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## **Decentralisation, Devolution, and Dynamics of Violence in Africa**

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Decentralisation, Devolution, and Dynamics of Violence in Africa  
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# Decentralisation, Devolution, and Dynamics of Violence in Africa

Caitriona Dowd and Jean-Pierre Tranchant

## Summary

This research sets out to understand the effect of processes of decentralisation on violent conflict in Africa, and what entry points these provide for research and policy actors to engage in meaningful and effective governance, peace-building and conflict resolution. The research employs a mixed methods approach, combining large-*n*, cross-national quantitative research on the relationship between decentralised political authority and the level, frequency, intensity and nature/form of political violence with qualitative process-tracing through secondary literature on pathways to violence in three specific decentralised governance contexts: Kenya, Mali and Nigeria.

**Keywords:** decentralization; rebellion; militias; political violence; Africa.

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# Practice summary

## Research question

This paper sets out to understand the effect of processes of decentralisation on different forms of violent conflict in Africa using a combination of large- $n$  quantitative analysis and qualitative process tracing in three case studies (Kenya, Mali and Nigeria). The paper attempts to empirically investigate the effects of decentralisation on three distinct forms of political violence, namely (1) rebel and secessionist violence, (2) state violence; and (3) militia violence. For the purpose of this study, militias are defined as organised groups that use violence to achieve political and/or security goals, without seeking the overthrow or replacement of the central state, or secession from it (Raleigh 2016; Raleigh and Dowd 2017).

Theoretically, the effects of decentralisation on violent conflict are ambiguous. On the one hand, devolution of power to subnational governments is expected to reduce the distance between people and the government and to increase governments' responsiveness. Both should lower the motives for rebel groups to form or to take up arms. On the other hand, a greater concentration of power at the local level can raise the stakes of political competition and generate or fuel localised forms of violence, notably from militia.

## Research design

For the quantitative research, we combine information on decentralisation from the V-DEM<sup>1</sup> (Varieties of Democracy) data set with information on the three forms of political violence from ACLED<sup>2</sup> (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project). This results in a panel data set where violent event counts are attributed to rebel, militia and state forces in 47 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, from 1997 to 2015 inclusive. This produces 893 observations at the country-year level.

Decentralisation is measured by two variables: a variable of *decentralised democratic power*, which gauges the relative power of local officials versus non-officials; and a variable of political decentralisation, gauging whether *subnational elections are free and fair*.

We statistically explore whether the variables of decentralisation are significantly related to each of the three forms of political violence. We use a negative binomial estimator to account for the fact that many pairs of country-year did not experience any violence. Standard errors are clustered at country level to control for the fact that violent events may not be independent of other country-level factors. Finally, we control for a wide range of factors that may affect the outcome and be correlated with decentralisation.

We supplement the cross-national comparative analysis above with small-N qualitative process tracing in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria to better understand not only the structural drivers of violence, but also to illustrate the causal mechanisms, processes and agency involved. The cases selected are deliberately diverse, representing different experiences of decentralisation and violence. These countries differ in terms of their degree of decentralised governance. Nigeria is a federal country whereas in Mali, local governments are closely overseen by central authorities. Kenya sits in between.

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<sup>1</sup> V-DEM is one of the largest social science databases, with more than 350 indicators on democracy and political systems.

<sup>2</sup> ACLED is the most comprehensive public collection of political violence and protest data for developing states.

## Main results

- Higher levels of decentralisation are positively and significantly correlated with the number of violent events attributed to militia groups. In other words, the greater the level of decentralisation, the greater the number of militia-related violent events we expect to see. This is true for both variables of decentralisation.
  - This effect is large: the predicted number of violent events attributed to political militias almost doubles from 8.9 to 15.6 militia events per year, when the subnational political power score moves just two points, from 1 (relatively low power) to 3 (relatively high power).
- However, neither rebel violence nor state violence are significantly related to either variable of decentralisation.
- In contrast to claims that decentralisation serves to reduce the winner-takes-all mentality of centralised political power, the cases of Kenya, Mali and Nigeria all illustrate conditions in which competition for, and electoral contest over, local political office has transformed the profile and geography of violence in these contexts.
- Evidence from Nigeria and Mali further challenges the argument that greater power at the local level will reduce the likelihood of insurgency, rebellion and calls for secession.
- The case studies also point to the possibility that in contexts of substantial concentration of political power at the local level – especially when local governments enjoy significant financial resources – there may also be a feedback effect, whereby devolution and decentralisation ‘localise’ political violence.

## Policy implications

Our findings reveal a potential trade-off that policymakers and practitioners face in supporting the decentralisation of political power. Critically, while devolved democratic power may be an effective means of reducing *some forms* of high-intensity, rebel-driven violence, other forms of *lower-intensity, militia-related* conflict may emerge in their place, or interact with them, complicating and transforming the conflict situation.

The case studies demonstrate that while limited financial resources can restrict the efficacy and autonomy of subnational centres of power – and thereby fail to meaningfully address calls for localised accountability and governance – high levels of localised control over natural resources and finances can raise the stakes of political competition at those sites, and produce other forms of violence.

The ideal arrangement will necessarily be context-specific. It will depend on an informed assessment of the incentives for violence, and a detailed analysis of (potentially violent) stakeholders, in order to design and implement governance arrangements that reflect local demands but do not further inflame violent competition.

# 1 Introduction

Against a backdrop of increasingly devolved governance in Africa in recent years, a wide-ranging consensus has emerged on the desirability of decentralisation for political development. One claim of its proponents is that decentralising power to local authorities brings government closer to the people, leading to enhanced accountability and responsiveness (see Crook 2003). Another claim is that decentralisation can serve as a conflict management tool by affording populations greater control over local politics (see Gurr 1994; Crawford and Hartmann 2008; Englebert 2002; Seely 2001; Lijphart 1977).

However, recent research in the field of democratisation has demonstrated that ‘not all good things go together’ (Grimm and Leininger 2012): competitive democracy can co-exist with, and even further incentivise, widespread political violence, taking forms such as voter intimidation, opposition repression, and attempts to forcibly displace rival communities. A subset of this literature has begun to explore the risks that particular democratic processes and institutional designs, including decentralisation, might pose for peace and security. In contrast to claims that decentralisation serves as a conflict mitigating strategy, recent research suggests that concentration of greater political power at the subnational level can raise the stakes of political competition and incentivise violence in some contexts (Cohen 1997; Schelnberger 2008). However, few studies have explored these dynamics, and fewer still have empirically tested the relationship between these processes.

Moreover, research in democratisation and decentralisation has largely failed to engage with emerging themes in conflict literature, which increasingly emphasises the importance of distinguishing between different *forms* of violence, and corresponding violent agents, in order to meaningfully identify specific causal relationships and violence trajectories in conflict-affected contexts. The literature on decentralisation and violence tends to focus on civil wars and large-scale ethnic violence (for instance), although the absolute number of civil wars has declined across the globe in the post-cold war era. Evidence suggests that alternative forms of political violence are increasing and producing new forms of insecurity (OECD 2016; Raleigh *et al.* 2010). In this context, competitive political processes have been particularly characterised by militia violence (Raleigh 2016). However, the relationship between these alternative, lower-intensity but pervasive forms of violence, and decentralisation, remains poorly understood.

This paper addresses this gap through empirical research on the relationship between decentralisation, and not only the levels of political violence, but also its discrete forms, in Africa. Through cross-national comparative analysis of violence and decentralisation on the continent, we demonstrate that decentralisation creates incentives for localised, lower-intensity violence by militia groups, through local political competition and the raised stakes of political power at the subnational level. In a series of case studies, we illustrate the ways in which election-related violence, communally mobilised militia groups, and self-styled ‘self-defence’ and vigilante militias are inextricably linked to the devolution and concentration of political power at the subnational level. The findings contribute to the study of violent conflict and governance by theorising and empirically testing the incentive structures for different violent groups in discrete governance arrangements; and contribute to the policy literature by highlighting the peace and security trade-offs inherent in decentralisation processes. The paper is structured as follows: Section 1 gives an overview of existing literature and implications for conflict dynamics; Section 2 outlines a research design and test of our hypothesis; Section 3 gives a detailed discussion of selected cases; and Section 4 provides our conclusions.

## **1.1 Existing literature**

The literature on decentralisation and political violence in Africa and beyond is extensive, and a full review is necessarily beyond the scope of this study. Below, we summarise key literature on the process and context of decentralisation in Africa; its proposed role as a conflict management and reduction tool; and emerging research in the field of conflict studies and political science that challenges this view.

### **1.1.1 The process of decentralisation in Africa**

In addition to conflict management, proponents of decentralisation in Africa have justified this institutional process by referring to the goals of good governance and development. Here, we summarise the decentralisation processes that have occurred on the continent, as the

manner in which decentralisation was implemented helps to shed light on its successes and limitations in terms of conflict management.

Hyden (2017) distinguishes between three phases of decentralisation in Africa: the colonial period, when decentralisation was an integral part of the indirect rule set up by the colonisers; the post-independence period, characterised by a consolidation of power at the central level; and the liberalisation period of the early 1990s, when decentralisation became widely adopted across the continent. Whereas some countries decentralised very quickly (e.g. Ethiopia and Uganda), others waited much longer before embarking on the process. Devolution of powers is typically associated with political decentralisation, and with multi-party elections being held for the leadership of local councils (Brosio 2000). The move towards decentralisation took place in a variety of institutional contexts. Some countries were explicitly federal (e.g. Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa), while others have simply reinforced the authority of local governments or created new political layers.

The push for decentralisation in the early 1990s was underpinned by the belief that devolving power and resources at the local level would improve service delivery, enhance popular participation, and help manage conflict. It was also a result of the widespread perception that top-down development had failed in Africa (Wunsch and Olowu 1995). Decentralisation was then seen as a critical tool with which to pursue the twin goals of development and democratisation (Hyden 2017). 'Democratic decentralisation' – to borrow the term coined by Crook and Manor (2000) – became the preferred form of government in the early 1990s (Ribot 2002). Ribot noted that the language around decentralisation moved away from notions of national cohesion and management of the local population to a focus on issues of democratisation, rights and pluralism.

Such a focus fitted with donor agendas around good governance and global development. Indeed, the good governance agenda was based on the belief that democratisation would be critical for delivering development (Hyden 2017). In that view, transferring significant mandates to local governments and establishing multi-party elections for the leadership of local councils was a critical means to bring people closer to centres of power, and to make governments more accountable and responsive to local needs.

Donors such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and bilateral funders also viewed decentralisation favourably, mostly as a way to curb what they perceived as an excessive consolidation of power at the centre, and to scale back the state (World Bank 2000). Structural adjustment programmes implemented in many debt-ridden African countries in the 1990s were mostly geared towards reducing the size of the state and liberalising the economy, consistent with the Washington Consensus on the negative role of the state in development. Decentralisation was a means to pursue this agenda. Conversely, central governments used decentralisation to offload the burden of structural adjustment to local governments (Brosio 2000).<sup>3</sup>

The result was that many local governments did not have the financial resources to meet their new mandates. In their analysis of South Africa, Koelble and Siddle (2013) found that only 2 out of 37 local governments had all their mandates funded. The extreme weakness of local governments in Africa means that many prerogatives of decentralised bodies are simply not met, or depend on transfers from the central state. Some authors argue that the manner in which decentralisation was pursued by international donors was oblivious to local realities of African countries. Manor (2000) noted that decentralisation in Africa followed excessively institutional designs, which were made even more problematic by the weakness of the state. Crook and Manor (1998) and Conyers (2000) also stressed that positive

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<sup>3</sup> For a political economy analysis of decentralisation in Africa, see also Dafflon and Madies (2012).

experiences of decentralisation often existed because of a strong state, a prerequisite which ran contrary to the Washington Consensus. Ribot (2002) and Hyden (2017) demonstrate that proponents of decentralisation assumed that the necessary structures of local accountability and democratic traditions existed and functioned as elsewhere in the world, which was rarely the case in practice.

These critiques point to broad weaknesses in the process of decentralisation, and the conditions in which it has been introduced. Below, we illustrate some of the ways in which these underlying limitations influence the success of decentralisation as a conflict reduction strategy, and even serve (in some cases) to further entrench and transform violence at the local level.

### **1.1.2 Decentralisation, civil war and ethnic separatism**

Alongside the claims of proponents (discussed above) that decentralisation supports greater accountability and responsiveness, there is a growing body of literature that documents the positive effects of decentralisation on reducing certain forms of violent conflict. Proponents of a consociational view of democracy (Lijphart 1968) see, in decentralisation, a means of preventing or managing conflict risk. This is especially true for territorial cleavages – i.e. when potential belligerent groups are clustered geographically. Consociationalism refers to the notion that democracy in plural society works better when cleavages across social groups are recognised, and a consensual power-sharing arrangement prevails. Opponents to consociationalism stress that acknowledging cleavages detracts from building an overarching national identity, and unleashes centrifugal forces.

One fundamental claim of proponents of decentralisation is that plural societies are characterised by a diversity of preferences that are incompatible with uniform policies. Granting a significant degree of self-rule to groups or regions with distinct preferences is thus a means to both preserve the territorial integrity of the state and allow segments of the population to have control over their own affairs (e.g. Lijphart 1977; Nordquist 1998; Gurr 1994; Hechter 2000). This can take the form of substantial devolution of power to all local governments or the institutionalisation of regional autonomy and federalism. A second argument in favour of decentralisation is that the accountability and government responsiveness that it is supposed to deliver (see above) would help minority groups make their voices heard (Siegle and O'Mahony 2006).

A contending body of research, however, is sceptical of decentralisation as a means of conflict resolution or peace-building. Some scholars argue that consociational democracy in general, and decentralisation in particular, contribute to legitimising and 'freezing' ethnic identities over time (Hardgrave 1993; Kymlicka 1998). Decentralisation in plural societies reinforces the strength of narrow ethno-regional identities and detracts from nation-building (Horowitz 1985), notably through the strengthening of regional parties (Brancati 2006). Federalism in multi-ethnic countries has been blamed by some for reinforcing secessionist tendencies (e.g. Roeder 1991; Bunce 1999; Cornell 2002), and for being fundamentally unstable (Hale 2004). Decentralisation may also encourage ethnic groups to splinter, as subgroups seek to control their own jurisdictions (Green 2008; Tranchant 2008), whereas local minority groups may suffer from the domination of a larger group (Roeder 1991). It is also feared that decentralisation endows separatist groups with considerable institutional, economic and political resources that can be used to pursue conflict (Cornell 2002).

Large-*n* studies tend to find that decentralisation prevents or manages ethnic violence, albeit only under certain conditions. Early studies by Cohen (1997), Bermeo (2002) and Saideman *et al.* (2002) contended that decentralisation or federalism were associated with a lower risk of ethnic violence. Brancati (2006) found that decentralisation exerts a negative direct impact on ethnic violence in democratic countries, but is also associated with stronger regional

parties, which tend to fuel violence. In their study of federal and quasi-federal countries, Bakke and Wibbels (2006) suggest that federalism tends to foster ethnic violence when regional inequalities are substantial, but that large fiscal transfers in federal states detract from violence. Christin and Hug (2012) indicate that ethno-federal structures can detract from civil war, but only if the number of regions dominated by distinct ethno-regional groups is small. Finally, Cederman *et al.* (2015) and Tranchant (2016a) find that regional autonomy status (and political decentralisation for the latter) strongly detracts from risks of civil war. The net effect of decentralisation is thus ambiguous.

An outstanding gap in this literature is that it ignores the effect of decentralisation on localised forms of violence. Cohen (1997) assumed that local conflicts would increase with decentralisation as the stakes associated with controlling local governments rose. Conversely, large-scale conflict over control of the national government would become less likely. There is some evidence that decentralisation is associated with an increase in local conflicts. Green (2008) found that the decentralisation process in Uganda led to massive re-districting and conflict over the definition of local administrative units. But it is unclear whether this is a universal phenomenon. Murshed, Tadjoeidin and Chowdhury (2009) and Pierskalla and Sacks (2017), for instance, found that fiscal decentralisation in Indonesia was responsible for a fall in routine violence and did not cause local tensions to flare up. These divergent findings point to the need for further research in this area.

### **1.1.3 Violence dynamics**

As the preceding summary suggests, recent research has demonstrated that high-intensity, civil war and secessionist violent conflict is less likely in conditions of decentralised governance. However, little research has systematically tested the potential relationships between decentralisation and increasingly common, lower-intensity forms of violence.

In recent years, conflict research has emphasised the importance of distinguishing between different forms of violence, and corresponding violent agents, in order to meaningfully identify specific causal relationships and violence trajectories in conflict-affected contexts. For instance, although the number of civil wars has declined worldwide in the post-cold war era, evidence suggests that alternative forms of political violence are increasing and producing new forms of insecurity for civilians and states (OECD 2017; Raleigh *et al.* 2010). Such a focus matters because civil wars witness a proliferation of violent actors, including rebel and state forces, alongside paramilitaries, communal defence groups and informal pro-government forces (Jentzsch, Kalyvas and Schubiger 2015; Stanton 2015; Carey, Mitchell and Lowe 2013). Furthermore, there is growing recognition that violent episodes by non-state agents that do not constitute outright rebellions are also common and growing in frequency, independent of the presence of civil war (see Francis 2005).

Conceptual clarity on the role of such groups can be hampered by a proliferation of terms. Similar non-state armed groups are variously referred to as 'paramilitaries', 'civil militias', 'civil defence forces' (Jentzsch *et al.* 2015: 755) or 'private armies' (Raleigh 2016: 284). A consensus appears to be emerging on the utility of the term 'militia' as a broad category of actor. For the purposes of this study, militias are defined as 'armed groups using violence to influence an immediate political process... They operate at the subnational level, and often in a localised area' (Raleigh 2016: 289).

While this category necessarily encompasses a diverse range of actors, it remains a coherent construct for the present study for several reasons. First, militia groups remain conceptually and categorically distinct from the other types of violent actors engaged in civil war and higher-intensity violence. Although sometimes aligned with, or sponsored by, the state, they differ from state forces in their informal structure (Hoffman 2007; Francis 2005), and are often strategically used by the state as subcontractors of violence for the purposes

of deflecting blame and obscuring the involvement of official state forces in localised violence (see Raleigh and Kishi 2017; Mazzei 2009; Carey and Mitchell 2016). Militias also differ from the other main actors in civil wars, (i.e. rebel groups), in that they are not seeking to overthrow, replace or secede from a central governing authority; rather, they use violence in an attempt to influence or shape outcomes and practices of political process. In this way, the distinction between militias and rebel groups corresponds to Naseemullah's categorisation of 'sovereignty-neutral' and 'sovereignty-challenging' actors, respectively (Naseemullah 2017). In short, militias are defined by their use of violence to influence political processes, and are distinguished from other actors by their structure and their goals.

Examples of militias include: (1) political party and local elite militias affiliated with different parties in Kenya and Nigeria, which engage in both intra- and inter-party violence around elections; (2) communally mobilised militias associated with regional, ethnic or religious identities in Kenya, Mali and Nigeria, which engage other communally mobilised groups; and (3) localised militia that ally or collaborate with larger armed actors such as rebel groups or state forces in Mali and Nigeria.

In addition to seeking different outcomes at the state level, militias also vary in their relationship to the state (Ikelegbe and Okumu 2010: 5). In some instances, militias are proactively established by states from above, as a means to: delegate violence (Carey, Colaresi and Mitchell 2015) or particular types of violence (Cohen and Nordås 2015); extend the reach of state force in contexts of limited power (Kalyvas 2006; Lyall 2010); or maintain power structures in highly fragmented elite regimes (Raleigh and Kishi 2017). Alternatively, militias may emerge from below, independent of state sponsorship or support, either as defensive community mobilised militias seeking to protect populations from predatory and targeted attack during conflict (Blocq 2014), or as armed agents seeking to influence the state, or state processes (such as elections), in the form of opposition- or elite-sponsored, private militias (e.g. Mehler 2007; Ero 2000). These groups are united by a common practice of using violence to negotiate entry to, and determine the contours and conditions of, elite bargains, settlements and political power (de Waal 2015).

Competitive political processes have been especially affected by rising militia violence. Literature on electoral cycles illustrates the multiple pathways by which multi-party elections produce violence (Taylor, Pevehouse and Straus 2013; Bekoe 2012; Laakso 2007). Elections serve as flashpoints of competitive political processes, whereby violence is used to intimidate, control or punish opposing elites and their supporters. While militias are also active violent agents in contexts of state collapse (such as failed states) or state crisis (such as civil war), they are also present in conditions of relatively high levels of state capacity, where elites vie for control and compete for access to state power and resources, reflecting the evolving dynamics of political competition wherein violence continues to play a role (Raleigh 2016).

Such groups are deserving of focused study first and foremost because of the large number of conflict-affected contexts in which they are active. Scholars have referred to this growing phenomenon as the 'militarisation of war and security in Africa', heralding an age of 'soldierless wars in Africa' (Ero 2000: 25, 29). In addition to their sheer number, there is a strong theoretical case for distinguishing between these actors and rebel counterparts. Because discrete actors, and types of actor, use violence in pursuit of different goals and objectives (Kalyvas 2006), we should therefore expect them to have different relationships with institutional design and governance structures in states.

The research that exists on these groups, however, has largely focused on their relationship with national-level political processes and transitions, leaving their relationship to localised political practices and power largely underexplored. This lacuna persists in spite of the fact that many of these groups are not seeking national-level political change, but set out to

influence local politics. This gap in research has particular implications for policy actors seeking to support decentralisation policies in conflict-affected contexts. While evidence indicates that civil war-related violence is reduced by decentralisation, there is far less empirical evidence on the implications of decentralisation policies for lower-intensity conflict, and what trade-offs (in terms of security) this entails for stakeholders and communities in affected contexts.

We hypothesise that while decentralisation successfully reduces the likelihood of civil war-related violence, it nevertheless increases the likelihood of lower-intensity conflict involving militias. This occurs through increased competition over decentralised, subnational political institutions, which actors seek to control or influence through violence. This violence is unlikely to result in large-scale violence, however, as competition at the subnational level is focused on control of local institutions and centres of power.

## 2 Research design

The paper applies a mixed methods approach to studying the relationship between decentralisation and violence, by combining a large-*n*, cross-national, comparative quantitative econometric analysis with a qualitatively informed, in-depth process tracing. The paper first looks at the empirical relationships between decentralisation and militia violence in Africa, and then illustrates these patterns through a focus on violence dynamics in three case study countries: Kenya, Mali and Nigeria. This nested approach to comparative analysis (Lieberman 2005) involves the systematic and sequenced combination of large-*n* quantitative data with secondary, case study-focused hypotheses-testing and refinement (Mahoney 2010; Seawright and Gerring 2008), and is particularly useful for drawing out detail and causal relationships that may be obscured by cross-national comparison alone.

### 2.1 Dependent variables

We test our hypothesis using a panel data set where violent event counts are attributed to rebel, militia and state forces in 47 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, from 1997 to 2015 inclusive.<sup>4</sup> This produces 893 observations at the country–year level. We model the dependent variable using the negative binomial estimator, owing to the distribution of zero-values across the data set. Standard errors are clustered at country level to control for the fact that violent events may not be independent.

The dependent variable is a count of violent events attributed to militia (*Militia\_Events*), rebel (*Rebel\_Events*), and state (*State\_Events*) forces that occurred in the country by year. Militias are defined as organised groups that use violence to achieve political and/or security goals, without seeking the overthrow or replacement of the central state, or secession from it (Raleigh 2016; Raleigh and Dowd 2017).<sup>5</sup> Rebels are defined as political organisations whose goal is to counter an established national governing regime through violence. Such groups have a stated agenda to secure national power through replacement or secession. State forces are defined as the official armed forces of internationally recognised regimes in assumed control of the state (*ibid.* 2017). Examples include state militaries and police throughout the continent.

This actor typology necessarily obscures some variation within categories themselves: state forces, rebel groups and militias all vary considerably in terms of mobilisation, strategy, tactics and operational capacity, within and across contexts, and over time. Nevertheless, we

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<sup>4</sup> Data on political institutions are unavailable for South Sudan and Equatorial Guinea, thus excluding them from the model.

<sup>5</sup> This corresponds to interaction term '3' in the ACLED data set.

contend that this broad typology presents valid categories for analysis on the basis that the fundamental goals of actors in each category differ in meaningful and observable ways. Chief among these differences in non-state actors is the fact that rebel groups, while diverse, seek ultimately to overthrow, replace or secede from the state. By contrast, militia groups are seeking to shape and influence the nature of the political system without its wholesale reconfiguration, including through manipulation of election outcomes, intimidation and oppression of opponents, and violence against perceived ‘rival’ communities in contests for power. In operationalising these categories in this way, we follow other research that has utilised these broad distinctions to derive comparative findings on the actions and dynamics of violent groups (see Raleigh 2016; Carey and Mitchell 2016; Francis 2005).

Violent events are categorised by the nature of the group to which the violence was attributed. We exclude all non-violent events such as peaceful protests, troop movement and the establishment of bases, as these do not directly speak to the dynamics of inter-group violence under consideration here. In robustness tests, models are re-run with the count of violent events attributed to rioters (*Rioters\_Events*), and the count of all distinct named violent groups (*DistinctMilitia* and *DistinctRebel*) discussed in further detail below. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Descriptive statistics of dependent variables**

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
<i>Militia_Events</i>	893	39.747	122.372	0	1415
<i>Rebel_Events</i>	893	33.127	110.461	0	1294
<i>State_Events</i>	893	49.751	126.973	0	1403
<i>Rioters_Events</i>	893	13.959	56.63	0	988
<i>DistinctMilitia</i>	893	2.814	4.484	0	48
<i>DistinctRebel</i>	893	1.081	1.988	0	14

Source: Authors' own.

Data on violent events are drawn from Version 7 of the geo-referenced, disaggregated Armed Conflict Location & Event Dataset (ACLED) (Raleigh *et al.* 2010). ACLED has been used in several analyses of the relationship between governance and violence, including studies on militia violence (Raleigh 2016), public perceptions of violence (Linke, Schutte and Buhaug 2015), the effects of election violence (Linke 2013), and others. The data set contains information on the date, location, actors and types of violent events across Africa from 1997 to the present. The unit of analysis – the individual conflict event – is constant across all years, and facilitates meaningful comparative analysis and process tracing over time and across contexts. This structure renders ACLED data particularly well-suited to understanding dynamics of particular *forms* of violence by discrete actor types, as it is disaggregated by violent actor type (including militias, rebel groups and state forces).

## 2.2 Independent variables

For the independent variable, the paper draws on data from the ‘Varieties of Democracy’ (V-Dem) data set (Coppedge *et al.* 2016) on the institutions and practices of governance. V-Dem is a relatively new data set, but one at the forefront of quantitative political science research, including in areas of subnational democracy (McMann 2016; Knutsen, Gerring and Skaaning 2016), and democratisation and conflict (Krishnarajan *et al.* 2016).

To describe decentralisation, we use a variable of **decentralised democratic power**. This is an ordinal measure, coded on a 0-4 scale, of the relative power of elected over non-elected offices at the local level.<sup>6</sup> A higher score is assigned where non-elected officials are generally subordinate to elected officials at the subnational level; and a lower score where elected officials are subordinate to non-elected officials. This variable effectively captures the degree to which decentralisation invests democratic powers in subnational democratic institutions. To shed light on the causal mechanisms by which subnational power encourages violence, we will also use a second variable associated with decentralisation, **freeness and fairness of local elections**. This is an ordinal measure of the degree to which subnational elections are free and fair. A lower score indicates that subnational elections are not at all free and fair, and a higher score indicates that they are generally free and fair.<sup>7</sup> It is also coded on a 0–4 scale. The extent of decentralisation appears to be relatively stable over the past 20 years in Africa: the mean score for democratic decentralised power has hovered around 2 throughout the entire period.<sup>8</sup>

All statistical models include control variables, chosen in accordance with sensitivity analyses and established conventions (see Hegre and Sambanis 2006; Dixon 2009). These include the combined Polity IV score (*e\_polity*) (Marshall, Gurr and Jaggers 2016), to control for the potential influence of regime type on violence. Demographic controls include a logged measure of population of each country (*Log\_Population*), to control for high population distorting event counts. Economic controls include a logged gross domestic product (GDP) per capita measure (*Log\_GDPpercapita*), to control for the potential influence of wealth levels; and the national infant mortality rate (*Infantmortalityrate*) as a proxy to control for the possible effects of poverty on violence. All three are drawn from the World Development Indicators (World Bank 2016).<sup>9</sup> We also include a control for ethnic fractionalisation (*FractionalizationEthnic*) from Alesina, Devleeschauwer and Easterly (2003), to control for the effects of ethnic fragmentation on conflict. Finally, we include a temporal lag of violent events attributed to the relevant actor type in the previous year, to control for the potential temporal endogeneity of violence (*LMilitiaEvents*, etc.). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.2.

### 2.3 Endogeneity of decentralisation

There is a risk of reverse causality when estimating the effect of decentralisation on violence using the aforementioned strategy. Reverse causality arises when the independent variable of interest (decentralisation) is influenced by the dependent variable (violence). In the presence of reverse causality, it becomes unclear how to interpret the estimated effect of the independent variable. The problem is likely to arise when looking at decentralisation and conflict because decentralisation is often – explicitly or implicitly – implemented in contexts of conflict. For instance, in Mali, a number of authors (e.g. Seely 2001) argue that the decentralisation process was launched with an aim of conflict resolution. Conversely, actors can engage in violence in a strategic bid to obtain greater decentralisation (Walter 2006). Tranchant (2016b) empirically shows that risks of ethnic civil wars rise before regional autonomy is granted to specific groups, which is evidence of strategic behaviours dynamically linking decentralisation and conflict.

We argue, however, that the risk of reverse causality in our estimations is low. First, we have seen that there were few changes in decentralisation levels in Africa. A majority of countries

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<sup>6</sup> In the V-Dem data set, this is the *v2ellocpwr\_ord* variable.

<sup>7</sup> In the V-Dem data set, this is the *v2elffelr\_ord* variable.

<sup>8</sup> The mean score for freeness and fairness of local elections has remained stable at 2.06 until 2005. After 2005, however, there has been an upward trend, rising to 2.3 between 2006 and 2012 and reaching 2.4 in 2013 and 2014.

<sup>9</sup> We created five-year floating averages where gaps existed in the control data. These were applied to population and GDP data for Eritrea from 2012-2015; and GDP data for Mauritania, Lesotho, Djibouti, and Gambia (2015); and Libya (1997 and 1998).

have seen no significant changes although a number of them have experienced conflict. Second, the main risk concerns rebel violence, and specifically ethnic separatism, for which the kind of strategic games described by Walter (2006) and Tranchant (2016b) make sense. For militia violence, however, there is a less compelling reason to believe that such a relationship exists. Militia violence by definition revolves around the control of local resources and sources of power. Devolving more power to the local level is therefore unlikely to dampen it. On the contrary, the expectation of decentralisation is that it gives scope to increased local contests (e.g. Cohen 1997).

**Table 2.2 Descriptive statistics of independent variables**

Variable	Observations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
<i>v2ellocpwr_ord</i>	774	2.053	1.012	0	4
<i>v2effelr_ord</i>	635	2.183	1.143	0	4
<i>e_polity</i>	893	.623	5.201	-9	9
<i>Log_Population</i>	893	7.006	.532	5.836	8.261
<i>Log_GDPpercapita</i>	893	2.992	.444	2.048	4.077
<i>Infantmortalityrate</i>	893	68.694	27.514	11.4	150.1
<i>Fractionalization Ethnic</i>	893	.667	.224	.039	.93
<i>LMilitiaEvents</i>	846	36.794	116.742	0	1415
<i>LRebelEvents</i>	846	31.8	106.202	0	1294
<i>LStateEvents</i>	846	46.173	119.136	0	1403
<i>LRiotersEvents</i>	846	11.846	50.504	0	988

Source: Authors' own.

### 3 Results

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 present the empirical findings. Model 1 refers to militia violence, model 2 to rebel violence and model 3 to state violence. Our hypothesis that decentralisation may incentivise lower-intensity violence is assessed by model 1. In line with our expectations, higher subnational elected institutional power relative to unelected bodies is positively and significantly correlated with the number of violent events attributed to militia groups. This indicates that the greater the power of elected officials at the local level, the more likely it is that militia groups will engage in political violence. Predictive margins demonstrate this relationship: the predicted number of violent events attributed to political militias almost doubles from 8.9 to 15.6 militia events per year, when the subnational political power score moves just two points, from 1 (relatively low power) to 3 (relatively high power) (see Figure 3.1).

**Table 3.1 Subnational elected power, and violence by actor type, Africa, 1997–2015**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
	<b>Militia Events</b>	<b>Rebel Events</b>	<b>State Events</b>
v2ellocpwr_ord	.279** (.137)	.38 (.251)	.098 (.154)
e_polity	-.027 (.027)	-.026 (.041)	-.03 (.022)
Log_Population	1.618*** (.246)	1.249*** (.342)	1.01*** (.25)
Log_GDPPerCapita	-.485 (.342)	-.806 (.684)	-.527 (.326)
InfantMortalityRate	-.003 (.004)	-.007 (.01)	-.007 (.006)
FractionalizationEthnic	-.833 (.581)	.948 (.83)	-.087 (.527)
LMilitia_Events	.016*** (.004)		
LRebel_Events		.02*** (.005)	
LState_Events			0.011*** (.002)
Constant	-7.723*** (1.857)	-5.937* (3.372)	-3.198 (2.051)
Log-likelihood	-2523.59	-1788.994	-2946.087
Observations	731	731	731

Note: Standard errors in parentheses \* p < .1; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01.

Source: Authors' own.

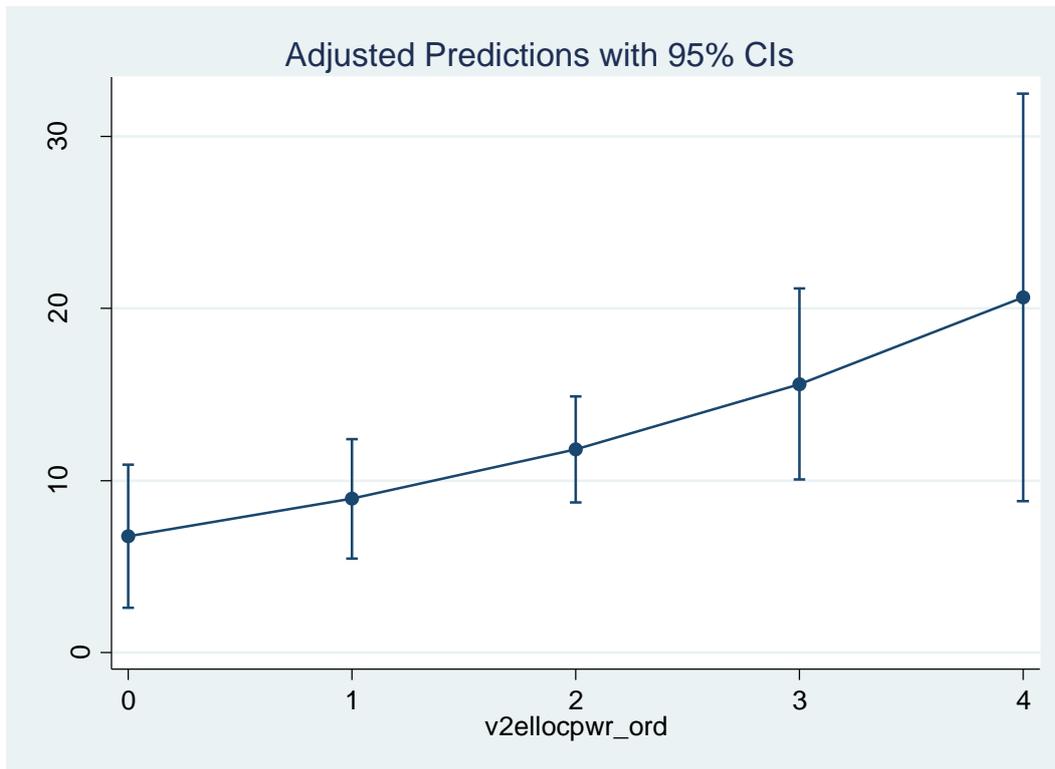
**Table 3.2 Free and fair subnational elections and violence by actor type, Africa, 1997–2015**

	<b>Model 4 Militia Events</b>	<b>Model 5 Rebel Events</b>	<b>Model 6 State Events</b>
v2elffelr_ord	-.277** (.132)	-.058 (.225)	-.172 (.111)
e_polity	.039 (.025)	.072* (.04)	.005 (.023)
Log_Population	1.372*** (.308)	.697* (.378)	.922*** (.255)
Log_GDPPerCapita	-.245 (.303)	-.43 (.669)	-.38 (.303)
InfantMortalityRate	-.006 (.006)	-.014 (.012)	-.011 (.008)
FractionalizationEthnic	-.436 (.569)	2.451** (1.056)	.462 (.545)
LMilitia_Events	.018*** (.006)		
LRebel_Events		.034*** (.009)	
LState_Events			.015*** (.003)
Constant	-5.739** (2.289)	-3.285 (.009)	-2.135 (.202)
Log-likelihood	-2036.416	-1402.639	-2385.801
Observations	601	601	601

Note: Standard errors in parentheses \* p < .1; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01.

Source: Authors' own.

**Figure 3.1 Predicted number of violent events attributed to political militias by subnational elected political power (v2ellocpwr\_ord)**



Source: Authors' own.

By contrast, models 2 and 3 illustrate that the same is not true of other violent actor types. Neither rebel violence nor state violence are significantly related to the level of subnational elected power.

Further tests specify that the effect of decentralisation occurs through the mechanism of subnational political competition. Table 3.2 presents the effect of free and fair subnational elections on violence by actor type. The results show that higher levels of freeness and fairness of subnational elections are significantly and negatively correlated to the levels of militia violence; while they show no relationship to either state or rebel violence levels. This is in line with our hypothesis and, more broadly, with the functions militias are known to carry out. Competitive elections are sites of contest between elites, who may sponsor or support armed groups in order to influence or determine the outcome of these elections. High levels of violence are predictably correlated to lower levels of freeness and fairness, as violence is often a component of measures of freeness and fairness in the first instance. However, the relationship remains important because it illustrates the causal pathway through which militia violence levels increase in line with greater subnational elected power in a country, in contrast to state and rebel violence, which shows no relationship.

### 3.1 Robustness checks

A series of sensitivity analyses test the robustness of these findings. First, in place of the combined count of all militia violence, we test the effect of decentralised democratic power on the number of different militias using violence in a given country and year. We include this measure because studies suggest that the proliferation of discrete violent groups has an effect on conflict (Dowd 2016, 2015; Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour 2012). The results hold: the greater the subnational power of elected officials, the larger the number of distinct political militias. At the same time, greater subnational power has no effect on the

proliferation of rebel forces. These results are consistent with the theory that subnational power incentivises political competition among lower-intensity violent actors, but does not encourage the same proliferation among rebel groups.

Second, we re-run models with the count of violent events attributed to rioters, defined as demonstrators who use force in – typically spontaneous – collective action (Raleigh and Dowd 2017). This serves to test whether *all* forms of lower-intensity violence are correlated with increased subnational power. While rioters may be engaged in contesting and seeking to violently shape the outcome of elections or other political practices, they are also potentially engaged in popular (and therefore, not always elite-sponsored or competition-driven) demonstrations, which are not concerned with formal political processes. For example, they may instead coalesce around issues such as local service delivery, inter-communal relations, and so forth. The results show no significant relationship between decentralised democratic political power and levels of riots. In other words, higher levels of subnational political power are positively and significantly associated with political militia violence only, and not with all forms of low-intensity collective action using violence.

As a further sensitivity test, we re-run the regression models with fixed effects to account for potential unobserved factors explaining both the extent of militia violence and decentralisation. Our results hold, showing a strong, positive and significant relationship between subnational elected power and militia violence, but not rebel or state violence. As a further alternative specification, we add a control for the total level of violence in the country that year, attributed to all violent actors within the territory, to control for variation between high- and low-violence environments. The results are consistent with the main models in all cases.

## 4 Case studies

We supplement the cross-national comparative analysis above with small-*n* qualitative process tracing to better understand not only the structural drivers of violence, but also to illustrate the causal mechanisms, processes and agency involved. While the themes explored in this paper are relevant to processes of decentralisation across the continent, this research explores these questions in three countries – Kenya, Mali and Nigeria – where they are of particular interest.

The cases selected are deliberately diverse, representing different experiences of decentralisation and violence. All three countries differ in terms of their degree of decentralised governance. Nigeria is a federal country whereas in Mali, local governments are closely overseen by central authorities. Kenya sits in between. However, even though Kenya and Mali are not characterised by the same degree of codified federalism as Nigeria, the devolution of power to country-level governments is still very substantial. Experience of violence also differs across these countries. Mali and Nigeria have both experienced high-intensity, civil war-related violence associated with insurgents in both countries' northern territories, alongside internecine, militia-related violence in the form of ethno-communally mobilised groups and political party militias. Kenya has witnessed a lower level of rebel-related violence, largely attributed to the originally Somali-based Islamist insurgent group, Al-Shabaab, but also experiences frequent and sometimes high-intensity violence associated with militias.

This diversity of forms of violence in contrasting governance contexts facilitates a comparison of the different ways in which violence manifests itself in discrete decentralised political contexts, while demonstrating similarity-in-difference in the outcome of highly localised, often lower-profile but persistent, violence concerning decentralised politics.

Below, we discuss how decentralisation has created particular incentives for shifting dynamics, patterns and geographies of violence across these discrete contexts. We do not contend that decentralisation is the sole driver of violence, nor that all militia-based violence can be attributed to this process alone. Rather, we propose that decentralisation has incentivised significant transformations in the nature of violence, and that the interaction between governance forms and violent groups at the local level has produced particular profiles of violence in each of these countries. These, in turn, have implications for theory and practice of decentralised governance more widely.

#### 4.1 Kenya

Kenya has a long history of political violence associated with multiple armed group types, which we do not suggest can be singularly attributed to the process of decentralisation alone. However, we propose that the changing nature of that political violence – in its dynamics, patterns, geography and targeting – reflects shifts in the governance arrangements of the state under devolved power, and demonstrates how high-stakes, local-level competition produces incentives for particular forms of decentralised violence.

Kenya's 2010 Constitution laid the groundwork for political devolution – a process intended to reduce risks of future violence following the 2007–08 election crisis in which more than 1,000 people were killed and up to half a million internally displaced (Human Rights Watch 2008). The 2007–08 election crisis, however, is part of a longer history of cycles of electoral violence and mobilisation of criminal–political hybrid militias as 'political instruments' in electoral contests (Khadiagala 2015; Ruteere and Wairuri 2015; Anderson 2002). Two-thirds of the population voted in favour of the new Constitution, which enshrined substantial devolution of governance to the counties, attesting to the popularity of decentralisation (Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis 2016). The process was also met with considerable optimism concerning its potential effects on political violence within the country. As Akech (2010: 20) declared: 'the new Constitution establishes national values and principles of governance that seek to diffuse, if not eliminate altogether, the ethnic tensions fuelled by perceptions of marginalisation and exclusion'.

Devolution of political power from the centre to the counties sought to address these issues of political marginalisation in several ways. In the first instance, the creation of county-level political offices was envisaged as a means to minimise the winner-takes-all, zero-sum logic of presidential competition, and create alternative sites of political representation and voice that could, in theory, be divided up among different candidates, creating a more pluralistic political landscape. Second, the relocation of key services was intended to make the county governments more responsive to constituents, and more immediately concerned with addressing grievances which arise in closer proximity to seats of power.

In reality, however, the process itself has been hampered by a range of issues. These include vertical issues concerning the exact implementation and parameters of devolved county governance between the centre and the counties. Political battles between different levels of government and different branches of state power are being actively and continually fought (e.g. Muchiri 2016; Makana and Muchiri 2015). Moreover, governors themselves have mounted a coordinated campaign to revise the terms of devolution (Cheeseman *et al.* 2016). These disputes indicate that the exact power balance between vertically related institutions within the devolved system is still being determined through this and similar contests. The uncertain nature of devolution and the unclear balance of power between national and county governments (and within branches of the national government) leave considerable room for future conflict.

In addition, contests within the counties themselves have also emerged, revolving around issues of control over the increasingly influential and powerful positions at county level.

Although the precise demarcation of county powers is still being negotiated, positions in the governorship and county assemblies, among others, yield considerable control over financial and natural resources, as well as a powerful voice in the demarcation of county and sub-county boundaries. Together, these features have contributed to raise the stakes of controlling local-level positions (see Lind, forthcoming; Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis 2014; Mkutu, Marani and Ruteere 2014).

This paper seeks to extend existing analyses in identifying the implications of decentralisation for the nature and geography of political violence across the country. In this context, the role of political militias in mobilising violent action around local political office reflects a process of 'devolution of violent conflict' from the centre to subnational locales (Raleigh and Dowd 2014: 4); whereby the 'ethnic divisions and polarisations that have plagued politics at the national level [risk being] replicated at county levels' (Ruteere and Wairuri 2015: 122). Although the 2013 elections were not marked by the same intensity of violence as in the preceding cycle, nevertheless, the pattern, location and nature of the violence that did occur highlight the revised logic of *local* political competition and *local* violent actors in Kenya's elections.

Several incidents illustrate how these dynamics played out in local-level conflicts, reflecting the raised stakes of subnational competition, and the specific role militia-related violence played in seeking to shape and determine the outcome of these high-stakes contests. For example, the county of Kilifi, on Kenya's coast, which typically has a low level of political violence, saw an upswing in militia-related violence in the run-up to and surrounding the 2013 elections. Violence included an attack on a police officer at a polling station during a mock election exercise in 2012 (Chao and Kalama 2012), and coordinated attacks on civilians and party political supporters on election day, attributed to the Mombasa Republican Council (Smith 2013). There were also reports of specific attacks on party political supporters to prevent them from voting, alongside inter-communal violence involving attacks on religious and ethnic leaders (ACLEDD 2017).

In nearby Kwale, armed men raided the Kwale Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission office in 2012, killing two people (Nyassy 2012). Elsewhere, in Busia, a targeted attack was carried out on a party candidate who was abducted and released only after the election was over, presumably to influence the results of the election (Wamalwa 2012). Violence around the control of devolved positions also had a particular temporal profile: party primaries were particularly volatile and bitterly fought, with violence flaring in locations including Migori, Homa Bay, Kisumu and Siaya, as well as localised violence in Nairobi, Kisumu and Eldoret – both strongholds of important political parties (Mérino 2014).

Turkana also witnessed an increase in militia-related violence (e.g. Lind, forthcoming). Qualitative interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch in the county cast light on the explicit logic of subnational competition in counties with strong ethnic divisions. As one respondent, who had contributed money to support a militia, reported in 2013:

The Turkana have been a minority, but now our population has grown. In the 2007 election, a Turkana candidate came second and the Borana realised we could take the seat in 2013. They started attacking us in order to displace us... In the past we did not have guns, but now we have guns as well as a group of young fighters on standby.  
(HRW 2013: 39)

This sentiment was echoed in an account published in a report on persistent violent political settlements in Marsabit, where a respondent proposed that in contemporary Kenyan politics, 'it is numbers that matter' (quoted in Scott-Villiers *et al.* 2014: 7).

In addition to witnessing an intensification of violence in some locations, conflict in post-decentralisation Kenya is also associated with a redistribution of the geography of electoral violence from formerly violence-affected contexts to locations which had not previously witnessed high levels of violence. An analysis of violence levels in the 2007 elections and post-election violence in 2008, and levels of violence under devolved governance in the run-up to the elections in 2012 and 2013, shows that there has been a dramatic reduction in militia violence in Nakuru over these two cycles, while violence increased in locations like Garissa, Kilifi and Mombasa (ACLEED 2017).

Together, these incidents and patterns serve to illustrate how the high stakes of subnational political competition play out in the Kenyan counties under devolved governance. Ultimately, although the 2010 Constitution was designed to reduce the likelihood of the high-intensity, centralised violence that brought the country to the brink of civil war in 2007–08, the concentration of power at the subnational level has created an alternative set of incentives, which create high stakes for political competition – and the use of violence – at the county level. These shifts in violence patterns and locations reflect the fact that high-intensity violence over central power (formerly, the presidency) can evolve in response to political and structural incentives under decentralised power.

## 4.2 Mali

Violent conflict and decentralisation in Mali are closely interlinked. Mali embarked on a decentralisation process in the early 1990s, when the country witnessed a violent Tuareg rebellion in the north and pervasive demonstrations against the authoritarian and centralised rule of Moussa Traore. Traore was overthrown in a coup in 1991 and the new regime committed to decentralisation as part of a deep democratisation process and an attempt to reshape the social contract (Seely 2001; Schraeder 2011). Decentralisation was also included as one of the terms of the ‘National Pact’ that marked the end of the Tuareg rebellion in 1992.

The decentralisation process of the 1990s led to the creation of 703 *communes*, 49 *cercles* (districts) and 8 regions. Leaders of *cercles* and regions are indirectly elected, while leaders of municipal councils<sup>10</sup> are directly elected. The Decentralisation Mission encouraged villages to group themselves into communes according to their own preferences, provided that the ensuing communes would be economically viable and of sufficient size. Both the direct elections of councillors and this bottom-up process of commune creation made political decentralisation in Mali very meaningful (Coulibaly, Dickovick and Thomson 2010).<sup>11</sup> The 1999 municipal elections constituted a concrete manifestation of the decentralisation process.

Yet, assessments of what decentralisation in Mali has achieved are mixed. The turnout for local elections is usually very low (below 30 per cent in 2012) and local governments are widely perceived as weak. They enjoy limited fiscal autonomy and inter-governmental transfers do not compensate for the lack of own sources of revenue (Coulibaly *et al.* 2010; Gaasholt 2013; Wing 2013). This lack of capacity has largely impeded local governments from meaningfully assuming their nominally wide-ranging prerogatives (Coulibaly *et al.* 2010).

There is also a widespread perception that decentralisation in Mali did not live up to its promise of peace-building in the north. First, the lack of fiscal transfers to, and fiscal autonomy of, local governments, coupled with their very limited tax reach, perpetuated or

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<sup>10</sup> The commune is the third level administrative unit in Mali. Communes are subdivided into villages (or quartiers in urban areas).

<sup>11</sup> V-Dem attributes a score of 3 out of a maximum of 4 for freeness and fairness of local elections (*v2elffel\_ord*) in Mali since 1995.

even reinforced the weakness of the state. This is especially so in the north where the capacity-building challenges for local governments were extremely acute (in part, due to their task of governing a small, nomadic and scattered population). In the same spirit, state-appointed administrators were able to exploit the weakness of local government to steer local politics and further stifle the newly created local structures (Armstrong 2013).

Second, decentralisation did not result in a significant increase in citizen participation and government responsiveness. Although the resources available to local governments are largely insufficient for them to carry out the tasks set out by the devolution of power, it remains the case that controlling local governments allows leaders to access a valuable source of (appropriable) resources (Boas and Torheim 2013). As such, the newly decentralised bodies often perpetuated the existing patron–client system: with decentralisation, local council leaders controlled the resources coming from the centre and used these to buy further influence through patronage (Bouju 2000; Wing 2013). Kassibo (1997) argued that this clientelist system impeded local ownership by the population of the local democratic structures. In addition, there is converging evidence that the contest for control of the local governments led to internal divides (Gutelius 2007; Lecoq 2010; International Crisis Group (ICG) 2014).

Overall, the inability of decentralisation to significantly address marginalisation, while simultaneously reinforcing local patronage systems, confirmed its failure as an effective tool of conflict reduction in the country.

Violence dynamics in Mali cannot be reduced to a struggle between a (weak) state, separatists and violent Islamist groups (Boisvert 2015). Inter-group and communal conflict is also present. The north of the country (the Azawad) is home to groups other than the Tuaregs, notably fellow nomadic Arabs and sedentary Songhai and Pular populations, who live closer to the Niger river. Many members of these sedentary populations felt excluded from the peace talks of the 1990s and threatened by the Tuaregs. This led to the creation of the Ganda Koy militia, a pro-government armed group meant to protect the sedentary populations from attacks by the Tuaregs. In 2008, a splinter group, the Ganda Iso, emerged. These militias have been involved in extensive human rights abuses against Tuaregs and are among a small number of limited pro-government forces fighting in the north after the 2012 coup and before the military operation (Boisvert 2015). These militias are not centralised in their operations nor do they pursue a common goal. Instead, they are best described as a collection of locally based armed groups, which represent and fight for their own communities.

Other militia-related violence is also ongoing in Mali, in a context of protracted insecurity that is interlinked with the insurgency. This includes violence perpetrated by *Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés* (GATIA), a pro-government militia operating primarily in Kidal, in the far north of the country. The group defines its goals as community self-defence in a conflict with separatist and Islamist forces, but its activities are also connected to inter-clan rivalry within the Tuareg community over status, power, and control over lucrative trafficking routes in the region (McGregor 2015; Boisvert 2015). They have engaged in clashes against separatist and Islamist forces in the region, and secured a number of military victories in a context where state forces are widely perceived as either ineffective or absent (Boisvert 2015).

Decentralisation may have encouraged or further entrenched these types of inter-group conflicts. The bottom-up process of communalisation has, at times, encouraged the creation of communes on the basis of shared identity traits, thereby reinforcing narrow identities and limiting inter-group cooperation (e.g. Armstrong 2013; Raineri and Strazzari 2015; Institute of

Action Research for Peace (IMRAP) 2015). An interview with a key informant from IMRAP (2015) revealed that:

Each resident along the river had his Arab or Tuareg counterpart in Hausa. It is with the advent of decentralisation that these bonds were severed... The Tuaregs or Arabs in the commune of Inchadjine no longer have a road to reach their Sonrhais in the commune of Sony.  
(IMRAP 2015: 126)

Inter-communal tensions have spread with decentralisation, fuelled by the competition for the control of spare resources and by the concomitant weakening of informal local conflict resolution institutions (ICG 2014). These intercommunal tensions have served as a pretext for local governments to create or sponsor community-based militia, in the name of security (*ibid.*). In that sense, decentralisation contributed to a vicious cycle in which growing intercommunal tensions fed community-based militias whose use of violence in turn further increased tensions.<sup>12</sup>

By raising the stakes of controlling local governments, decentralisation has also been associated with an increase in electoral violence. In the northern region of Kidal, a coalition of Tuareg rebels prevented local elections going ahead. But electoral violence extends beyond the north: in Segou (central region), one candidate was abducted and five military personnel who transported ballot boxes were killed in Douentza (Mopti region) on 20 November 2016 (Tobie *et al.* 2016). Overall, out of 26 communes for which a Monitoring Group for Peace and Security existed (as part of a project by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the *Coalition Nationale de la Société Civile pour la Paix et la Lutte contre la Prolifération des Armes Légères* (CONASCIPAL)), four experienced serious acts of violence (such as abduction, attacks on electoral personnel, and destruction of materials) in the 2016 local elections. At the country level, insecurity prevented 15 communes from voting, and in more than 40 communes, elections were not safely conducted (*ibid.* 2016).

Militia-related violence, of course, is not singularly driven by the process of decentralisation and a contest for power at the local level. Nevertheless, several factors point to a complex relationship between militia violence and decentralisation in Mali. These include the implementation of decentralisation as an attempted conflict management tool, and its ultimate failure to effectively address grievances and resolve cyclical waves of rebellion in the north, in addition to the interlinked nature of the local self-proclaimed 'self-defence' militias in conditions of extreme state weakness and deeply embedded illicit trafficking and patronage networks in these environments. Together with emerging trends of highly localised violence around communal elections, discussed earlier, these patterns point to the complex and divergent ways in which processes of decentralisation either fail to effectively manage conflict or actively fuel certain forms of lower-intensity violence in protracted crises.

### 4.3 Nigeria

In common with Kenya and Mali, Nigeria has a long-running history of violent conflict, at multiple local, subnational and national scales. These conflicts cannot be reduced to contests over decentralised power alone, but we propose that the profile and targeting of that violence is closely linked to incentive structures created by the devolution of power to the local level. In contrast to the preceding case studies, Nigeria has a federal Constitution in which significant power is devolved to 36 federal states and the federal capital territory, Abuja. As such, Nigeria has the most entrenched form of decentralised local governance of

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<sup>12</sup> However, it is worth noting that Gaasholt (2004) contends that, in practice, local councillors co-operate along party lines, which potentially cut across communal identities.

the three country case studies under review. However, the cases also share several similar features, in that all three are affected by multiple forms of violence, including both rebel- and militia-related conflicts, and decentralisation has been among several strategies intended to address and resolve these conflicts.

Federalism in Nigeria has a long and complicated history characterised by disputes between the subnational units and the centre, as well as conflicts between subnational units. The latter have, at multiple points in the country's history, spilled over into civil war or widespread violence that has brought the country to the brink of outright war (see discussion in Osaghae 2015). This history is too extensive to discuss in detail here, so we focus on the dynamics of decentralised governance since the reintroduction of civil rule in 1999. In this context, decentralisation has interacted with conflict dynamics in several discrete ways, exemplified by violence in multiple discrete 'sites' of conflict: Nigeria's south-eastern states and its Middle Belt.

Nigeria's south-eastern states have witnessed a reduction of rebel violence since 2009, but extensive militia violence has remained a very real threat to stability and security in the region. Militia violence is linked to control of key resources, including oil and its associated wealth. It is also closely connected to resources and networked patronage relationships associated with the amnesty programme, which has been in place since 2009 in an explicit attempt to reduce violence (Iwilade 2014). The persistence of militia violence in the face of reduced rebel violence reflects the fact that as demands shifted from gaining control over and/or seceding from a central state, to the (often violent) ways in which groups negotiate their position *within* that state and at the local level, violence transforms and persists in new ways.

This violence manifests in several ways. Meagher (2007) has documented the way in which the Bakassi Boys – a semi-formal vigilante group active across south-eastern Nigeria that once enjoyed considerable popular support – became captured by opportunist political leaders at the state and federal levels. The group became instrumentalised as a violent tool in political battles to silence opponents and rivals, and in a process of elite enrichment through violence. Although many of these contests were highly localised in nature, they were enmeshed in wider political negotiations between the federal and state governments: the federal government tacitly endorsed the activities of these and other violent militia groups in a bid to leverage popular anti-crime initiatives for its own support (Meagher 2007; Baker 2002). More recent episodes of vigilante and militia-based violence include ongoing violence targeted at oil production and transport infrastructure in a conflict over the allocation and control of oil resources (BBC News 2016) and violence associated with electoral competition and targeted attacks on electoral monitoring bodies accused by militants of malpractice (*This Day* 2011).

Nigeria's Middle Belt states have not witnessed comparable levels of civil war violence, but have nevertheless been sites of extensive violent conflict. The demographically diverse states have long been, and remain, sites of sporadic but recurring cyclical waves of violence and unrest. Violent conflict primarily coalesces along religious (Muslim/Christian) lines, which overlap with contextually specific categories of indigeneity and allochthony, typically defined by ethnic identity (Sayne 2012). Flashpoints of violence occurred at critical junctures, including around elections (Angerbrandt 2016), and the introduction of Shari'a law (IRIN 2004).

This violence can be seen as directly related to the process of decentralisation, in the sense that decisions to implement specific (Shari'a) legal systems at the subnational level are part of a larger contest over the power of states relative to the centre, and of a north–south federal divide in the country. Moreover, the federal government's claim that it had no authority to deal with the question of state-level legal systems, nor with the violent fallout that

surrounded their implementation (Angerbrandt 2011), reinforces the degree to which conflicts over the nature of local political authorities become embedded within the devolved government structures. Through its inaction, the federal government sought to shift responsibility for resolving the crisis to the local level, even though issues of security and the drivers of the conflict rooted in contests over national power and representation are fundamentally federal issues. As in other areas profiled herein, Middle Belt states have also witnessed extensive militia violence surrounding local government elections, party primaries and political contests (e.g. Lami Sadiq 2013; Chitiyo and Imig 2008).

As in Kenya and Mali, decentralisation of political power in Nigeria has concentrated substantial powers at the local level. This has often been conceived of in the academic literature as a mere technical exercise of legislative and bureaucratic division of powers, and one that is separate from the politics and power relations of the central state (see discussion in Angerbrandt 2011). By contrast, the examples outlined above demonstrate the ways in which relations with the central state, and within the subnational units themselves, continue to incentivise certain forms of violence, even as they may effectively reduce insurgency-based claims on central power.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper has sought to generate new and robust knowledge on the effect of decentralisation on the levels, intensity, nature and forms of violence in Africa and their relationship to governance structures and decentralised power. Broadly speaking, the findings are consistent with research that emphasises the importance of understanding political power and processes below the level of the central state alone. The research is also part of a growing body of scholarship that conceptualises political violence as a contest between competing factions. These factions are incentivised or disincentivised to use violence, and particular modalities of collective violence (such as rebel groups or militias), based on the stakes of that contest, and the scale at which they are seeking to effect political change (Raleigh 2016). The findings contribute to advancing the literature on these dynamics by empirically testing and presenting original theories on the divergent forms and dynamics of violence, and how they are incentivised and disincentivised through specific decentralised power arrangements at the local level.

Together, the cross-national comparative analysis and case study profiles illustrate how localised violence has been incentivised and transformed through substantial investment of power at the subnational level. In contrast to claims that decentralisation serves to reduce the winner-takes-all mentality of centralised political power, the cases of Kenya, Mali and Nigeria all illustrate conditions in which competition for, and electoral contest over, local political office has transformed the profile and geography of violence in these contexts. Meanwhile, evidence from Nigeria and Mali further challenges the argument that greater power at the local level will reduce the likelihood of insurgency, rebellion and calls for secession. While the literature suggests that this argument has some degree of empirical validation, the evidence we have presented indicates that alternative forms of violence, even if of lower intensity, may in fact emerge within conflict contexts, including civil wars. In that case, decentralisation would thus transform conflicts rather than wholly resolve them. The case studies also point to the possibility that, in contexts of substantial concentration of political power at the local level, especially when local governments enjoy significant access to financial resources, there may also be a feedback effect. This creates a situation whereby devolution and decentralisation 'localise' political violence, but these localised clashes take on a renewed, national significance in geostrategic politics and the character of the national political settlement.

The study also contributes to policy and practice debates around the role and function of decentralisation. It does so by identifying its role in localised, militia-related violence, which tends to be overlooked in the literature. This reveals a potential trade-off for policymakers and practitioners in supporting the decentralisation of political power. Critically, while devolved democratic power may be an effective means of reducing *some forms* of high-intensity, rebel-driven violence, other forms of *lower intensity, militia-related* conflict may emerge in their place, or interact with them, complicating and transforming the conflict situation. Stakeholders should make informed decisions based on the full range of impacts of these processes, and the provisions (such as enhanced accountability, transparency and civilian protection measures) that may be necessitated through these institutional designs. Broadly speaking, high-level policy and practice debates around political violence in Africa remain dominated by concerns with high-intensity insurgency, with far less attention paid to forms of violence that are more pervasive, of lower intensity, but still destabilising and deadly. A lack of attention to these more 'normalised' forms of violence at the local level may induce policymakers to conclude that decentralisation *is* a successful tool for conflict management. Our findings seek to challenge and nuance this conclusion by robustly demonstrating the alternative forms of violence that often occur under decentralised power structures, which may otherwise go unnoticed.

A second implication of the findings is that policymakers and practitioners alike should be attentive to the financial and power implications of decentralised institutional design. The case studies demonstrate that while limited financial resources can restrict the efficacy and autonomy of subnational centres of power and thereby fail to meaningfully address calls for localised accountability and governance, high levels of localised control over natural resources and finances can raise the stakes of political competition at those sites, and produce other forms of violence. The ideal arrangement will necessarily be context-specific. It will depend on an informed assessment of the incentives for violence, and a detailed analysis of (potentially violent) stakeholders, in order to design and implement governance arrangements that reflect local demands, but do not further inflame violent competition.

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