



Graph 5.1. Number of violent student events for each university in Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia during 2000-2022. Each graph illustrates the distribution of a country's organized student violence between its public universities.

There is, furthermore, great variance in how violent, violent exposed universities are. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny stands out with its 19 recorded events, while the other universities that experienced violence only had five and two incidents respectively. Liberia is an extreme example, with its largest university, University of Liberia, hosting almost all of the recorded organized student violence taking place in the country. In Nigeria, the majority of universities had no recorded acts of violence (56 universities), while there is much divergence between universities where students have taken to arms (48 universities). The main takeaway from graph 5.1 is that there is a handful of universities in West Africa, which stand

for the bulk of organized student violence. For instance, the ten most violent universities (see graph 5.2 below) in the region accounted for approximately 45% of all violent events. What is also interesting is that even though Nigerian universities are overrepresented in the top ten, it is University of Liberia which was, by far, the most violent.



Graph 5.2. The ten universities in West Africa with the highest number of violent student events.

What characteristics do these violence-stricken universities share? Generally, they have a large student body, tend to be older, and are located in large urban centres (oftentimes capitals). For instance, violent Nigerian universities can all be found in the southern, more densely populated regions of the country; Lagos State University and University of Lagos—which have experienced the highest levels of violence—are both located in Lagos (Nigeria’s largest city). Likewise, the most conflictual campuses in Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Liberia are all found in large cities such as Abidjan, Accra, Kumasi, and Monrovia.

One way to understand this phenomenon is to view student violence through the lens of what Hoffman (2007) calls “the city as barracks”. In the ghettos of Africa’s major urban centres, the city concentrates “bodies (particularly male bodies) and subjects into formations that can be deployed quickly and efficiently” for various political, economic and military enterprises. Because urban localities that house large populations of frustrated youths either constitute a political asset (whose members can be mobilized) or a security threat (whose members must be contained), they invariably become contested spaces where youths, security providers and various elites vie for influence. This description does not only fit ghetto areas, but increasingly so Africa’s older and larger universities whose students can no longer count on finding employment after graduating (Gerdes 2011) and where the increasingly large student body is cramped into campuses where they spend most of their time (going to class, social life, and sleep). As such, the ‘campus’

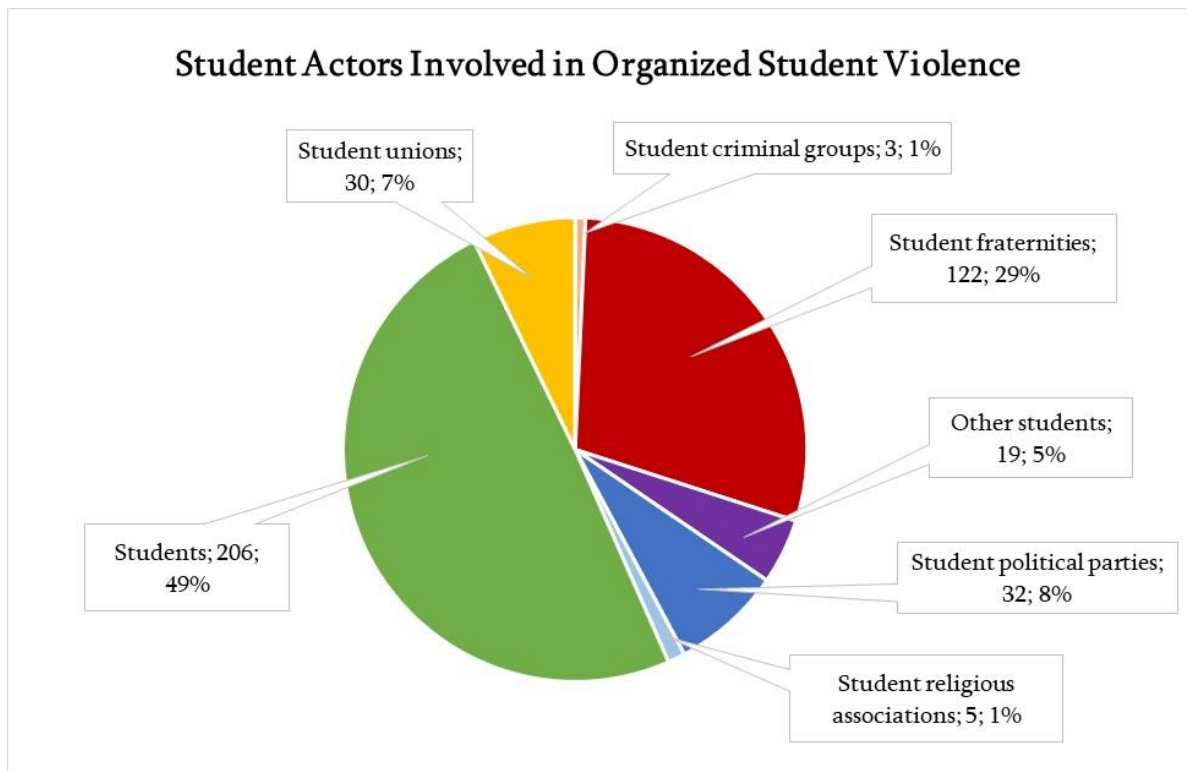
becomes a version of Hoffman’s “city as barracks” that attracts the attention of key elites. It is perhaps therefore not surprising that universities with large student populations, located in major urban centres, are more likely to become politicized and subsequently violent, than their smaller and more rural counterparts.

Moreover, West Africa’s older and larger universities are often located at strategic sites in major cities, such as downtown or along key roads. This is because, at the time of independence, leaders viewed universities as key national infrastructure—similar to the presidential palace, airport, army barracks, and sports stadium—intended to showcase national sovereignty and foster unity. University of Liberia, for example, is placed at Capitol Hill in Monrovia, a few hundred meters from the House of Representatives. In Nigeria, some of the most violent university campuses are situated along major roads, thus increasing their accessibility. It is easy to see how the physical placement of such universities becomes a political asset for disgruntled students. When engaging in demonstrations or organized violence, student groups can quickly stop traffic, threaten key state institutions and make the city ‘ungovernable’. This potential threat also entails that security forces have incentives to monitor and quickly respond to any efforts by students to mobilize themselves, increasing the risk of armed clashes.

Several of the most violent universities also have a long history of student activism. At older, larger universities—where, as mentioned, much of the violence is concentrated—there is often an established culture of political agency among students, both in relation to national politics and university-specific grievances. For instance, the main student party at University of Liberia, SUP, was founded in 1970 during a period of repression and has consistently positioned itself as a leading advocate for social justice in the country and student rights within the university. In Côte d’Ivoire, a culture of agency is also visible in the student union FESCI, which through its political activism originally mobilized to protect student interests at universities and schools in the 1990s. This political activism was later co-opted by President Gbagbo in order to attack political opponents. In Nigeria, student unions are deeply involved in university and national politics. This is particularly true in the context of older universities, where student agency has become a central part of university life. What is more, many student parties and unions have their origins in Pan-Africanism and have historically espoused revolutionary ideals that legitimize armed struggle. As such, student parties and unions do not only help to mobilize students around shared feelings of exposure and grievances, but when needed they can tap into their organizations’ historical consciousness and rhetorical repertoire to legitimize armed action.

6. Actors Engaged in Organized Student Violence

Given the different contexts in which organized student violence occurs, a myriad of actors takes part. Graph 6.1 below summarizes the types of student actors engaged in the recorded violence—dyadic, student one-sided, and property violence—based on our data.



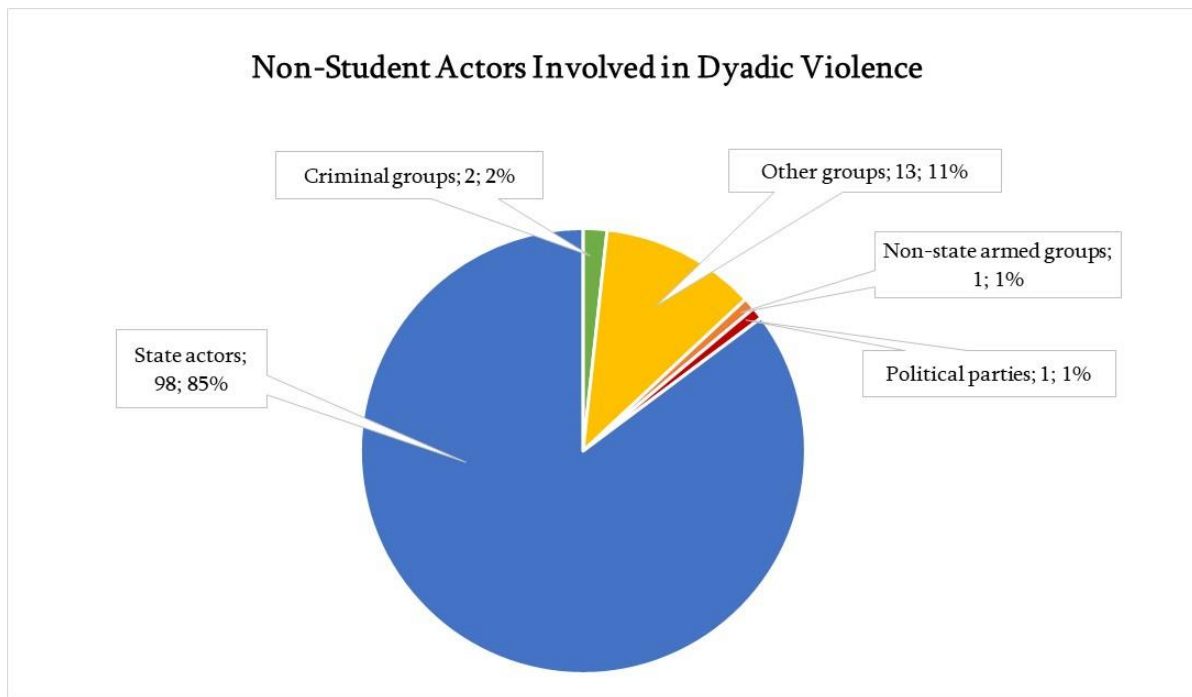
Graph 6.1. The number and share of violent student events (dyadic, student one-sided and property violence) that specific categories of student actors were involved in.⁷

As can be discerned from graph 6.1, the most common student actor is “students” in general. This is perhaps not surprising as this classification is the broadest actor category and used when (a) groups of students—lacking a clear organizational identity—temporarily band together to engage in violence, or (b) media sources do not provide sufficient information about the organizational affiliation of the students employing violence. Fraternities constitutes approximately a third of the student actors using violence. This is largely composed of Nigerian ‘cult’ fraternities, which again demonstrates the dominant role Nigeria has when it comes to student violence in West Africa. Other notable student actors are student political parties and unions.

Graph 6.2 illustrates the type of non-student actors that students clash with.⁸ In the vast majority of cases, students employ violence against various state actors, such as the police or military. This habitually concerns situations where security forces are involved in confrontations with students during protests that escalate into violence. It is particularly student political parties and unions, or ‘students in general’, that confront security forces in these incidents. Such types of escalation—from demonstration to dyadic violence—is further elaborated on in section 7.

⁷ Students that cannot be grouped into a specific actor category are classified as “Other students”. This, for instance, concerns students from specific university faculties (e.g. engineering students).

⁸ Hence, this presentation excludes dyadic violence where two or more student groups clash with each other.



Graph 6.2. The number and share of dyadic violent events that specific categories of non-student actors are involved in.⁹

To understand why student political parties, unions, and fraternities tend to employ violence, it is essential to examine their roles in university life. In many ECOWAS-countries, universities have a strong presence of student unions and active student politics. Unions are often engaged with campus issues, serving as spokespersons on student matters and organizing gatherings and protests. When student unions are involved in violent incidents, it often stems from organized protests that escalate. In Nigeria, student unions from various universities sometimes collaborate to organize larger events, which can be more threatening for regimes, as they are harder for police to control. Additionally, union elections can lead to violence, as the role of union president is associated with elevated status, power, and valuable elite connections that may open pathways to jobs, money, and a potential career in national politics. Like unions, student political parties serve as student advocates and spokespersons, with the distinction that they also participate in student elections on campus. However, while student elections, as seen in Liberia, are often linked to status and power, there is also a strong sense of identity and group cohesion within student parties. In many of these parties, membership loyalty is expressed through attacking competing student factions.

The student union FESCI in Côte d'Ivoire distinguishes itself from other unions in the region, in that it has so openly been entangled in national politics. What started as a pro-democracy group in the early 1990s, banned by the government, later evolved into political partisans, allied with the President Gbagbo. During the early 2000s FESCI became increasingly militarized and engaged in violence both on

⁹ Actors that cannot be grouped into a specific actor category are classified as "Other", such as campus security guards, communal groups, or university lecturers.

and outside of campus, often with government protection, and established a tight control of campus (HRW 2008).

As previously mentioned, a significant part of Nigeria's student violence centres around so-called 'cult' fraternities. Due to the prevalence of 'cult' violence, scholars have referred to Nigerian university campuses as "centres of violence" (Rotimi, 2005: 79). Cult fraternities have, however, not always been violent. The first fraternity was founded in the 1950s, when a group of students created the Pyrates Confraternity at University of Ibadan. The group was based on intellectual, non-violent beliefs and soon started to spread to other universities. In the beginning of the 1980s, these fraternities began engaging in secrecy. According to Rotimi (2005), violence became the way of resolving political conflicts in Nigeria as multiple military coups took place. At the same time, public universities were under-prioritized resulting in a falling standard of education. Cult fraternities at university campuses also started to split causing inter-group rivalries and the emergence of institutionalized violence. Although Nigeria is the most well-known example of cult fraternity violence, it also exists in Sierra Leone. At Fourah Bay College in Freetown the cults Black Camp and White Camp have long competed for supremacy. This struggle has, however, been less ferocious than that in Nigeria.

What makes these fraternities distinct is their recruitment strategies, initiation rituals, and secrecy. Recruitment is a critical process, not only for the 'cults' survival, but also to establish connections. Students with powerful relatives tend to be targeted for enlistment, as a way to secure connections at the top of society. Some students also seek to join fraternities to achieve economic assistance, protection, or identity in the sense of a common belonging (Rotimi, 2005). After recruitment, some type of initiation ritual typically follows, which commonly includes taking part in illegal and violent acts. Not only does this help to foster in-group identity, but also make it more difficult for members to leave the cult.

Moreover, there are claims that cult fraternities influence union elections at Nigerian campuses by supporting different contenders for the president position. That way, the fraternities have a direct link to decisions regarding student matters if their contender wins. (Omotola 2023). An example of fraternities' entanglement with student unions comes from Lagos State University, in February 2002, when the student union president was targeted and killed by members of the Black Axe cult group (AFP 2002, All Africa 2002, Femi 2002).¹⁰

7. Contextualizing Organized Student Violence

As highlighted in previous sections, organized student violence in West Africa involves a wide range of actors and occurs in multiple contexts. Despite this complexity, some general trends emerge. Evidence suggests that student violence is

¹⁰ It is important to note that dyadic violence between cult fraternities is likely to be underreported in the data. The reason for this is that such violence is committed out of public view. This can be compared to armed clashes between student protesters and security forces, which are much more likely to be picked up by media. What is more, ex-cultist members are often reluctant to speak about their experiences due to the risk of reprisals from their former fraternities.

most prevalent in four key settings: *embeddedness in national politics, competition to control the campus, large-scale student protests, and militarized masculinities.*

Embeddedness in National Politics

The first context in which much student violence occurs, is when student organizations become integrated into national politics. In fact, one way to interpret student violence is to see it as a form of political communication directed at an elite audience, where the ultimate goal is to ‘get noticed’ and be integrated into the latter’s patronage networks. De Waal (2009) has described the context in which similar forms of violence takes place as the neo-patrimonial marketplace. In this market, student organizations engage in violence to determine the ‘buy-off’ for confirming their loyalty to political elites. The greatest rewards are given to those student leaders who can most visibly showcase their capacity to escalate, and de-escalate, the violence employed by their peers. With similar buy-offs, elites hope to control, and at times, utilize the agency of student organizations. In return for supporting a regime or political party, student leaders can be provided with positions in state agencies, or jobs as bodyguards (Konings 2002; Rotimi 2005). Hence, for crafty, but unconnected, students, violence can offer that which their education may not—a route to elite-integration.

An example of how students may use violence in connection with national politics is FESCI, which supported President Gbagbo during the First Ivorian Civil War. On the 9th of March 2004, FESCI and the Young Patriots—a youth militia closely associated with FESCI—massed outside the high court of Côte d'Ivoire in Abidjan. They were protesting the appointment of two judges by the minister of justice, who were members of the opposition party. Eventually, FESCI and the Young Patriots pushed inside the building and beat up several judges as well as journalists. Journalists on the scene noted the inaction of the police, with the United States embassy denouncing the impunity that followed. This inaction can be attributed to the incumbent government not wanting to protect their opponents (AFP 2004a; 2004b; HRW 2008).

In Nigeria, cult fraternities habitually aspire to expand their influence both into local and national politics. One way to do so is to recruit, sometimes forcibly, students from influential families. This includes students from wealthy backgrounds, but more critically children of politicians or high-ranking military or law enforcement officers (Omotola 2023). Much like other criminal organizations (e.g. Italian Mafia, Colombian cartels), cult fraternities seek political connections to become integrated into patrimonial networks. Similar dynamics can be found at Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, where the two main secrete fraternities—Black Camp and White Camp—have close ties to the country’s two dominant political parties, Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) and All People’s Congress (APC). Not only do SLPP and APC sometimes provide funding to the Black respectively White Camps, future political leaders are often drawn from these two fraternities. In return, Black and White Camp members are expected to engage in political campaigning and violence on behalf of their sponsors (Dari 2011; Gardner 2014).

Competition to Control the Campus

The second setting in which student violence is prevalent, is when there is intense competition between student groups to physically and socially control the campus. Unlike ‘embeddedness in national politics’—which is geared towards an elite audience—the violence committed in this context focuses on horizontal, grassroots relations between student groups.¹¹ A common form of competition centres on controlling student government bodies, whose representatives are selected via elections. Just as during national elections, student organizations can have incentives to employ electoral violence to maximize their chances to succeed at the polls. For instance, on the 23rd of June 2004 in Côte d’Ivoire, fifty members of FESCI stormed the house of opposition leader Achy Ekissi of the PCRCI (Parti Communiste Révolutionnaire de Côte d’Ivoire, the Revolutionary Communist Party of Ivory Coast), which was ransacked and looted (AFP 2004c). Their target was one of the founding members of AGEECI (Association Générale des Élèves et Étudiants de Côte d’Ivoire, the General Student Association of Côte d’Ivoire), Habib Dodo, who was also secretary general of the PCRCI’s youth wing. He was soon found and taken away by the FESCI members, who lynched him on their campus. The leader of FESCI in 2005 justified the attacks in an interview: “AGEECI is not a student organization and we cannot let them meet on campus. It is a rebel organization created in the rebel zone and seeking to spread its tentacles to the university” (AFP 2004c; HRW 2008). Thus, FESCI used violence to quell a rival organization who could seize control of the student body. Similarly, in the days leading up to the 2012 ULSU (University of Liberia Student Union) elections, the historically dominant SUP (Student Unification Party) feared a new coalition that was formed with the purpose of defeating them: COSS (Coalition of SIM and STUDA). Members of COSS were attacked by SUP supporters on the 13th and 18th of July 2012, a few days before the election. The SUP members stormed the launching of COSS’ political campaign in a building on campus, claiming it belonged to them. A subsequent clash followed, with SUP and COSS members throwing rocks and other projectiles at each other (All Africa 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d).

‘Cult’ fraternities in Nigeria often seek to gain informal control over campuses. By eliminating competition, fraternities can gain monopoly on the enlistment of new members. It is valuable to gain access to recruits who excel in the usage of violence and possess high political and economic status. There may also be personal incentives to join, with cults being able to provide financial support, as well as offering prestige on campus (Rotimi 2005: 81). Fraternities may even engage in bloody battles over potential recruits, without the latter’s knowledge (Omotola 2023). This is also true concerning students who are deemed desirable romantically and sexually. Clashes may even occur over which fraternity has the right to chase attractive women on campus. An example from Abia State University in Nigeria shows just how vicious fraternity violence can be. On 12 March 2016, members of the Burkina Faso cult group invaded the hostel where members of the Mafia cult lived. There, the Burkina Faso fraternity attacked the rival cultists, leaving one with

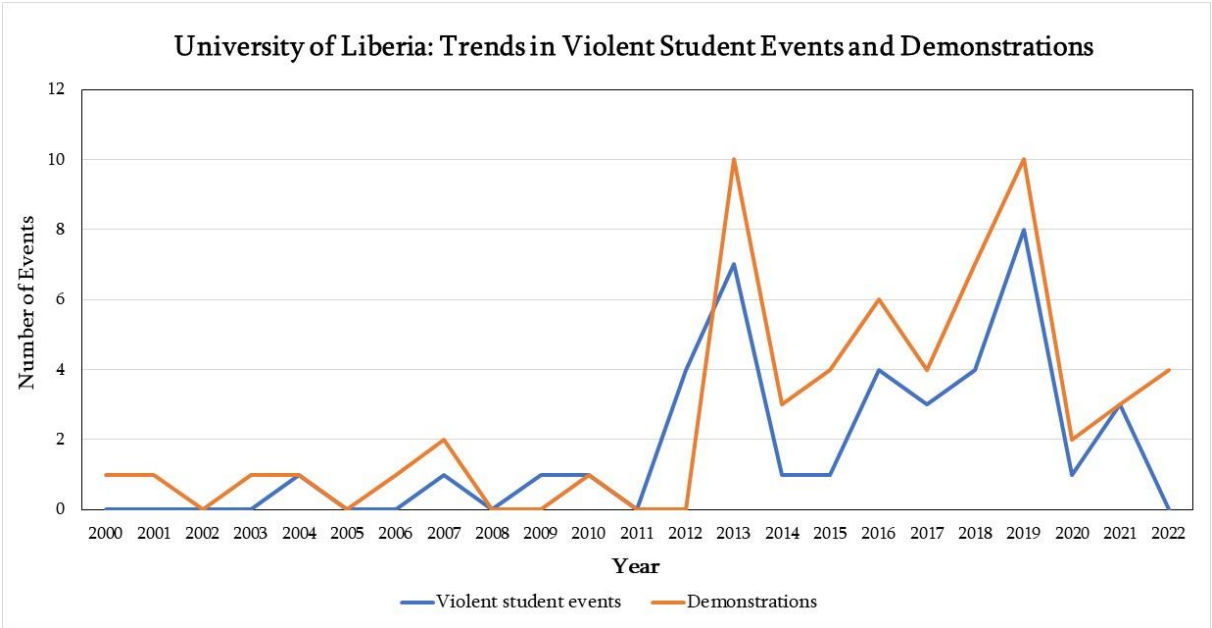
¹¹ Of course, the long-term objective of gaining control over campus may be to gain the attention of various national elites and become integrated into the latter’s patronage networks.

machete cuts on his head and chest. Two other Mafia members were beheaded, and their heads displayed by the university gate for other students to see (National Mirror 2016). Such forms of violence have an important signalling value, showcasing to rival fraternities who is on charge of the campus.

Large-Scale Student Protests

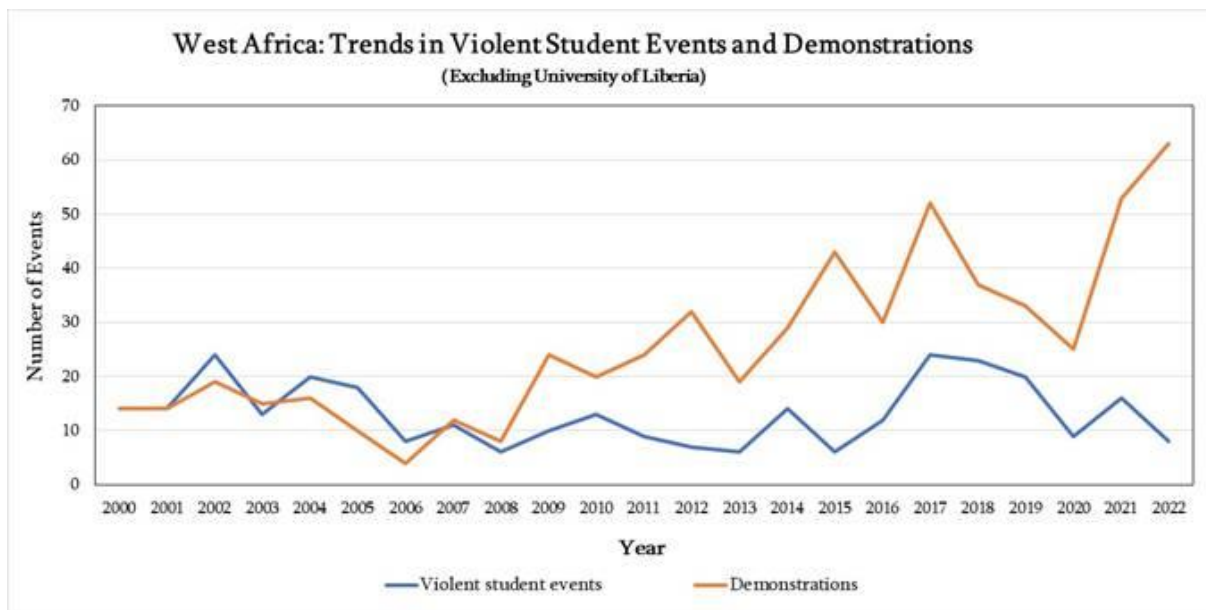
The third context which fosters organized violence, is the presence of student demonstrations. In many parts of West Africa, the police or military seek to contain student protests. Such efforts often become violent either because students attack the police or military, or defend themselves after being exposed to violence from security forces.

University of Liberia stands out as a campus that has a notable number of demonstrations escalating into organized student violence. Graph 7.1 below lucidly illustrates this phenomenon, as peaks in student demonstrations tend to occur at the same time as spikes in violent events. Meanwhile, it is also visible that not all demonstrations escalate into violence as the peaks in protest events are normally higher than the number of clashes. Out of all recorded student demonstrations at University of Liberia (61), a third (20) escalated into dyadic violence, most commonly between students and the police.



Graph 7.1. Trends in violent student events and student demonstrations for University of Liberia.

As can be discerned from graph 7.2 below, the correlation between student demonstrations and organized violence is not as straightforward in West Africa at large. From 2000 to 2008, the number of violent student events and protests largely covary. However, during the 2010s the two trends diverge. While the number of demonstrations continue to increase (except for 2018-2020), organized student violence is more fluctuating, with some increases in 2015-2019 followed by notable drops in 2020 and 2022.



Graph 7.2. Trends in violent student events and student demonstrations in West Africa (excluding University of Liberia).

The reasons why students protest are many and vary between and within countries. In general, students organize themselves to raise their voices about current issues or experienced injustices. This can be in relation to national issues, such as the government’s removal of oil subsidies, or about university-related issues, such as an increase in school fees. Demonstrations can therefore be seen as a channel to communicate students’ opinions, which is especially historically rooted at larger and older universities with strong student unions or parties.

Demonstrations are particularly likely to escalate into violence when they are large and concern contested issues. For example, a large student protest over the expulsion of five students at the campus of Université Abdou Moumouni in Niger, in April 2018, escalated into clashes with security forces when they arrived at campus, leaving many students injured (AFP 2018). It is common for students to ally themselves with civil society organizations, human rights activists, or opposition parties to protest nation-wide issues, such as fuel hikes or police brutality. Because such broad-based protest movements often constitute a larger threat to incumbent regimes, they risk being met with violence by state security forces, with demonstrators responding in kind. In 2011, large-scale protests organized by students erupted in the city of Koudougou, Burkina Faso, after a high school student died in police custody. Driven by university students and other parts of civil society, the demonstrations became a national movement, incorporating national grievances, and lasted for months. These protests were sometimes met with repressive violence by security forces resulting in injuries and deaths (Sylla 2011). The risk of such forms of escalation also depends on how entrenched a culture of violence is in the security forces. The abusive track-record of the Nigerian police could, for instance, be one reason for why police-student clashes are so prevalent in Nigeria.

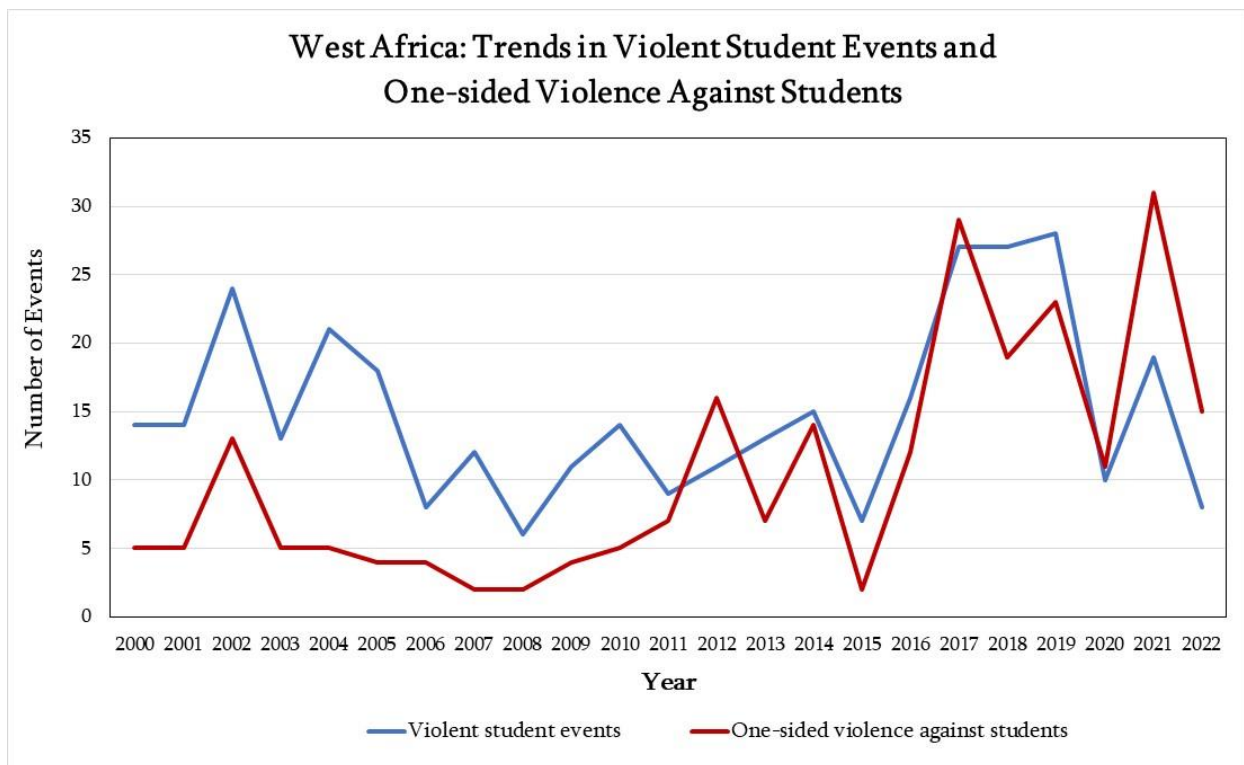
Militarized Masculinities

A final context conducive to organized student violence is when student organizations are permeated by militarized masculinities. To increase their organizational strength, student groups need to construct strong in-group identities. This is particularly true if violence is considered a legitimate means of achieving their objectives. Studies have highlighted that the usage of collective violence requires a strategy to socialize members, whereby the practice of violence acquires a taken-for-granted quality (Checkel 2017). This is often done through the dispersion of militarized masculine norms, whereby manhood becomes synonymous with strength and ferocity, and “where violent acts are both justified and glorified” (Bjarnegård et al. 2021: 7142). Student organizations can promote such norms by employing various mechanisms, ranging from persuasion and teaching, to hazing and dehumanization (Checkel 2017). High levels of militarized masculinities do not preclude the active participation of women. On the contrary, female students often play a crucial role in entrenching such norms by engaging in violent acts. In some Nigerian ‘cult’ fraternities, female members are tasked to attack female counterparts in opposing groups, or humiliate individual male students by beating them up (Rotimi 2005). As such, women’s participation in militarized student organizations help to cement the very patriarchal hierarchies that control them (Eichler 2014: 82-83).

In West Africa, militarized masculinities appear to be particularly prevalent in student fraternities. This is perhaps not surprising, considering that such organizations often force prospective recruits to undergo humiliating acts—often involving violent components such as beatings or floggings—to test their toughness and build strong common bonds. These acts are also often highly gendered. In Nigeria for instance, many new entrants are given violent sexual-related tasks, such as to assault or rape a specific university student or employee. Female recruits may also be coerced into sexual activities (Rotimi, 2005: 83-84). Accustoming members to similar forms of abuse also helps to normalize violence against other student groups. Due to the glorification of masculinity, such violence often takes gendered forms. For instance, during confrontations between student hall fraternities in Ghana, it is not uncommon that male members seek to portray themselves as “embodying true masculinity” (virile and assertive), while depicting competitors as weaklings who possess female genitalia (Diabah 2020).

8. Students as Victims of Organized Violence

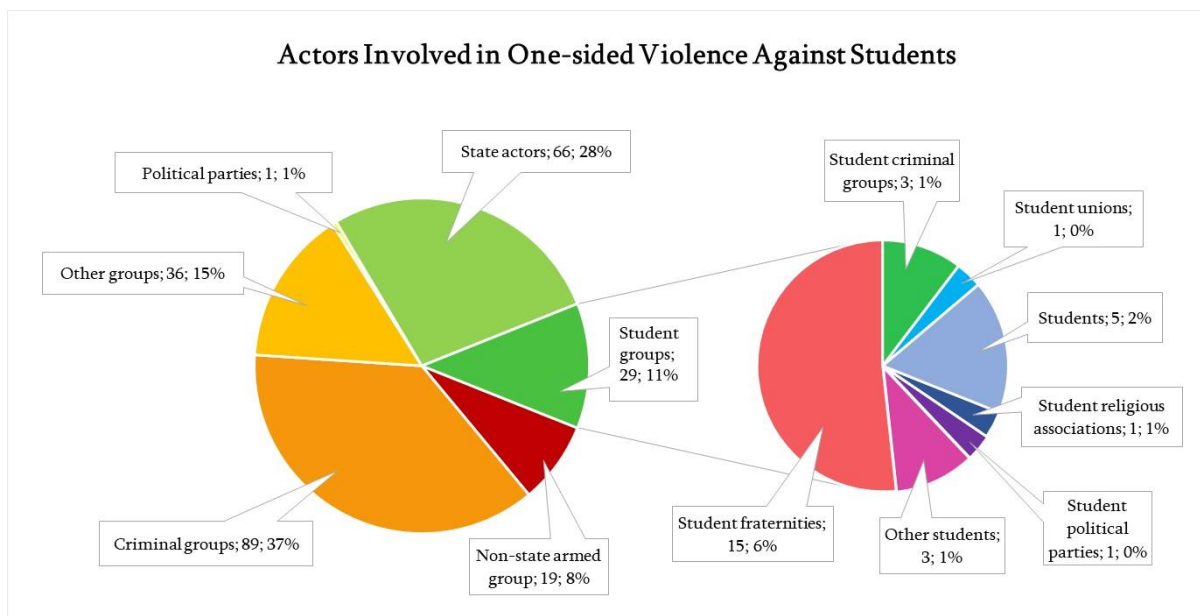
While this report focuses on students as perpetrators of violence, it is critical to note that students are also the target of violence. Graph 8.1 demonstrates the levels of one-sided violence committed against students (i.e. situations where organized actors employ force against students, but students due to not retaliate) in West Africa during 2000-2022. To provide an idea about how abuses against students covary with organized student violence, we have also included data on this. 2012 is the first breaking point where students were more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators of violence. Since then, these two types of violence have been more at par.



Graph 8.1. Trends in violent student events and one-sided violence against students in West Africa during 2000-2022.

The largest threat against students are criminal groups, which are responsible for 37 percent of the violence (see Graph 8.2 below). Almost all of these incidents took place at Nigerian universities. This violence is predominantly committed by ‘cult groups’ that exist outside of universities, and whose members are non-students. Even if it is possible to trace the origins of these ‘cult groups’ back to certain universities (e.g. members are often former students), they operate independently of university-based fraternities. What is more, they can best be described as well-organized crime syndicates that often have a global reach.¹² Due to the economic and political benefits of engaging with students, it is not uncommon that external ‘cult groups’ seek to increase their influence at campuses. Such penetrations do not only result in clashes with university-based fraternities, but also the killing of innocent students.

¹² It is important to note that there is often membership overlap between student and non-student cult groups, and when students graduate they often join non-student cult groups.



Graph 8.2. The number and share of ‘one-sided violence against students’ events that specific categories of organized actors are involved in.

Another type of criminal violence that students are exposed to are kidnappings. In recent years, this has become a lucrative business for organized gangs in Nigeria (Omotola & Oyewole 2024). While kidnappers may sometimes kill students during their operations, kidnapping is mostly driven as an economic enterprise with students as the commodity. Compared to the average Nigerian youth, university students come from more well-off families who have the capital to pay ransoms for their release. If not, the universities themselves sometimes gather and pay ransoms for their students. Similarly, due to the high concentration of students on campus, groups of armed robbers often target, abuse and sometimes kill students going to and from campus.

The second most common perpetrators are state actors—such as the police or armed forces—who committed 28 percent of the abuses against students. This violence is often inflicted when students engage in demonstrations. This highlights that students do not always retaliate when attacked by security forces (as discussed in section 7 above), but often chose to remain peaceful. One reason for this is the power disparity between students and security forces; in many instances the only weapons available for protesting students are stones and sticks.

Meanwhile, student groups constitute the third clearly identifiable actor that poses a risk to the student body.¹³ In 11 percent of the cases, student actors employed violence against their peers. A majority of these abusive events were carried out by Nigerian university ‘cult’ fraternities and is notably deadly compared to other one-sided violence actors. This violence appears in several different

¹³ To be precise, the “Other groups” classification is technically the third largest category. However, this consist of an array of various actors that cannot be grouped into a specific category, such as peacekeepers or communal groups. Likewise, student groups that cannot be categorized into a specific actor category are categorized as “Other students”, such as students who are supporters of a national political party.

contexts, such as in relation to initiation rituals, targeted attacks towards university-based 'anti-cult' groups, or reprisal attacks based on previous rivalry clashes.

Finally, students are also the victims of violence committed by non-state armed groups, such as rebel movements, militias or paramilitaries. In fact, such violence constitutes eight percent of the one-sided violence against students. This was overwhelmingly carried out by the Nigerian Islamist group *Boko Haram*, which repeatedly attacked students at University of Maiduguri in north-eastern Nigeria. These acts of violence are in line with the ideological underpinnings of the rebel group. A central tenet of *Boko Haram* is that it sees Western-inspired education—such as higher education—as a sin and its' institutions as legitimate targets that should be attacked.

9. Concluding Discussion: When are Universities at Risk?

In many parts of West Africa organized student violence is an everyday reality that students, teachers, and local communities must live with. Such violence not only undermines students' ability to make the best of their education, but also inflicts suffering and destruction outside of campus. More disturbingly student violence risks fostering a new generation of leaders who employ violence, rather than elections, as a tool for political contestation. What is more, organized student violence has been on the rise since 2008. The type of organized violence that students engage in is primarily dyadic violence; where student groups clash with other organized actors, such as rival student associations or security forces. However, students also use violence to destroy property (property violence) and intimidate, sexually abuse, and kill unarmed civilians, including student peers (student one-sided violence).

One of the most striking features of organized student violence in West Africa, is how geographically varied it is between and within countries. Nigeria is by far the most violent country. Other states with a large share of student violence is Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. This can be compared to Cabo Verde and Guinea-Bissau that did not experience any violent events. What is more, violence tends to be clustered to a few campuses in each country, with University of Liberia (Liberia), Lagos State University (Nigeria) and Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny (Côte d'Ivoire) being the most violent. The clustering of violence to relatively few universities is a source of hope; it highlights that most centres of higher learning remain peaceful. This makes programmatic efforts to curb student violence more manageable, since interventions can focus on a few 'hot-spots'. Furthermore, by analytically comparing campuses with and without student violence, it is possible to develop theories explaining why certain universities are more susceptible to violence, than others.

The most common type of student organization that perpetrate violence are various fraternities. Most prevalent of these are outlawed 'cult' fraternities in Nigeria. Besides fraternities, student unions and political parties are other student actors who commonly employ arms. When students use violence against non-student

organizations, they predominantly do so versus state actors, such as the police and military, often in the context of student demonstrations.

Factors Associated with Organized Student Violence

What then causes students to take to arms? Based on the empirical analysis in sections 3-7, it is possible to inductively identify a number of factors that appear to increase the risk of organized student violence. We have, more specifically, identified six such clusters of factors.

1. *Elite penetration of universities.* Evidence suggests that student violence is more prevalent when student and national politics are intertwined. Such dynamics increase the stakes of inter-student rivalries; as auxiliaries to national political parties, student organizations can gain access to what are often highly sought-after patronage networks. Elite influence is often concentrated in older, larger universities situated in the capital or major urban centers. These universities typically have sizable populations of aggrieved students—many with a history of political activism—and are frequently located in strategic parts of the city. Youths studying at these institutions therefore constitute a political force capable of shutting down the city. As such, elites often seek either to harness or contain the agency of students in the 'big city.'
2. *Large-scale student protests.* Student violence is often conducted in the context of demonstrations. In countries with weak democratic institutions, regimes are often quick to securitize student protests. This is perhaps not surprising considering that students often take on the role as 'first movers'—the actors who first dare to take to the streets and demand democratic change (Amutabi 2002; Dahlum 2019). As a consequence, governments often quickly deploy security forces to contain student protests. In this context of heightened confrontation, demonstrations easily escalate into violence; either because police use excessive violence against students, or groups of students seek to provoke security forces.
3. *Abusive security forces.* There are important variations—also amongst weak democracies—in how abusive security forces are. Police and military in some states resort to force more readily, and have a much worse human rights record. As such, student violence is also a function of the behaviour of security forces. If the police and military are quick to quell signs of student activism, there is an increased risk that students respond in kind.
4. *Culture of violence in society.* University campuses cannot be seen in isolation from the societies in which they are embedded. Consequently, when host communities are engulfed by criminality, electoral violence, or civil wars, the risk of spillover into campus life increases. While this often takes the form of students being victimized by criminal groups or rebel movements, it can also

result in students being socialized into using violence, making alliances with violent entrepreneurs, and gaining access to arms.

5. *Militarized masculinities in student organizations.* Organized student violence is often carried out by student organizations permeated by militarized masculinities. To strengthen in-group identity, such organizations commonly equate manhood with strength and ferocity, idealizing the use of force. As a consequence, members have incentives to employ violence not only within the organization, but also vis-à-vis rival student bodies and ordinary students. Hence, student violence seems to be more rampant at campuses where such organizations are active.
6. *Economic shocks.* Finally, student violence is often triggered by sudden changes in national and university policies that affect the ability of students to finance their studies. This concerns macro-level events (e.g. removal of fuel subsidies or sudden increases in food prices), or university specific changes (e.g. increased cost for tuition or housing, removal of scholarships).¹⁴

Policy Implications

The primary policy implication of this report is that the factors discussed above can serve as early-warning indicators of when universities are at risk. Actors engaged in promoting higher education in Africa would therefore do well to develop conflict prevention interventions at campuses where all, or most, of these factors are present. Scarce resources can thereby be devoted to these universities, while campuses characterized by peaceful interactions can be ‘de-securitized’.

When it comes to campus-specific factors (*elite penetration, large-scale student protests, militarized masculinities*) several policies can be enacted. First, one strategy is to make it mandatory for national political parties and student organizations, who want to campaign on campus, to publicly sign codes of conduct prohibiting the usage of violence. Even if these are not legally binding, they can still have value as a public shaming mechanism. At worst, efforts can be taken to regulate or temporarily ban political campaigning on campus. Second, an effective strategy may be to conduct gender and human rights training with students in general—and members of student organizations in particular—to counter norms based on militarized masculinities. Similarly, training that accentuates the virtues of non-violent resistance can be beneficial. It is crucial here to emphasize to student leaders and activists that research shows that non-violent resistance is more effective in bringing about policy change than violent campaigns (Chenoweth & Stephan 2008). This approach allows policymakers to recognize the positive role of student activism in supporting democratic transitions, while also minimizing the risk of students using demonstrations as a pretext for violence.

¹⁴ Even if economic shocks appear to be the most common ‘trigger’ factor, it is important to note that students also react to other types of sudden events or changes. This concerns triggers such as name changes to universities or university-based scandals.

Regarding more country specific factors (*abusive security forces, culture of violence in society*), university-based programs need to be done in tandem with macro-and meso-level reforms. This concerns security sector reform programs that seeks to ensure democratic control over the police and military, and the diffusion of human right norms to personnel staffing these institutions. More specifically, efforts can be made to promote confidence building measures between state security actors and students. This can be done through the creation of university security committees, where representatives of student organizations, university staff, and police/military meet on regular intervals to discuss common and urgent issues. Universities also benefit when efforts are made to improve the general security climate in host communities. Examples of the latter include capacity-building of the police, investing in community policing, and supporting peace processes between the state and non-state armed groups.

Finally, to counter the negative effect of *economic shocks* it is vital for national and international actors to continue to invest in improving the quality of higher education, and ensuring that students have the socioeconomic means to complete their education. This includes long-term investments in scholarships, affordable housing, and part-time employment opportunities that can increase students' resilience against sudden economic shocks. Equally important is to improve university-student dialogue. African universities are highly centralized organizations, where students struggle to make their voices heard within a formal institutional context. A lack of input on issues such as tuition fees, teaching, and housing generates resentment that can trigger student violence. This highlights the urgent need to improve student democracy, allowing students' input on key policies to be considered early in the decision-making process.

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11. Appendix

Methodology for Data Collection

The data collection is based on news reports retrieved from Dow Jones Factiva's global news database. For each of the 183 universities included in this study, we used an English search string consisting of: (a) an array of violence-related words; (b) the word *student*; and (c) the name and acronyms and/or alternative names of the university in question. The searches capture relevant articles from all media sources—both domestic and international—within the Factiva database. This systematic approach was employed to ensure a high level of reliability and comparability in the data collected. Using this method, the number of articles retrieved per university ranged from 0 to several thousands. When very few articles were generated, the search string was systematically adjusted to generate more articles, for example by adding the name of the city in which the university is located in. If an exceptionally large number of articles were generated, adjustments were made in the opposite direction by making the Factiva subject restrictions narrower. This filtered away articles concerning unrelated activities—e.g. inaugurations of new buildings, the election of new university vice-chancellors, or graduation ceremonies—that are often published concerning larger universities. Adjustments to narrow down the search were made only to a few universities and the decision to do so was discussed among the research team to ensure a systematic data collection.

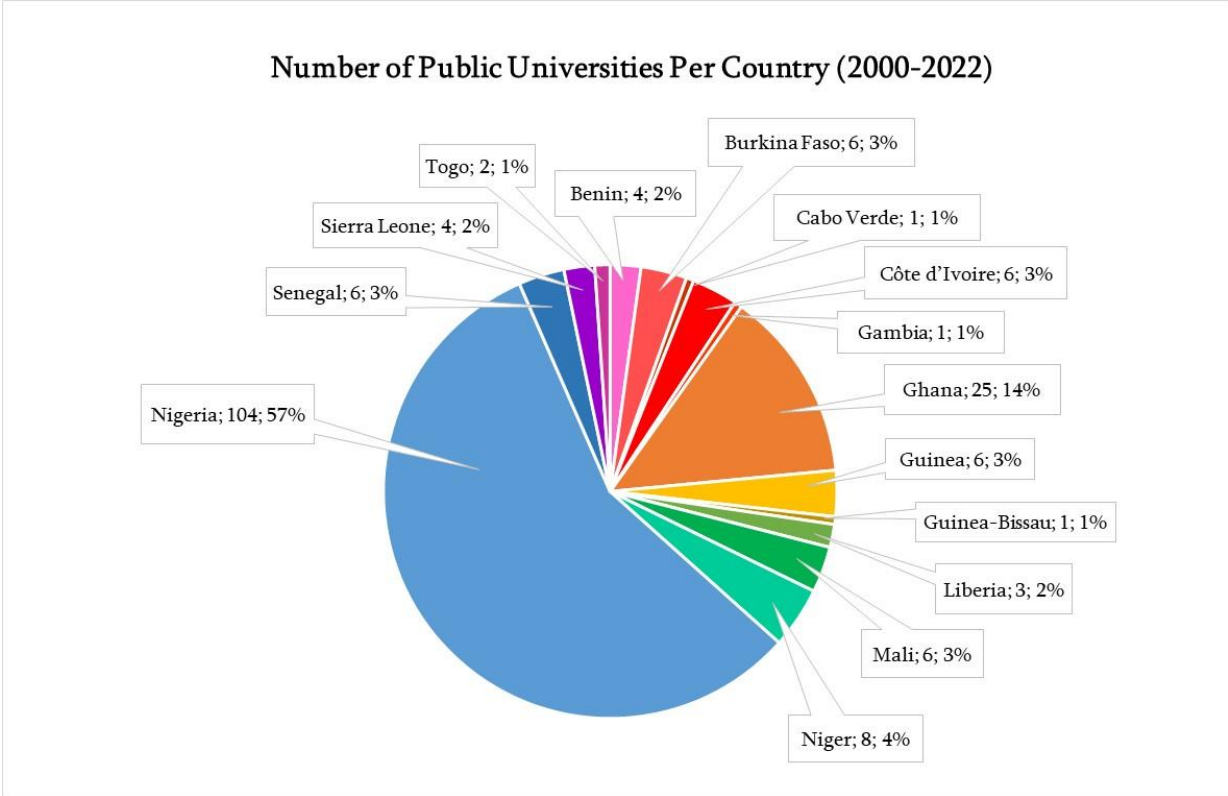
Throughout the coding work we have employed a conservative approach. What this means is that we have not included 'unclear' violent events that (a) do not fully live up to our operational definitions for organized student violence (and the three under categories dyadic, property and student one-sided violence); and (b) cannot be assigned to students belonging to one of the 183 universities analysed in this study. The benefit of this approach is that we believe that the data holds high-quality (as we have minimized the risk of incorporating 'false' events in our data). However, this comes with a price; the true number of violent events is, in all likelihood, higher than presented here.

Even if the above-mentioned design ensures a high level of data reliability and comparability, it does open up the risk of certain biases that the reader should be aware of. First, there is often a discrepancy between, and within, countries concerning media coverage. Some countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria, have stronger domestic media actors, as well as greater international media presence. Hence, violent student events may be more likely to be reported in such countries. Similarly, since media actors are often based in larger cities, student violence in universities in more rural settings may be underreported. Second, there can also be a bias caused by variations in levels of freedom of speech between countries, where information about student violence may be more likely to be suppressed in authoritarian contexts. Third, there are also reasons to believe that student violence carried out during large-scale demonstrations may be overreported. Unlike so-called 'cult-fraternity' violence, which is often purposefully done in secrecy, violent demonstrations are public acts that attract media attention. Finally, as this report is a pilot study, we only used English media sources. There may therefore be a language bias, whereby we are not capturing all violent events

taking place in French and Portuguese speaking countries. The risk of this bias should not be exaggerated, considering that collective violence is often the type of events that are most likely to be picked up and reported on by, for instance, international media outlets. Considering these potential biases, it is vital to see the data presented in this report as expressions of general trends, rather than empirical truths.

Breakdown of the Number of Universities Per Country

Graph 11.1 illustrates the number of public universities in each West African country and also a country’s share of the total number of public universities in the region (183). Given its large population, it is not surprising that Nigeria has the highest number of public universities. Therefore, when observing the high number of violent student events in Nigeria, it is important to also consider that Nigeria has a total of 104 universities during the studied time-period (2000-2022). As such, Nigeria has more universities than all other West African countries combined. Ghana stands out with the second highest number of universities (25).



Graph 11.1. Number of public universities per country and the share of total number of universities in West Africa (183).