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Between politics and survival: government responses and the precarious future of Bakassi displaced persons in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The forced displacement of Bakassi communities after the International Court of Justice ruling and the Green Tree Agreement has created one of Nigeria's most protracted humanitarian crises. Although successive governments have pledged to address the plight of Bakassi Displaced Persons (BDPs), responses have been shaped more by short-term relief efforts and political expediency than by durable solutions. Despite the visibility of these crises, there has been limited scholarly engagement with the structural and political conditions that continue to undermine resettlement, reintegration, and the sense of belonging. This paper foregrounds the intersections of displacement, electoral politics, and Niger Delta contestations to advance a framework for understanding the uncertain futures of BDPs. We examine how state authorities have simultaneously invoked the suffering of Bakassi communities as instruments of campaign rhetoric and symbols of national neglect, while neglecting substantive commitments to their welfare. We also consider how ongoing disputes over the delisting of Bakassi as a Local Government Area reinforce displacement and deepen experiences of exclusion. We argue that the plight of Bakassi DPs reveals not only the fragility of Nigeria's humanitarian governance but also the entanglement of survival with political manipulation, illuminating broader questions of citizenship, rights, and state accountability.

KEYWORDS: crisis, Bakassi Peninsula, Cameroon, Nigeria, uncertainty, Bakassi people

INTRODUCTION

The Bakassi Peninsula represents one of the most emblematic cases of postcolonial territorial conflict and displacement in Africa. Situated along the maritime boundary between Nigeria and Cameroon, the Peninsula is endowed with rich fishing grounds, fertile land, and potential hydrocarbon reserves that have long attracted geopolitical contestation (Hart, 2022). For decades, the Bakassi question has served as both a regional security dilemma and a humanitarian tragedy, illustrating the intersections of international law, state sovereignty, citizenship, and survival. The 2002 judgment of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which ruled in favor of Cameroon, and the subsequent Green Tree Agreement of 2006 marked a decisive moment in the conflict's history, legally transferring sovereignty to Cameroon (International Court of Justice, 2002a; International Court of Justice, 2002b; International Peace Institute, 2008; United Nations, 2008). Yet these events did not resolve the plight of the inhabitants. Instead, they inaugurated new layers of precarity, statelessness, and contested belonging, particularly for the Bakassi Displaced Persons (BDPs) who continue to struggle between politics and survival (Odinkalu, 2012; Hussain, 2023; Oyewo, 2021).

At its core, the Bakassi displacement crisis is not simply a by-product of boundary adjustments, but a deeply political and social issue that touches on Nigeria's fragile governance, Cameroon's citizenship policies, and the broader regional culture of politicizing displacement. Numerous studies highlight how indigenes of Bakassi were suddenly redefined as "foreigners" on their ancestral land, compelled to either accept Cameroonian sovereignty, migrate to Nigeria, or exist in a state of statelessness (BBC, 2013; Kindzeka, 2013; Macdonald, 2024). Many chose relocation, leading to waves of internal displacement within Cross River and Akwa Ibom States of Nigeria, where resettlement efforts proved inadequate and underfunded (Ngalim, 2019; Unah, 2021). The humanitarian consequences have been devastating: loss of livelihood, homelessness, psychological trauma, and exclusion from political participation (Madoro et al., 2020; Sheikh et al., 2016; Oghuvbu & Okolie, 2020).

Despite the ICJ's framing of the Bakassi dispute as a matter of international law, the everyday experiences of displaced persons reveal the limitations of legal resolutions when detached from social realities. Scholars have argued that the transfer of sovereignty ignored the voices and consent of the Bakassi people themselves, thereby perpetuating a top-down model of conflict resolution (Bonchuk, 2014; Beckly, 2013; Ngalim, 2016). Indeed, the Peninsula's communities became collateral in a state-centered negotiation process that privileged territorial integrity over human security. This pattern is not unique to Bakassi; it resonates with other African boundary settlements where displaced populations are left without adequate protection, rights, or reintegration mechanisms (Anthony, 2014; Manby, 2016; Nguindip, 2017).

The implications of the Bakassi conflict extend beyond international law into the do-

mains of politics, governance, and humanitarian policy. Federal and state governments in Nigeria have often invoked the suffering of Bakassi DPs in electoral rhetoric, pledging resettlement or compensation, yet delivering little substantive change (Unah, 2021; Akhere, 2023). At the same time, the Niger Delta's volatile political environment, marked by resource conflicts and identity struggles, has further complicated the fate of displaced persons (Ebiede, Langer, & Tosun, 2020; Dayil, 2015). In Cross River State, for instance, resettlement projects such as the Ikang camp have been plagued by underfunding, corruption, and neglect, leaving many BDPs without stable housing or livelihoods (Unah, 2021). The politicization of displacement has thus become a recurring feature of Nigeria's governance landscape: Bakassi DPs are alternately portrayed as victims to attract donor aid, as symbols of state betrayal to mobilize political opposition, or as pawns in electoral contests.

This entanglement of displacement with politics underscores the urgent need for a critical reassessment of how the Bakassi crisis is understood. Much of the existing literature frames the Peninsula's history primarily in terms of boundary dispute resolution, legal compliance, and bilateral negotiations (Baye, 2010; Egeran, 2015; LeFebvre, 2014). While these perspectives are important, they risk reducing the crisis to a case study in international arbitration, sidelining the lived realities of those most affected. Recent research highlights the enduring humanitarian crisis, focusing on statelessness, citizenship struggles, and the failure of state institutions to guarantee basic rights (Hussain, 2023; Hart, 2022; Macdonald, 2024). Yet what remains underexplored is the nexus between displacement and the political strategies of Nigerian and Cameroonian leaders—how the condition of Bakassi DPs is utilized in electoral campaigns, negotiations with international partners, and discourses of national sovereignty.

Equally significant are the debates around citizenship and identity. As Anthony (2014) and Ngalim (2019) demonstrate, the Bakassi case illuminates broader questions of indigeneity and belonging in Nigeria, where the constitutional distinction between "indigene" and "settler" continues to fuel exclusion and marginalization. For displaced Bakassi persons, this has meant not only material deprivation but also contested recognition within Nigerian society, as their claims to land, political rights, and cultural identity are continuously challenged. In Cameroon, restrictive nationality laws and bureaucratic hurdles have rendered many returnees effectively stateless (Nguindip, 2017; Cameroon Multi-Country Office, 2017). The result is a population caught in a liminal space—neither fully Nigerian nor Cameroonian—whose precarious existence raises fundamental questions about the meaning of citizenship in postcolonial Africa.

The humanitarian dimensions of the crisis are equally troubling. Studies document widespread poverty, unemployment, and psychological trauma among Bakassi DPs, with many unable to rebuild their livelihoods due to inadequate state support (Sheikh et al., 2016; Madoro et al., 2020). International organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have raised alarms over risks of statelessness and

prolonged displacement (Cameroon Multi-Country Office, 2017; United Nations, 2016). Yet despite such warnings, durable solutions remain elusive. Instead, what emerges is a cycle of temporary relief measures, political promises, and prolonged uncertainty, leaving displaced persons dependent on precarious aid and vulnerable to renewed displacement.

Moreover, ongoing contestations over the delisting of Bakassi as a Local Government Area in Nigeria further complicate the displacement experience. Debates over administrative recognition not only determine access to political representation and state resources but also symbolically affect the displaced community's sense of belonging (Otora, 2022; Nonju & Uwoh, 2021). For many DPs, delisting signals a deeper erasure of their identity, compounding their marginalization. In this way, displacement is not merely a humanitarian issue but also a political one, entangled with governance, representation, and the struggle over who counts as a legitimate citizen.

In this paper, we argue that understanding the plight of Bakassi Displaced Persons requires moving beyond legal and humanitarian framings to interrogate the political logics that sustain their condition. Displacement here is not simply a failure of state capacity but also a deliberate instrument of political strategy, mobilized to consolidate power, deflect responsibility, or gain electoral advantage. By foregrounding the intersections of sovereignty, citizenship, and survival, this analysis highlights how Bakassi DPs are caught in a web of structural neglect and political manipulation.

The guiding questions of this study are therefore threefold: (1) *How have federal and state governments in Nigeria responded to the Bakassi displacement crisis, and with what consequences?*; (2) *In what ways has the plight of Bakassi DPs been instrumentalized within electoral and political discourses?*; (3) *What do the experiences of Bakassi DPs reveal about the broader relationship between displacement, citizenship, and governance in Nigeria?* In addressing these questions, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the nexus between politics and survival in contexts of protracted displacement, situating Bakassi not merely as a border dispute but as a critical site for rethinking state accountability, human rights, and the politics of belonging in Africa.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This paper seeks to contribute to critical debates on forced displacement, state accountability, and the politicization of humanitarian crises in Nigeria by examining the plight of Bakassi Displaced Persons (BDPs). Our goal is to illuminate how displacement is not only a humanitarian concern but also a political instrument mobilized within contests of sovereignty, citizenship, and governance. To do so, the paper draws upon three interrelated strands of scholarship: (1) the historical continuities of territorial contestation and postcolonial boundary-making in Africa; (2) the intersections of citizenship, statelessness, and belonging as central dimensions of displacement; and (3) the entanglement

of electoral politics with humanitarian responses, particularly in the Niger Delta region.

Rather than presenting original empirical data in the conventional sense, this paper adopts a critical-interpretive approach that synthesizes secondary literature, policy documents, international legal rulings, and media reports. The International Court of Justice judgment of 2002, the Green Tree Agreement of 2006, and subsequent Nigerian and Cameroonian policy frameworks form a central part of the material we analyze (International Court of Justice, 2002a, 2002b; United Nations, 2008; International Peace Institute, 2008). In addition, we engage reports from humanitarian agencies (Cameroon Multi-Country Office, 2017; United Nations, 2016), analyses from legal scholars and political scientists (Akhere, 2023; Bonchuk, 2014; Ngalim, 2019; Hussain, 2023), and journalistic accounts that document the lived realities of displaced communities (BBC, 2013; Unah, 2021; Macdonald, 2024). This layered body of sources allows us to foreground not only state narratives but also the voices and conditions of displaced persons themselves.

Our positioning as three Nigerian scholars, each with different disciplinary backgrounds and personal connections to questions of displacement, strongly shapes the methodological stance of this paper. One of us has worked directly with displaced populations in southern Nigeria, observing how humanitarian promises frequently collapse into cycles of neglect and political opportunism. Another has a background in international law and has critically examined the ICJ's Bakassi ruling as well as the broader jurisprudence of boundary conflicts in Africa. The third author approaches the issue from a political-sociological perspective, drawing on field observations of electoral dynamics in the Niger Delta to trace how displacement figures in campaign rhetoric and governance strategies. These combined perspectives allow us to bring into conversation legal, political, and lived dimensions of displacement that are often treated in isolation.

We are particularly attentive to the ways in which government responses to displacement are mediated through political logics rather than humanitarian commitments. By critically examining how Bakassi DPs have been alternately portrayed as victims, bargaining chips, or invisible populations, we seek to disrupt technocratic framings of resettlement and instead highlight the structural conditions that perpetuate precarity. In this sense, our methodological approach is less about "measuring outcomes" and more about situating displacement within broader trajectories of state fragility, contested citizenship, and Niger Delta politics.

In a nutshell, our approach reflects a commitment to amplifying the intellectual and political contributions of displaced communities themselves. As scholars, we recognize that the plight of Bakassi DPs is not only documented in international reports but also narrated daily through their struggles for housing, livelihoods, and recognition. While our work relies on secondary sources, our interpretive stance emphasizes that these voices and experiences are crucial for rethinking the nexus of politics and survival. By weaving together legal rulings, policy frameworks, scholarly analyses, and everyday accounts, we

develop a framework that treats displacement not as an isolated humanitarian issue, but as a deeply political condition deeply embedded in the fabric of Nigeria's governance.

HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES OF TERRITORIAL CONTESTATION AND POSTCOLONIAL BOUNDARY-MAKING IN AFRICA

Contemporary displacement in the Bakassi Peninsula cannot be understood without situating it within the longue durée of territorial contestation and postcolonial boundary-making in Africa. African borderlands, far from being neutral demarcations of territory, are legacies of colonial cartographies that redefined sovereignty, identity, and belonging through spatial engineering (Mamdani, 1996; Anthony, 2014). The modern African state inherited boundaries designed to serve imperial interests rather than indigenous political or socio-cultural geographies. These boundaries have since become the sites of contestation, conflict, and displacement, with the Bakassi Peninsula offering a paradigmatic case.

The Anglo-German treaties of 1884–1913, which partitioned the Cameroon–Nigeria border region, exemplify how colonial boundary-making subordinated indigenous sovereignty to imperial bargains. Bakassi, historically home to the Efik, Ibibio, and other fishing communities, was absorbed into shifting colonial jurisdictions, its political fate negotiated in metropolitan capitals far removed from local realities (Ebolo, 2022; Bonchuk, 2014). Later Anglo-Nigerian treaties continued this pattern, embedding Bakassi into a cartography that privileged European strategic and economic considerations, particularly access to trade routes and resource-rich territories (Ngalim, 2016).

The legacies of this colonial cartography reverberated into the late twentieth century. When Nigeria and Cameroon contested ownership of Bakassi, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) adjudicated in 2002, grounding its judgment in the same treaties and colonial agreements that had earlier erased indigenous agency (ICJ, 2002a, 2002b). By transferring sovereignty to Cameroon, the ICJ decision was hailed as a triumph for international law and diplomacy, but it simultaneously revealed the enduring violence of colonial boundary-making.

For Bakassi residents, the ruling was less about law and more about lived displacement. Communities long integrated into Nigeria's political and economic systems were suddenly recast as foreigners, subject to Cameroonian taxation, administrative control, and, in some cases, forced relocation (BBC, 2013; Kindzeka, 2013). As Odinkalu (2012) and Hussain (2023) highlight, the outcome was not merely a geopolitical adjustment but a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of people were left stateless, stripped of citizenship rights, and adrift between two states unwilling or unable to provide adequate protection.

The Green Tree Agreement of 2006, signed by Nigeria and Cameroon under UN auspices, was intended to smooth the transfer of authority and safeguard local populations

(United Nations, 2008; International Peace Institute, 2008). Yet, in practice, the agreement prioritized state sovereignty over human security. Provisions for the protection of the Bakassi population were weakly implemented, while resettlement and compensation schemes faltered due to corruption, underfunding, and neglect (Unah, 2021; Akhere, 2023).

This episode underscores a broader pattern in African boundary politics. Postcolonial states, rather than dismantling colonial logics, often perpetuate them by privileging territorial integrity over the rights and security of populations. In Bakassi, sovereignty disputes were mediated through international law, but the lived consequences—displacement, statelessness, and precarity—fell on borderland communities (LeFebvre, 2014; Ngalim, 2019). The ICJ judgment and its aftermath thus reproduced the structural exclusions inherent in Africa's colonial inheritance.

Resource interests have further politicized these dynamics. As Baye (2010) and Hart (2022) note, Bakassi's oil reserves, fertile fishing waters, and strategic location in the Gulf of Guinea elevated its geopolitical significance. Sovereignty was not only a matter of national pride but also of access to critical economic resources. Displacement, therefore, cannot be seen merely as a byproduct of territorial adjudication; it is also an outcome of economic competition and resource securitization.

The Nigeria–Cameroon conflict over Bakassi is emblematic of how boundary disputes transform borderlands into "zones of exception" where rights are suspended and survival becomes politicized (Akhere, 2023). Far from being anomalies, such cases illustrate the structural continuities of territorial contestation across postcolonial Africa. Whether in Bakassi, the Sudan–South Sudan border, or the Horn of Africa, boundary disputes reveal how colonial legacies, postcolonial statecraft, and international legal frameworks intersect to produce displacement and dispossession.

MATERIAL DEPRIVATION AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE IN BAKASSI

The displacement of Bakassi residents following the ICJ judgment and Green Tree Agreement illustrates how boundary disputes manifest as structural violence and material deprivation. Displacement is not only physical but also political, economic, and psychosocial, reflecting what Gilmore (2007) terms "organized abandonment"—a deliberate withdrawal of state responsibility, coupled with selective coercion when displaced populations resist.

Thousands of Bakassi residents were forced to abandon ancestral homes and fishing livelihoods as sovereignty shifted to Cameroon (Beckly, 2013; Fobella, 2007). Many resettled in Cross River State, Nigeria, particularly in areas such as Ikang and Akpabuyo, where they faced inadequate housing, limited infrastructure, and scarce employment opportunities (Unah, 2021; Oyewo, 2021). Promised compensation packages and rehabilitation

programs often failed to materialize, undermined by corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and shifting political priorities (Akhere, 2023).

The deprivation experienced by Bakassi Displaced Persons (BDPs) reflects not only state neglect but also the structural violence inherent in boundary-making. Cameroonian governance in Bakassi has often relied on militarization and heavy taxation, alienating local populations and entrenching insecurity (Kah, 2014; BBC, 2013). Nigerian authorities, meanwhile, have treated Bakassi returnees as peripheral to national development, leaving them to navigate precarious conditions with little institutional support.

The psychosocial consequences of displacement are equally profound. Studies among internally displaced persons in Nigeria highlight elevated rates of trauma, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly among women and children (Sheikh et al., 2016; Madoro et al., 2020; Oke-Chinda, 2021). These invisible forms of violence compound material deprivation, producing intergenerational effects of exclusion and vulnerability.

Yet Bakassi communities have not been passive victims of these structural forces. Through activism, petitions, and grassroots mobilizations, displaced populations have continued to assert their agency. The Bakassi Movement for Self-Determination (BAMOSD) and other groups have sought to resist marginalization by appealing to international bodies, demanding recognition, and contesting both Nigerian and Cameroonian state practices (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2010; Nonju & Uwoh, 2021). Media narratives and local activism, as Taiwo and Igwebuike (2015) demonstrate, have further highlighted the contradictions and injustices embedded in the displacement process.

These forms of resistance reflect a broader struggle over rights, belonging, and recognition. By challenging their erasure, Bakassi communities transform displacement from a humanitarian issue into a political claim-making process. Their activism underscores that material deprivation is not simply a condition to be alleviated but a form of structural violence that demands accountability and redress.

The Bakassi crisis thus illustrates how boundary disputes generate layered forms of exclusion. On one level, displacement arises from legal and territorial adjudication rooted in colonial treaties. On another, it reflects the political economy of resource competition, as sovereignty over Bakassi is linked to oil reserves and fishing rights. Finally, it manifests in everyday material deprivation—lack of housing, healthcare, livelihoods, and security—experienced by displaced populations.

This multi-layered exclusion calls for a reconceptualization of displacement in African borderlands. Rather than treating it as an unintended byproduct of territorial conflict, displacement should be understood as a deliberate outcome of statecraft, sovereignty claims, and political manipulation. The case of Bakassi highlights the persistence of colonial logics in postcolonial governance and the urgent need for frameworks that prioritize

human security and rights over territorial integrity.

CITIZENSHIP, DISPLACEMENT, AND THE POLITICS OF BELONGING

> *Citizenship is not merely a legal status; it is a claim to recognition, protection, and belonging.*
>
> Bronwen Manby (2016, p. 12)

The 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that ceded the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon (ICJ, 2002a, 2002b) transformed thousands of Nigerian citizens overnight into a people adrift, caught in the liminal space between two states. Stripped of their homes, denied stable civic recognition, and subjected to alternating regimes of neglect and exploitation, the Bakassi displaced persons (BDPs) embody the precariousness of belonging in postcolonial Africa. Their story is not only one of displacement but also of contested citizenship, political instrumentalization, and the uncertain meaning of recognition in the Niger Delta and beyond.

As Mamdani (1996) and Anthony (2014) argue, colonial states in Africa constructed bifurcated political systems that distinguished between "natives" and "strangers." These logics, which persist in postcolonial states, shaped the vulnerability of Bakassi residents long before the ICJ ruling. Cameroon's nationality regime, already restrictive and bureaucratic (Nguindip, 2017), compounded this uncertainty, while Nigeria's political elites responded inconsistently, often treating BDPs as political pawns rather than citizens entitled to protection (Odinkalu, 2012; Akhere, 2023).

From the onset, government responses were mediated through the politics of administration. Under President Olusegun Obasanjo, who signed the Green Tree Agreement (2006), Nigeria pledged to resettle displaced Bakassi communities. Federal promises included financial packages, housing estates in Cross River and Akwa Ibom, and social services for affected families. Yet, implementation was limited. The symbolic triumph of international legality was prioritized over the substantive protection of citizens (United Nations, 2008; International Peace Institute, 2008).

President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (2007–2010) expanded compensation plans, but his short-lived tenure left many promises unfulfilled. Jonathan's administration (2010–2015), which hailed from the Niger Delta, publicly committed to addressing BDP grievances. Several housing projects were launched in Ekpri Ikang and Akpabuyo, but corruption scandals, underfunding, and partisan allocation of benefits undermined their impact (Unah, 2021; Oyewo, 2021). Displaced communities often complained that aid distribution was channeled through political loyalists, reinforcing inequality.

The Buhari administration (2015–2023) brought a different posture. Its rhetoric emphasized national security and the finality of the ICJ judgment, while humanitarian commitments to Bakassi residents were deprioritized amid wider displacement crises in the northeast. Buhari's government did approve budgetary allocations for BDP reintegration, but many projects stalled, and survivors reported worsening neglect (Akhere, 2023). Meanwhile, state-level governments in Cross River and Akwa Ibom intermittently provided relief materials, scholarships, or healthcare interventions, though often framed as campaign gestures ahead of elections (Caldwell, 2012; Unah, 2021).

The current administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2023 – present) has pledged renewed attention, with Niger Delta politicians once again invoking the plight of Bakassi DPs in campaign rhetoric. However, communities remain skeptical, viewing such promises as part of a cycle of electoral exploitation. This historical sequencing reveals a pattern: while each government acknowledges Bakassi displacement, interventions remain piecemeal, politicized, and insufficiently institutionalized.

Thus, Bakassi citizenship struggles cannot be analyzed outside the interplay of governmental timeframes, campaign cycles, and Niger Delta politics. Politicians routinely use the suffering of BDPs as evidence of national neglect, yet actual interventions remain symbolic and fragmented. For displaced persons, the uncertainty of belonging is compounded by the temporality of politics: protections exist only as long as they align with the electoral fortunes of those in power.

PRECARIOUS BELONGING AND THE UNCERTAIN PROMISE OF PROTECTION

Belonging in Bakassi is both a legal and political condition. As Odinkalu (2012) observes, the Green Tree Agreement redefined many residents' civic status without providing them with secure recognition. Nigeria nominally promised citizenship retention for those wishing to remain Nigerian, but bureaucratic hurdles, lack of documentation, and shifting political will obstructed this path (Bonchuk, 2014; Ebolo, 2022). Cameroon, meanwhile, imposed taxation and militarized control without granting full nationality rights (BBC, 2013; Kindzeka, 2013).

This precarity deepened during transitions between administrations. Under Obasanjo and Yar'Adua, displaced Bakassi residents were promised rapid resettlement and inclusion, but bureaucratic failure bred mistrust. Jonathan's Niger Delta origins raised hopes, but many residents later lamented that even a "son of the soil" could not secure their rights, deepening their sense of betrayal (Beckly, 2013; Ngalim, 2019). Buhari's era heightened neglect: BDPs were overshadowed by the insurgency-driven displacement in the northeast. Promises of reintegration gave way to narratives of fiscal restraint, reinforcing the impression that Bakassi lives were expendable in the calculus of national priorities (Hart, 2022).

At the state level, governors in Cross River and Akwa Ibom periodically distributed relief, built schools, or promised housing, often tied to election campaigns. During gubernatorial races, BDPs were paraded as symbols of state responsibility, yet benefits rarely endured beyond electoral cycles. This politicization of suffering created what Baye (2010) describes as "perpetual liminality," where belonging is perpetually deferred and dependent on political expedience.

The psychosocial toll of this precarious belonging is profound. Studies by Sheikh et al. (2016), Madoro et al. (2020), and Oke-Chinda (2021) document trauma, distress, and heightened vulnerability among displaced populations, especially women and children. This uncertainty is lived not only as legal exclusion but also as a chronic instability over whether promises of recognition will ever materialize. For many BDPs, the pain of displacement is exacerbated by witnessing successive governments exploit their plight rhetorically while leaving structural issues unresolved.

Yet, despite these conditions, Bakassi communities assert agency. Grassroots mobilizations, such as the Bakassi Movement for Self-Determination (BAMOSD), have consistently challenged both Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2010). These movements demand not only recognition but also reparations and autonomy. Their activism exposes what Nwoko (2015) calls the failures of international law to account for the lived realities of displaced peoples.

Belonging in Bakassi, therefore, is negotiated through a complex interplay of state politics, grassroots agency, and international advocacy. On one hand, successive administrations have instrumentalized BDPs as symbols of state benevolence while failing to secure durable solutions. On the other hand, displaced persons themselves resist erasure, invoking ancestral ties, oral traditions, and political mobilization to assert their place in the national imagination (Nonju & Uwoh, 2021).

The contradictions are stark: while international actors celebrated the ICJ ruling and the Green Tree Agreement as triumphs of legality (United Nations, 2008; Caldwell, 2012), the everyday reality for Bakassi residents has been precarious belonging, uncertainty, and political instrumentalization. Citizenship remains contingent on shifting government agendas; recognition is perpetually postponed by electoral calculations. And yet, through endurance and mobilization, Bakassi displaced persons continue to remind Nigeria, Cameroon, and the world that citizenship is not simply a gift of the state but a lived claim to recognition, identity, and justice.

ELECTORAL POLITICS AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES IN THE NIGER DELTA

Humanitarian interventions for displaced Bakassi communities have never been neutral or technocratic. They are deeply entangled with the shifting logics of Nigerian electoral

politics, particularly in the Niger Delta, where displacement narratives intersect with the politics of oil, resource control, and federal-state bargaining (Akhere, 2023; Hart, 2022). The plight of Bakassi displaced persons (BDPs) is repeatedly framed within campaign rhetoric, party manifestos, and state-level political contests, creating a cycle in which humanitarian promises rise and fall with electoral seasons.

This entanglement has roots in the history of the Bakassi handover. As LeFebvre (2014) notes, Nigeria's acceptance of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling was framed as a triumph of legality, yet local populations interpreted it through the lens of betrayal, fueling resentment that politicians have since mobilized for electoral gain. Federal leaders—Obasanjo, Yar'Adua, Jonathan, Buhari, and Tinubu—each invoked Bakassi as a symbol of either national weakness or Niger Delta neglect, positioning themselves as protectors of displaced citizens while often delivering only partial or symbolic interventions (Odinkalu, 2012; Unah, 2021)

At the state level, governors of Cross River and Akwa Ibom have also politicized humanitarian responses. Election campaigns often highlight housing projects, scholarships, or food distribution initiatives for Bakassi communities; however, these efforts are frequently short-lived, underfunded, or undermined by corruption (Unah, 2021; Oyewo, 2021). Baye (2010) describes this dynamic as a "politics of compassion," in which humanitarian gestures are deployed not to resolve displacement but to reinforce political loyalty.

Beyond Nigeria's domestic politics, electoral contestation also shapes how the Bakassi issue is framed in international diplomacy. Nigerian politicians frequently highlight Bakassi displacement in their appeals to multilateral organizations, portraying themselves as guardians of vulnerable populations even as internal policies fall short (United Nations, 2008; International Peace Institute, 2008). This selective invocation highlights what Anthony (2014) refers to as the politics of indigeneity, where citizenship claims are mediated not only by law but also by the calculus of political expediency.

Thus, the Niger Delta offers a striking case of how humanitarian responses are entangled with political logics: displacement is not addressed as a structural issue but instrumentalized within electoral cycles. As a result, BDPs are caught in a paradox—central to campaign rhetoric yet peripheral to substantive policy.

RECENT DOMESTIC EFFORTS AND ELECTORAL CALCULATIONS

The humanitarian condition of Bakassi displaced persons illustrates how electoral cycles structure both the provision and withdrawal of state support. Politicians, particularly in the Niger Delta, routinely deploy the imagery of displacement during campaigns, promising housing, compensation, and reintegration. Yet, as Ebiede, Langer, and Tosun (2020) argue in their analysis of Nigeria's post-amnesty programme, such promises often function as temporary palliatives tied to electoral legitimacy rather than durable devel-

opment strategies.

During Obasanjo's presidency, the signing of the Green Tree Agreement in 2006 coincided with preparations for the 2007 elections. His administration framed the treaty as evidence of Nigeria's maturity in international law, while simultaneously promising generous resettlement schemes to displaced Bakassi communities (United Nations, 2008; Bonchuk, 2014). However, the political urgency of electoral succession outpaced implementation.

Yar'Adua's short tenure expanded compensation initiatives, but these were also framed within the political economy of Niger Delta militancy. As Ebolo (2022) shows, state interventions in border disputes were entangled with efforts to pacify oil-producing regions, linking Bakassi relief to broader strategies of electoral consolidation in the South-South.

Goodluck Jonathan's presidency further demonstrates the politicization of displacement. Hailing from the Niger Delta, Jonathan used his background to build legitimacy among affected communities, promising to "restore dignity" to Bakassi returnees. Yet, as Unah (2021) and Oyewo (2021) document, corruption scandals plagued housing projects in Cross River, with relief packages often channeled through party loyalists.

Under Buhari, the framing shifted. Campaign rhetoric emphasized sovereignty and security rather than humanitarian care. While his government allocated funds for reintegration, Bakassi residents reported worsening neglect as resources were redirected to the northeast, where Boko Haram–related displacement dominated political discourse (Akhere, 2023; Hart, 2022).

The current administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has attempted to reframe the discourse by opening dialogue with Niger Delta delegates over the plight of Bakassi DPs. Since assuming office in 2023, Tinubu has received delegations from Niger Delta leaders and civil society representatives pressing for renewed housing schemes, documentation drives, and federal recognition of Bakassi claims. Although these engagements signal some political willingness to revisit unresolved grievances, displaced communities remain cautious, interpreting them as potential extensions of the historical cycle of promises without substantive follow-through (Akhere, 2023; Macdonald, 2024).

At the state level, governors continue to parade humanitarian interventions during campaign seasons. Relief materials, scholarship schemes, or resettlement visits are frequently showcased in the months leading up to elections (Beckly, 2013; Caldwell, 2012). Yet these efforts rarely endure beyond electoral seasons, reinforcing what Baye (2010) describes as "perpetual liminality," whereby displaced populations are sustained in a condition of suspended need, instrumentalized for political loyalty rather than long-term relief.

ONGOING AGITATIONS AND GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATIONS

Alongside official interventions, Bakassi communities and advocacy groups have continued to mobilize, highlighting the limitations of state-led humanitarian responses. Movements such as the Bakassi Movement for Self-Determination (BAMOSD) have consistently pressed for reparations, autonomy, and recognition of Bakassi returnees as full citizens entitled to durable resettlement. Their protests and petitions often coincide with election periods, leveraging campaign visibility to extract short-term concessions (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2010; Nonju & Uwoh, 2021).

Grassroots leaders and displaced community associations have also utilized electoral seasons as strategic moments to amplify their voices. By staging demonstrations, issuing communiqués, and aligning with Niger Delta advocacy networks, these groups force candidates to acknowledge their plight in campaign manifestos. Yet, as many community leaders attest, such recognition rarely translates into sustainable post-election policy.

The persistence of agitation underscores the deep psychosocial toll of displacement. Research demonstrates that uncertainty and recurring unfulfilled promises exacerbate trauma, erode trust in government, and foster a sense of abandonment (Sheikh et al., 2016; Madoro et al., 2020; Oke-Chinda, 2021). For Bakassi residents, the cycle of hope and disappointment not only deepens marginalization but also fuels demands for self-determination and alternative political futures.

In this way, grassroots mobilizations serve as both a critique of electoral opportunism and a form of agency within constrained political structures. They reveal how displacement, while instrumentalized by elites, is also reclaimed by affected communities as a platform for advocacy, contestation, and negotiation. This dynamic reflects what Ngalim (2019) calls "post-conflict liminality"—a condition where belonging, recognition, and relief are contingent not only on the rhythms of political time but also on the capacity of displaced persons to agitate and assert their claims.

CONCLUSION

The Bakassi Peninsula crisis remains one of the most enduring illustrations of how international legal resolutions can obscure, rather than resolve, the lived realities of borderland communities in postcolonial Africa. The 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling and the subsequent 2006 Green Tree Agreement provided a framework for transferring sovereignty to Cameroon, yet they failed to anticipate or mitigate the profound humanitarian and identity crises that followed for Bakassi's Nigerian residents (Odinkalu, 2012; Bonchuk, 2014). For many displaced persons, the outcome was not stability but dislocation, statelessness, and the erosion of belonging.

Over two decades later, the humanitarian challenges remain unresolved. Successive Ni-

gerian administrations—from Obasanjo to Buhari—have alternated between symbolic recognition and fragmented interventions, while state governments in Cross River and Akwa Ibom have often linked relief efforts to campaign cycles rather than long-term rehabilitation (Unah, 2021; Oyewo, 2021). Recent domestic initiatives under President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, including meetings with Niger Delta delegations and renewed pledges of reintegration, suggest some political willingness to revisit the crisis. Yet skepticism persists among affected communities, who view such gestures as part of a cyclical pattern of electoral promises that rarely translate into durable solutions (Akhere, 2023; Macdonald, 2024).

At the same time, grassroots resistance continues to shape the political landscape. Movements like the Bakassi Movement for Self-Determination (BAMOSD) and allied Niger Delta groups have sustained demands for autonomy, reparations, and recognition, often intensifying their mobilizations during electoral seasons to compel attention from political elites (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2010; Nonju & Uwoh, 2021). These ongoing agitations underscore both the failures of state-led humanitarian responses and the agency of displaced populations in reclaiming their place within national and regional politics.

The international community has largely treated Bakassi as a resolved territorial dispute, yet the persistence of displacement, statelessness, and periodic violence reveals the inadequacy of purely legalistic settlements. The limited role of international actors in safeguarding the rights of Bakassi residents demonstrates the structural weaknesses of global legal frameworks in addressing the human costs of postcolonial border disputes (Ebolo, 2022; Hussain, 2023).

Generally, the Bakassi crisis is not only a story of boundary demarcation but also of contested citizenship, electoral politics, and grassroots resistance. Durable peace and justice for Bakassi communities require more than episodic state relief or rhetorical recognition. They demand sustained institutional responses that move beyond electoral cycles, regional bargaining, and symbolic diplomacy. Unless the rights, dignity, and aspirations of Bakassi displaced persons are placed at the center of policy and international engagement, the crisis will remain locked in what Ngalim (2019) terms "post-conflict liminality"—a condition of unresolved belonging, recurrent displacement, and deferred justice.

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