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Political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria: historical dynamics and contemporary implications for national security

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Abstract: Political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria pose significant challenges to national security and stability, rooted in colonial-era policies that institutionalized ethnic and religious divisions. These historical grievances compounded by contemporary socio-political dynamics, manifest in electoral violence, insurgencies like Boko Haram, farmer-herder clashes, and secessionist movements such as IPOB. The study investigates these tensions by exploring their historical roots, contemporary manifestations, and impact on national security, employing Marxist, and Functionalist theories to provide a robust theoretical framework. Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered from archival records, governmental and non-governmental reports, and case studies, including the Kano Riots of 1953, the Maitatsine Riots of 1980, and the Boko Haram insurgency and the likes. Findings reveal that these tensions are exacerbated by governance failures, socio-economic inequalities, and the manipulation of identity politics, with severe implications for national security, such as displacement, economic disruption, and weakened state legitimacy. While interventions like the Niger Delta Amnesty Program and anti-open grazing laws have yielded partial success, their limited scope underscores the need for comprehensive reforms. The study concludes that addressing these tensions requires historical reconciliation, inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and sustainable conflict-resolution mechanisms. Thus the study recommends establishing a

national reconciliation commission, decentralizing governance, promoting interfaith dialogue, and enhancing security frameworks through community policing and stakeholder engagement. These measures aim to address the root causes of tensions and foster long-term stability and peace. By integrating historical, political, and socio-economic dimensions, the study provides a roadmap for mitigating political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria.

Keywords: Political tensions, Ethno-religious conflict, National security, Governance.

Introduction: In the contemporary landscape of globalization, national security has become an increasingly pressing concern for governments across the globe. The stability of nations hinges not only on their ability to protect territorial sovereignty but also on their capacity to address internal socio-political dynamics that threaten peace and cohesion. Political and ethno-religious tensions have been identified as significant destabilizing factors, manifesting in various forms such as civil unrest, insurgencies, and intergroup conflicts (Joshi, 2024). These tensions, which have been observed from the Balkans to the Middle East, have demonstrated a capacity to undermine governance, erode social cohesion, and derail developmental progress (Okeke-Ihejirika & Odimegwu, 2022; Kehinde, 2023).

In Africa, the interplay of political and ethno-religious divisions presents formidable challenges to nation-building and security. The continent's diverse ethnic and religious landscape often serves as a fault line for conflict, particularly in nations with colonial legacies that forced disparate groups into a single political framework. Nigeria, often referred to as the "Giant of Africa," epitomizes the complexities of managing ethno-religious diversity within a post-colonial state. With over 250 ethnic groups, including the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, Nigeria reflects a rich tapestry of cultural, linguistic, and religious plurality. Islam and Christianity dominate religious affiliations, with traditional beliefs also playing a significant role in many communities (Ndubuisi, 2024). This diversity, while a source of national pride, also presents significant challenges. Competing interests among various groups have often resulted in political and social tensions that are deeply rooted in Nigeria's historical context.

Since its amalgamation in 1914 by British colonial authorities, Nigeria has struggled to integrate its myriad ethnic groups and religious affiliations under a unified political structure. The three dominant ethnic groups—Hausa-Fulani in the north, Yoruba in the west,

and Igbo in the east—are further divided along religious lines, with Islam predominantly practiced in the north and Christianity in the south. These divisions have historically been politicized, fostering competition for resources, power, and representation (Agu, 2024). Over the decades, these political and ethno-religious tensions have escalated into recurrent conflicts, ranging from civil wars to communal violence, and the insurgency of extremist groups like Boko Haram. The cumulative impact of these conflicts has led to a deterioration of national security, characterized by loss of lives, displacement of populations, and economic disruptions.

The interplay between economic challenges and social tensions underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to governance that addresses both security and socio-economic development. The Nigerian government's response to these multifaceted challenges has included various policy initiatives aimed at fostering national unity and addressing the root causes of conflict. However, the effectiveness of these strategies remains a topic of debate among scholars and policymakers. Some argue that a more inclusive approach, which considers the diverse interests of Nigeria's ethnic groups, is essential for achieving long-term stability (Kyuvi, 2023). This perspective aligns with the notion that good governance, characterized by transparency and accountability, is crucial for fostering trust among citizens and mitigating the risks of conflict (Bah & Ouedraogo, 2022).

Moreover, the role of international organizations in supporting Nigeria's efforts to enhance its national security cannot be understated. A robust and equitable representation within key international bodies, such as the African Union, is vital for Nigeria to effectively advocate for its interests and priorities on the global stage. A well-aligned foreign policy framework that prioritizes economic growth and regional stability is essential for bolstering Nigeria's resilience and autonomy within the international community (Umeh et al., 2023).

As Nigeria navigates these turbulent waters, the lessons learned from its historical context and current dynamics will be critical in shaping a more secure and cohesive future for the nation. Understanding the roots and modern dynamics of these issues is critical for addressing the persistent challenges they pose. This study focuses on Nigeria as a case study to explore the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of political and ethno-religious tensions. It examines their implications for national security, shedding light on the interplay of governance, institutional frameworks, and socio-political dynamics that perpetuate these conflicts. By addressing these issues, the study aims to contribute to the development of more comprehensive and

sustainable strategies for mitigating tensions and fostering peace in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite numerous efforts by successive governments and international stakeholders to address political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria, these challenges remain deeply ingrained, raising significant questions about the effectiveness of existing strategies and policies. The persistence of these issues has had far-reaching implications for national security and governance, as Nigeria continues to grapple with the consequences of historical grievances, socio-economic disparities, and institutional weaknesses (Dhital, 2019). The rising tide of migration among Nigerians seeking safety and stability abroad further underscores the state's failure to effectively address these tensions, leading to questions about its legitimacy and capacity to govern equitably (Okereke et al., 2022).

The historical context of these tensions highlights the unresolved legacies of colonial rule and the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970). British colonial policies forced the amalgamation of diverse ethnic groups into a single political entity, disregarding their distinct cultural and religious identities. This foundational discord, compounded by divide-and-rule strategies entrenched divisions that persist today (Osimen et al., 2022). The civil war, fueled by ethnic and regional grievances, resulted in significant loss of life and displacement, leaving scars that continue to shape Nigeria's socio-political landscape (Bayer, 2023). Marginalized groups, particularly in the southeastern region, continue to seek greater autonomy, underscoring the unresolved grievances from this historical conflict (Bammeke & Awosika, 2022). The enduring influence of these tensions illustrates the failure to address their root causes, perpetuating cycles of violence and mistrust among ethnic and religious groups.

Despite Nigeria's democratic progress, contemporary manifestations of these tensions exacerbate its fragile socio-political fabric. Extremist groups, such as Boko Haram in the northeast, have exploited socio-economic disenfranchisement and religious divisions, leading to widespread violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises (Umeh, 2023). Boko Haram's insurgency exemplifies the intersection of religious extremism and poor governance, contributing to the polarization of Nigeria's religious landscape. Similarly, the farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, often framed as clashes between Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farmers, highlight the deepening competition over scarce resources exacerbated by climate change (Arowosegbe, 2020). These resource-based conflicts not only fuel ethno-religious tensions but also threaten

agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods, compounding national security challenges (Kamta et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Nigeria's governance structures have struggled to build public trust and effectively manage these crises. Corruption and ineffective governance have eroded confidence in state institutions, exacerbating social unrest and disenfranchisement (Ilo et al., 2020). This lack of trust has led to protests and civil disobedience, as evidenced during the #EndSARS movement in 2020, which highlighted broader systemic issues of governance and accountability. The inability of the state to address grievances equitably perpetuates a cycle of discontent, further deepening the socio-political divide.

Social media, while a powerful tool for citizen engagement, has also become a double-edged sword in exacerbating Nigeria's security challenges (Sassetti, 2019). Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have facilitated communication and mobilization but also serve as channels for radicalization and the spread of misinformation (Onwudiwe & Mendie, 2022). The Nigerian government's controversial decision to ban Twitter in 2021, citing its role in civil unrest, illustrates the complexity of balancing governance, freedom of expression, and national security (Mohammed, 2023). The role of social media in shaping public discourse and security dynamics underscores the urgent need for policies that address its misuse while preserving democratic freedoms.

The impact of these unresolved tensions on national security is profound. Over 3 million people have been displaced due to ongoing conflicts, particularly in the northeast and Middle Belt regions, exacerbating humanitarian challenges and straining already limited resources (Kamta et al., 2021). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) often face inadequate access to healthcare, education, and basic services, further deepening the socio-economic divide. The economic implications of these conflicts are equally significant, with violence disrupting trade, investment, and agricultural production. As noted by Umeh (2023), Nigeria loses billions of dollars annually due to these disruptions, perpetuating poverty and unemployment. This economic decline fuels grievances among marginalized groups, creating fertile ground for further violence and instability.

Despite numerous interventions by international stakeholders and domestic reforms, these persistent challenges highlight the inadequacy of existing strategies. The Nigerian government's inability to address these issues comprehensively has not only deepened internal divisions but also eroded its

credibility on the global stage. As the nation continues to face recurring cycles of violence and social unrest, the need for innovative, inclusive, and sustainable solutions has become increasingly urgent. This study aims to analyze these dynamics, assess their implications, and propose actionable solutions to mitigate their impact on Nigeria's stability and future development.

Research aim and Objectives

The study aims to investigate, understand, and analyze the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria, and to assess their impact on national security. The study's objectives are:

- To analyze the historical roots of political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria.
- To examine the contemporary manifestations of these tensions.
- To assess the impact of these tensions on national security.
- To propose potential solutions and recommendations for mitigating these tensions.

Significance of the study

By analyzing the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of conflict in diverse societies. This knowledge is crucial for developing effective conflict resolution strategies and preventing future outbreaks of violence. Furthermore, the findings of this research will provide valuable insights for policymakers, government officials, and international organizations involved in addressing conflict and promoting peace and security in Nigeria. The study will inform the development and implementation of policies aimed at mitigating tensions, fostering national cohesion, and enhancing national security.

By shedding light on the historical and contemporary factors that contribute to political and ethno-religious tensions, this research can contribute to raising awareness and fostering dialogue among different ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. This can help to build bridges of understanding, promote tolerance, and ultimately contribute to national cohesion and social stability. Additionally, this study will contribute to the existing body of academic literature on conflict studies, political science, and international relations. It will provide a valuable case study for understanding the interplay between political, ethnic, and religious factors in shaping national security outcomes.

Scope of the study

This study will primarily focus on examining the historical evolution of political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria, tracing their origins to pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independence periods. It will also analyze contemporary manifestations of these tensions, including electoral violence, religious extremism, inter-communal conflicts, and the role of political corruption and inequality. Furthermore, the study will assess the impact of these tensions on various aspects of national security, such as internal security threats, regional security, economic development, and human rights. Finally, the study will propose potential solutions and recommendations for mitigating these tensions, including political reforms, dialogue and reconciliation initiatives, addressing root causes, strengthening security institutions, and the role of the international community.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical and case study research design to explore the contemporary manifestations of political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria. Data collection will involve archival research, utilizing diverse sources such as government documents, academic journals, news articles, and reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These sources provide rich and reliable information to understand the causes, dynamics, and impacts of political and ethno-religious conflicts. The data will be analyzed using qualitative content analysis, focusing on identifying patterns, themes, and trends in the documented information to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. This approach ensures an in-depth exploration of the interplay between political governance, religious dynamics, and ethnic diversity in shaping Nigeria's security and developmental challenges.

Literature Review

Historical Dynamics of Political and Ethno-Religious Tensions in Nigeria

Pre-Colonial Period

The pre-colonial period in Nigeria featured a tapestry of autonomous ethnic communities with distinct governance systems. Centralized monarchies, such as the Hausa-Fulani emirates and the Oyo Empire, coexisted with decentralized societies like the Igbo, characterized by kinship and communal decision-making. Inter-ethnic relations during this period were predominantly shaped by trade, alliances, and localized conflicts over resources. These disputes were often resolved through traditional mechanisms that emphasized balance and social harmony (Ayinla, 2024).

However, ethno-religious dynamics also emerged during this time, particularly with the 19th-century Jihad movement led by Usman Dan Fodio. This campaign sought to establish the Sokoto Caliphate and convert non-Muslim populations, profoundly reshaping the socio-political and religious fabric of northern Nigeria. The establishment of Islamic emirates, such as Bauchi, was accompanied by significant expansion and consolidation of Islamic governance structures (Orngu, 2018). Conversely, Christianization efforts beginning in the 15th century gained momentum in the 19th century, counteracting Islamic influences and setting the stage for religious contestations.

Colonial Period

The historical roots of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria are widely attributed to colonial policies that shaped the country's socio-political and religious dynamics. Orngu (2018) identifies colonial administrative strategies as pivotal in entrenching religious dichotomy. The British imposed indirect rule, which upheld existing Islamic structures in the North while allowing Christian missionaries to dominate the South, thereby institutionalizing division and rivalry. Similarly, Ugorji (2017) highlights the amalgamation of culturally distinct northern and southern regions in 1914 as a critical point that exacerbated tensions between Muslims and Christians. The colonial divide-and-rule policies perpetuated inter-group competition and distrust, laying the groundwork for modern conflicts. This perspective aligns with Osadola's (2012) analysis, which underscores the deliberate colonial manipulation of Nigeria's ethnic diversity to maintain control, ultimately fostering deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions.

The analysis of religion's role in political socialization, as detailed by Eze et al. (2024), further elucidates how ethno-religious dynamics have shaped Nigeria's political trajectory. The duality of governance systems and exclusionary practices rooted in colonial legacies continue to fuel separatist agitations and societal upheavals. Meanwhile, the broader implications of anti-colonial resistance and its impact on identity formation are explored by Kuandyk and Sarsikeeva (2023), who emphasize literature's role in exposing and challenging colonial legacies. This cross-cultural analysis enriches the understanding of colonial impacts on societal structures and resistance narratives, offering comparative insights relevant to Nigeria's historical context.

Post-Independence Period

Post-independence Nigeria has witnessed a persistence of ethno-religious conflicts, with their

roots deeply entrenched in colonial legacies and exacerbated by the socio-political dynamics of a diverse nation-state. Adenuga et al. (2023) provide a comprehensive overview of these conflicts during Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2021), documenting over 2811 ethnic and 3703 religious conflicts that have resulted in massive fatalities and socio-political instability. The analysis identifies the failure of the post-colonial state to equitably distribute power and resources as a key driver of unrest. Agbiboa (2013) explores the broader historical continuum of these tensions, emphasizing that post-independence political mobilization along ethnic and religious lines hindered the formation of a cohesive national identity. The Biafran War and subsequent electoral and religious violence illustrate the enduring challenges of unity in diversity.

Sule (2015) investigates the role of the mass media in amplifying conflicts in Northern Nigeria, particularly through biased reportage influenced by the affiliations of media owners and editors. This study highlights how even resource-based disputes, such as the farmer-herder crises, often assume a religious character, complicating conflict resolution efforts. The findings underscore the mass media's dual potential to either de-escalate or exacerbate ethno-religious tensions.

Contemporary Manifestations of Political and Ethno-Religious Tensions in Nigeria

Electoral Violence

In Nigeria, the electoral process is significantly influenced by ethnicity and religion, often leading to violence. Ethnic and religious affiliations are frequently exploited by politicians during elections to mobilize support, creating an "us versus them" mentality. This tactic leads to violent clashes among political and religious factions, especially when the stakes are high, as in presidential and gubernatorial elections. "Religious othering" during campaigns, where opposing religious groups are demonized or stigmatized, deepens these divisions. For example, ethnic minorities may feel politically marginalized, while religious minorities experience exclusion or hostility during campaigns. Between 1999 and 2021, over 2,811 ethnic conflicts and 3,703 religious conflicts were recorded, emphasizing the depth of polarization and the frequency of violence in the electoral context (Adenuga et al. 2023). These tensions, fueled by the politicization of religion and ethnicity, make elections a flashpoint for violence, undermining the democratic process and the security of the country (Chigbu et al., 2024).

Religious Extremism

The rise of religious extremism in Nigeria, particularly the insurgency led by Boko Haram and other militant

groups, represents a severe threat to national security. These groups justify their actions with ideological motivations that intertwine with religious dogma, but they are also deeply rooted in political and socio-economic grievances. Historical factors such as colonial legacies, which introduced divisions between the north and south, as well as competition for power among different ethnic and religious groups, have fueled religious extremism (Mshelia, 2024). Groups like Boko Haram, which emerged in the early 2000s, have escalated violence in the northeast, leading to thousands of deaths, mass displacement, and the destruction of property. The group's radical interpretations of Islam and violent actions have led to profound destabilization across Nigeria (Effiom 2023). This extremism has not only targeted government institutions and military personnel but also civilians, particularly those in Christian-majority regions, contributing to a growing divide between religious communities and increasing sectarian tensions across the nation.

Inter-communal Conflicts

Inter-communal conflicts, particularly those between farmers and herders, are a significant source of violence in Nigeria. These conflicts often stem from competition for resources—especially land and water—amid changing climate conditions that have made agricultural and grazing land scarcer. However, these conflicts are also intertwined with ethnic and religious identities. The herders, predominantly Muslim and of Fulani ethnicity, frequently clash with farmers who are mostly Christian or from indigenous ethnic groups. These conflicts are often framed in ethnic and religious terms, as various groups view the violence through the lens of their identity (Chigbu et al., 2024). The consequences are dire: thousands of people have lost their lives, and many more have been displaced as a result of these clashes. In addition to resource competition, historical grievances between ethnic groups—further exacerbated by political manipulations—have turned these conflicts into protracted violence, demanding urgent attention and resolution (Adenuga et al, 2023).

Political Corruption and Inequality

Political corruption remains one of the most significant factors exacerbating ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria. Corruption at various levels of government has led to a severe misallocation of resources, which disproportionately affects certain ethnic and religious groups. Politicians often perpetuate corruption to consolidate power within their ethnic or religious communities, leading to widespread disenfranchisement and inequality. As a result,

marginalized groups feel excluded from the benefits of governance, fueling resentment and exacerbating tensions. The failure of the state to address these disparities contributes to a sense of injustice, further stoking the flames of conflict (Sarafa & Monday, 2024). The lack of trust in government institutions also leads to a breakdown in social cohesion, as citizens turn to ethnic or religious militias for protection, contributing to a cycle of violence and instability. Political corruption thus serves as a catalyst for deepening ethno-religious divisions, making the resolution of tensions more difficult and creating a fertile ground for violence.

Implications Political and Ethno-Religious Tensions for Nigeria's National Security

Internal Security Threats

One of the most visible manifestations of Nigeria's political and ethno-religious tensions is the rise of terrorism and insurgency. Groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have capitalized on religious divisions to incite violence and destabilize the country. Boko Haram, originally focused on opposing Western education, has evolved into a deadly insurgency that targets government institutions, military personnel, and civilians across northern Nigeria. These groups exploit religious sentiments, especially in the predominantly Muslim north, where they claim to fight against the "corruption" and "Westernization" of Nigerian society. However, their violent tactics—bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on villages—have led to widespread insecurity, displacement, and loss of life (Nakanda et al., 2024). The persistence of terrorism and insurgency has not only weakened the state's control over large parts of the country but has also exacerbated ethnic and religious divisions. In the northeast, Boko Haram's campaign has particularly targeted Christian communities, creating additional friction between the Muslim-majority north and the Christian-majority south. This has led to the further polarization of communities, making it increasingly difficult to foster national unity.

The political exploitation of ethnic and religious divisions frequently leads to civil unrest, with violent riots and clashes breaking out across various regions of Nigeria. These ethnic and religious conflicts often occur during politically sensitive periods, such as elections, or in response to provocative acts. For example, the 2011 post-election violence saw ethno-religious tensions escalate into widespread riots, particularly in the northern parts of the country, where supporters of rival political factions clashed along religious lines (Adabembe & Adedayo, 2022). These clashes typically undermine public safety and governance, as state and local authorities struggle to maintain control and

address the grievances that often fuel such violence. Over time, the destabilizing effect of civil unrest has contributed to a fragile state of governance, further deepening insecurity and weakening trust in government institutions.

The rise in criminal activities such as banditry, kidnappings, and ritual killings is closely linked to the socio-political environment fueled by ethno-religious tensions. Banditry, particularly in the north-western states like Zamfara and Katsina, has escalated in recent years, with armed groups exploiting local ethnic divisions to carry out violent attacks on rural communities. These criminal groups, often ethnic militias, have gained significant influence and control over large areas of the country, terrorizing civilians and taking advantage of the weak state presence in some regions (A & Ekeng, 2023). Kidnapping for ransom has become a lucrative business for these groups, with high-profile abductions of schoolchildren and travelers garnering national attention. These criminal activities further destabilize the country and create a sense of fear, contributing to the ongoing cycle of violence and insecurity.

Regional Security Implications

The instability in Nigeria has broader implications for regional security, particularly in the West African sub-region. The proliferation of armed groups, such as Boko Haram and its affiliates, has led to increased cross-border movements of militants and criminal elements. Armed groups operating in the Lake Chad Basin area, including Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, have been known to exploit the porous borders and lack of effective regional coordination to stage attacks across these nations (Udeh & Nwokorobia, 2022). These cross-border movements of militants exacerbate regional security challenges, as neighboring countries struggle to contain the spread of violence and curb the activities of transnational terror networks. The growing presence of these groups in the region also threatens to destabilize already fragile states, further compounding the security challenges facing the entire West African region.

Ongoing violence in Nigeria has led to significant displacement, creating a refugee crisis that affects neighboring countries. As insurgent groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP continue their campaigns, millions of Nigerians have been forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge in neighboring countries such as Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. This mass displacement strains the resources and infrastructures of these countries, creating a humanitarian crisis that is difficult to manage (Babajide et al., 2024). The refugee flows also have political implications, as neighboring

countries face challenges in accommodating large numbers of displaced persons while attempting to maintain their own security. Additionally, the movement of militants and weapons across borders complicates efforts to address regional security threats and stabilize the region.

Impact on Economic Development

The pervasive insecurity in Nigeria has a profound impact on its economic development. Both local and foreign investors are deterred by the high risks associated with operating in a volatile security environment. The constant threat of terrorism, kidnappings, and inter-communal violence has made Nigeria an unattractive destination for investment. Consequently, vital sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and infrastructure development face significant setbacks, with limited access to capital and resources (Adabembe & Adedayo, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of a stable and secure environment hampers Nigeria's ability to diversify its economy away from oil dependency, making it vulnerable to global economic shocks and limiting its prospects for sustainable growth.

The cost of insecurity is not only felt by investors but also by businesses operating within the country. The need for increased security measures, including private security personnel, surveillance systems, and insurance, adds substantial operational costs for companies. These increased costs are often passed on to consumers, contributing to inflation and rising unemployment rates (Udeh & Nwokorobia, 2022). Additionally, the destruction of infrastructure and the disruption of supply chains caused by violence have long-lasting economic consequences. The cumulative effect of these disruptions hampers Nigeria's ability to achieve sustained economic growth and development.

Human Rights Violations

Millions of Nigerians have been displaced due to the violence associated with political and ethno-religious tensions. Displacement often leads to dire humanitarian conditions, with refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) lacking access to basic services like healthcare, education, and adequate housing (Babajide et al., 2024). The displacement crisis is further exacerbated by the inadequate response of both the Nigerian government and international organizations, leaving vulnerable populations to fend for themselves. Moreover, displacement exacerbates ethnic and religious tensions, as displaced groups often face stigmatization or persecution in their new locations, leading to further cycles of violence and instability.

The targeted violence against specific communities based on their ethnic or religious identity is a significant human rights concern. From the mass killings of

Christians by Boko Haram to the attacks on Muslims by ethnic militias in the Middle Belt, Nigeria has witnessed widespread violations of human rights. These acts of violence often lead to extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and sexual violence, undermining the protection of civilians and further deepening ethnic and religious divides (Nakanda et al., 2024).

Theoretical Review

Marxist and Neo-Marxist Perspectives

Marxist theory, developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, emphasizes class struggle as the primary driver of social, economic, and political developments. Classical Marxism views ethnicity and religion as tools used by ruling classes to obscure class consciousness among the proletariat. This diversion prevents workers from uniting against the bourgeoisie by fostering divisions along ethno-religious lines (Marx & Engels, 1848). Marx criticized religion as "the opium of the people," a mechanism through which the ruling class pacifies the masses to maintain the status quo. Neo-Marxist and post-Marxist theorists, extend classical Marxism to consider ethno-religious mobilizations in postcolonial contexts (Mayer 2016; Nnoli 2008). Neo-Marxists argue that these mobilizations are often responses to systemic inequalities, feudalistic structures, and capitalist exploitation in developing societies. They emphasize that such mobilizations are not merely diversions but, in some instances, revolutionary acts against entrenched structures of oppression.

In Nigeria, the Marxist framework highlights the complex interplay between ethnicity, religion, and class. Nigeria's historical and socio-economic landscape—marked by colonialism, exploitation of resources, and entrenched regional inequalities—has created fertile ground for ethno-religious conflicts. The ruling elites and capitalist interests exploit ethnic and religious identities to maintain economic control, suppress political dissent, and manipulate electoral outcomes (Nnoli, 2008; Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). Neo-Marxists argue that such exploitation fuels grassroots movements and resistance, as seen in the Niger Delta militancy and insurgencies in northern Nigeria (Mayer, 2016; Egwu, 2011). Colonial policies in Nigeria laid the foundation for ethno-religious tensions by institutionalizing divisions between ethnic groups and regions. British indirect rule exploited existing ethnic hierarchies, favoring certain groups while marginalizing others. This created systemic disparities in access to education, infrastructure, and political power, leading to deeply entrenched inequalities that persist today. Marxist theory explains this historical dynamic as a deliberate strategy to perpetuate the

dominance of colonial elites and their successors in postcolonial Nigeria (Nnoli, 2008).

Marxist analysis elucidates how economic inequalities intersect with ethnic and religious affiliations, creating patterns of exclusion and resistance. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgency reflects the grievances of marginalized communities in northern Nigeria, who perceive the state as complicit in their economic deprivation (Nnoli, 2006; Mayer, 2016). Similarly, the Niger Delta conflict illustrates how capitalist exploitation of natural resources marginalizes indigenous populations while enriching multinational corporations and political elites. Religious affiliations have also been manipulated to serve capitalist and political interests. Political elites exploit religious sentiments to mobilize support during elections, often exacerbating divisions. For example, the competition between predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria and Christian southern Nigeria is framed through religious lenses, diverting attention from the underlying economic disparities (Egwu, 2011).

The Marxist perspective underscores the role of systemic inequalities in fueling insecurity. Ethno-religious mobilizations disrupt national cohesion, leading to violence, insurgency, and terrorism. Groups like Boko Haram and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian state, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with its failure to address economic and social inequities (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). These conflicts undermine governance and weaken state institutions, making Nigeria vulnerable to external threats and internal collapse. Marxist analysis advocates structural reforms to address the root causes of inequality and exploitation. These include equitable resource distribution, regional development programs, and dismantling ethno-religious patronage networks. Empowering marginalized communities through education, healthcare, and infrastructure development is critical to fostering national cohesion and reducing tensions (Ake, 1981; Watts, 2004).

Functionalist Theory

Functionalist theory, developed by Émile Durkheim and further advanced by Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton, emphasizes the role of social institutions in maintaining societal stability. Functionalists view ethnic and religious groups as critical agents of socialization, shaping norms, values, and political culture (Durkheim, 1912; Parsons, 1951). These groups contribute to the integration and cohesion of society by fostering shared identities and collective action. However, functionalist theory also warns that disruptions within these groups can destabilize societal harmony. Merton's concept of

dysfunction highlights how social institutions can contribute to conflict when they fail to fulfill their intended roles or when they become subverted for selfish purposes (Merton, 1968). In the Nigerian context, ethnic and religious groups have both integrative and disruptive potentials, depending on how they are mobilized and managed.

Functionalist theory explains the historical role of ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria as agents of cultural preservation and political mobilization. During the colonial era, these groups were instrumental in resisting colonial exploitation and advocating for independence. However, the colonial policy of divide-and-rule disrupted their integrative function, creating antagonistic identities that undermined national unity. In contemporary Nigeria, the functionalist framework elucidates how the politicization of ethnic and religious groups undermines social cohesion. Political elites manipulate these groups to gain electoral advantages, often exacerbating divisions. Communal conflicts, such as those between herders and farmers, illustrate how the failure of traditional institutions to mediate disputes leads to violence (Olaniyan & Omotola, 2015; Egwu, 2011).

The functionalist approach also highlights the role of ethno-religious groups in shaping political culture. For instance, religious organizations play a significant role in voter mobilization, advocacy, and policy influence. However, their involvement often polarizes the electorate, creating a zero-sum dynamic that threatens national stability (Freeman, 2020). Functionalist theory underscores the security threats posed by the dysfunction of ethno-religious groups. When these groups are mobilized for parochial interests, they disrupt the state's ability to maintain order and security. The proliferation of armed militias, such as the Oodua People's Congress and Arewa Youth Consultative Forum, reflects the erosion of state authority and the rise of alternative power centers (Omotola & Alumona, 2016; Oshita et al., 2019).

Moreover, functionalist analysis reveals how inter-group conflicts undermine economic development. For example, persistent violence in the Middle Belt region disrupts agricultural production, contributing to food insecurity and economic stagnation (Olaniyan & Omotola, 2015). These disruptions weaken national resilience, making Nigeria more susceptible to external threats and internal collapse. Functionalist theory advocates strengthening social institutions to enhance their integrative functions. This includes promoting interfaith and interethnic dialogue, fostering inclusive governance, and supporting traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. Policies that prioritize cultural pluralism and national identity over sectionalism are

essential to building a cohesive society (Omotola & Alumona, 2016; Osaghae, 2001). Investing in education and civic programs that emphasize shared values and national unity can also reduce tensions. Functionalist solutions align with the objectives of this study by addressing the structural and cultural factors contributing to Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts.

Empirical Review

Research into Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts reveal complex, interconnected drivers shaped by historical legacies, socio-economic inequalities, and political manipulations. Ayinla (2024) examines how ethno-religious identity contestations hinder national development. Employing historical and descriptive methodologies, the study highlights the colonial legacy of division and resource competition as critical drivers of conflict. Ayinla proposes Islamic principles as a mechanism for resolving identity crises, aligning with Orngu's (2018) assertion that understanding historical dynamics is crucial for fostering peaceful coexistence. Both works emphasize that colonial policies institutionalized ethnic and religious divisions, leaving a legacy that perpetuates Nigeria's current challenges.

Ugorji (2017) uses postcolonial and social conflict theories to explore the connections between historical events such as the Nigerian Civil War and the rise of Boko Haram, arguing that colonial amalgamation exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions. Similarly, Osadola (2012) adopts content analysis to analyze how colonial policies intensified ethnic rivalries, concluding that prioritizing local and ethnic interests over national cohesion remains a significant obstacle to unity.

Recent studies explore how systemic exclusion, dual governance structures, and political manipulation perpetuate contemporary ethno-religious tensions. Eze et al. (2024) highlight systematic exclusion and the dual governance system as central factors sustaining conflicts, echoing Orngu's (2018) observations about colonial religious policies' lingering effects on Nigeria's fragile unity. Adenuga et al. (2023) quantify the alarming scale of conflicts during the Fourth Republic, noting over 2,811 ethnic conflicts and 3,703 religious conflicts between 1999 and 2021. These studies highlight the devastating impacts of these tensions on national security and development, framing them as multidimensional and deeply entrenched.

Religious extremism, particularly Boko Haram's insurgency, has received significant scholarly attention. Mshelia (2024) traces the roots of Boko Haram to colonial and postcolonial political neglect, arguing that socio-economic grievances and historical injustices have fueled the group's radicalization. Nakanda et al. (2024) emphasize the devastating effects of Boko Haram's

activities, including mass displacement, property destruction, and loss of life. The group's actions illustrate how religious extremism intersects with socio-economic and political contexts, posing severe threats to national security.

Ethnic and religious identities are often exploited during elections, exacerbating tensions and leading to violence. Chigbu et al. (2024) argue that "religious othering" during elections intensifies divisions, turning electoral processes into battlegrounds for ethno-religious rivalries. Adenuga et al. (2023) support this, documenting the significant number of conflicts directly linked to electoral violence, further illustrating how ethno-religious identities shape Nigeria's political environment.

Competition over resources, particularly land and water, remains a significant driver of ethno-religious conflicts. Chigbu et al. (2024) examine farmer-herder clashes, noting their framing as ethnic and religious conflicts, with predominantly Muslim Fulani herders clashing with Christian or indigenous ethnic farmers. Adenuga et al. (2023) detail the scale and intensity of these conflicts, highlighting their roots in resource competition but also their exploitation by political elites to further divisive agendas. These conflicts have resulted in thousands of fatalities and widespread displacement, necessitating effective resolution strategies.

Political corruption exacerbates ethno-religious tensions by perpetuating inequality and marginalization. Sarafa and Monday (2024) link corruption to the unequal distribution of resources, which fosters feelings of disenfranchisement and injustice among certain ethnic and religious groups. This exclusion fuels violent protests and support for extremist groups, undermining public trust in government institutions. The authors advocate for anti-corruption measures and equitable governance to address these issues and restore stability.

The displacement caused by ethno-religious conflicts has worsened national security challenges. Babajide et al. (2024) analyze the impact of IDPs in regions like northwest and north-central Nigeria, finding inadequate governmental responses that exacerbate tensions between displaced groups and host communities. These dynamics often lead to increased discrimination and violence, further destabilizing affected regions.

Nigeria's porous borders contribute significantly to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, exacerbating insecurity. Udeh and Nwokorobia (2022) critique the government's border security policies, including border closures, for their unintended

economic consequences and limited success in curbing illegal arms smuggling. The authors propose modern security technologies and adherence to regional trade protocols as balanced solutions to these challenges.

Effiom (2023) argues that while ethnic diversity is not inherently a threat, its political exploitation exacerbates divisions. Politicians leverage ethnic and sectarian identities to maintain power, fueling terrorism, banditry, and other criminal activities. The study advocates for inter-ethnic dialogue and proactive conflict resolution strategies to address these deep-rooted divisions.

Historical Case Studies of Political and Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

1. The Kano Ethnic Riots of 1953

The Kano Ethnic Riots of 1953 marked the first significant ethno-religious conflict in the city since its capture by British colonial forces in 1903. The conflict occurred between the indigenous Kanawa population and the Sabon Gari settlers, who comprised mainly Southern Nigerians and some foreign nationals. British colonial policies, which deliberately segregated these groups to prevent alliances that could challenge colonial rule, were central to fostering mutual suspicion and animosity between the two communities (Albert, 2013).

Tensions heightened following a disagreement in the House of Representatives in Lagos over the proposed 1956 date for Nigerian independence. Southern politicians supported the motion, but Northern leaders, concerned about their region's lack of educated personnel to govern effectively, rejected it. In response, the Action Group (AG), a Southern-based political party, launched an independence campaign in Kano in March 1953. This act was perceived as provocative by Northern leaders and the Emir of Kano, who organized a peaceful protest against the AG. However, this protest escalated into violent clashes between Northern residents and Sabon Gari settlers, who were seen as sympathizers of Southern political interests. Between May 15 and May 18, 1953, the conflict claimed at least 30 lives and injured 241 people (Thompson, 2004). The event exemplifies how colonial-induced ethnic divisions and regional political disputes could ignite violence, setting a precedent for future conflicts in Nigeria.

2. The 1966 Military Coup

Nigeria's first military coup, executed on January 15, 1966, was orchestrated primarily by Igbo military officers. The coup led to the assassination of prominent Northern leaders, including Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Northern Premier Sir Ahmadu Bello, as well as several Western regional leaders and military officers (Lugga, 2007). In the aftermath, General

Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo, assumed leadership of the country. The coup exacerbated ethnic tensions, especially in Northern Nigeria, where it was viewed as an Igbo-led conspiracy against Northern dominance. The subsequent Unification Decree of 1966, issued by Ironsi, abolished Nigeria's federal structure in favor of a centralized administration. Northerners perceived this decree as an attempt to consolidate power within Igbo-controlled regions, intensifying their sense of marginalization (Lugga, 2007). Violent demonstrations against the decree erupted in March 1966, culminating in the massacre of thousands of Igbos in Northern Nigeria. The situation further deteriorated when Ironsi's government was overthrown in July 1966 by Northern military officers led by General Yakubu Gowon. The coup reflected deep-seated ethnic resentments and set the stage for the Nigerian Civil War, highlighting how political mismanagement and ethnic biases could destabilize national unity.

3. The Maitatsine Riots of 1980

The Maitatsine riots were sparked by the radical teachings of Muhammadu Marwa, a Cameroonian-born Islamic preacher. Known as "Maitatsine," Marwa rejected orthodox Islamic doctrines, including the Hadith and Sunnah, and even declared the Prophet Muhammad an impostor. He gained a significant following among disillusioned and economically marginalized youths in Kano. In December 1980, Marwa's followers initiated a revolt that escalated into widespread violence. The conflict began when police officers attempting to arrest a preacher near Maitatsine's headquarters were ambushed. Armed with rudimentary weapons such as bows, arrows, and swords, Maitatsine's followers attacked civilians and law enforcement. Over the course of the conflict, 4,177 people were killed, including Marwa himself (Isichei, 1987). The violence extended beyond Kano. In 1982, similar uprisings occurred in Balumkutu near Maiduguri, resulting in over 3,000 deaths. Subsequent clashes in Rigassa near Kaduna and Yola in 1984 caused hundreds of fatalities and significant property destruction. The Maitatsine riots underscore how socio-economic grievances, combined with religious extremism, can fuel large-scale violence, destabilizing national security across multiple regions.

4. The Kafanchan Crisis of 1987

The Kafanchan crisis, originating at the Kafanchan College of Education, illustrates the intersection of religious disputes and communal violence. On March 5, 1987, the Christian student organization Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS) organized an evangelical event titled "Mission 87." Tensions arose when a banner reading "Welcome to Mission 87 in Jesus

Campus" was displayed, sparking objections from Muslim students (Ibrahim, 1989). The situation escalated on March 6, 1987, when Abubakar Bako, a former Muslim turned Christian preacher, was accused of misinterpreting Quranic verses and denouncing the Prophet Muhammad. This led to violent clashes on campus, which quickly spread to Kafanchan town. Muslim youths, incited by members of the Muslim Student Society (MSS), engaged in protests that turned into violent confrontations. By March 9, the unrest had evolved into a full-scale conflict between Christian and Muslim residents, resulting in 19 deaths, the destruction of 152 churches, five mosques, and extensive damage to property (Ibrahim, 1989). The Kafanchan crisis extended to other towns, including Zaria, Katsina, and Kaduna, demonstrating how localized religious disputes can spiral into broader ethno-religious conflicts with far-reaching consequences.

5. The Zangon Kataf Crisis of 1992

The Zangon Kataf crisis was rooted in long-standing disputes between the predominantly Christian Kataf and the Muslim Hausa communities in Kaduna State. Tensions reached a tipping point when the Kataf-dominated local government proposed relocating the Zangon market to a new site in Kataf territory. Hausa residents opposed the move, arguing that the proposed site was traditionally used for Eid prayers and accusing the local government of undermining their economic dominance (Lugga, 2007). In February 1992, violence erupted during Friday prayers when Kataf youths attacked the Hausa community. The initial skirmishes quickly escalated into a full-blown conflict, resulting in over 90 deaths, 250 injuries, and the destruction of 133 houses and 26 farmlands (Lugga, 2007). The crisis highlighted the intertwined nature of political, economic, and religious grievances, as well as the role of local governance decisions in exacerbating ethno-religious tensions.

Contemporary Manifestations of Political and Ethno-religious, and Political Tensions

Emergence and Activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), founded in 2012 by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, seeks the secession of the southeastern region of Nigeria to re-establish the state of Biafra. Emerging as a successor to groups like the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Biafran Zionist Movement (BZM), IPOB primarily promotes the Igbo people's right to self-determination through peaceful means such as referendums (Jacob et al, 2020). The group attributes its resurgence to the Nigerian government's failure to implement transitional justice after the Nigerian Civil

War (1967-1970) (Ekpo & Agorye, 2019).

IPOB's activities gained prominence in 2015, following the election of President Muhammadu Buhari. The arrest of its leader, Nnamdi Kanu, in October 2015, triggered widespread protests. Amnesty International reported that government crackdowns on IPOB demonstrations between 2015 and 2016 resulted in over 170 deaths and numerous injuries, often involving excessive use of force (Ekpo & Agorye, 2018). In 2017, IPOB was officially designated as a terrorist organization by the Nigerian government following violent confrontations and the launch of IPOB's security arm, the Biafra Security Service (BSS). This designation was controversial, with critics arguing that IPOB's activities did not meet the criteria outlined in Nigeria's 2011 Terrorism Act (Ekpo & Agorye, 2018).

Since 2021, IPOB's sit-at-home orders have become a significant form of protest, aimed at pressuring the Nigerian government to release Kanu. These orders paralyze economic activities in southeastern Nigeria, as residents remain indoors out of fear or solidarity (Mark et al., 2022). While some view this as a form of peaceful resistance, others, including state governments, criticize its socio-economic consequences, such as lost productivity and disrupted transportation networks (Ejikendu, 2022). The sit-at-home orders have had adverse effects on the Southeast's economy, with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and transport systems bearing the brunt (Ibeanu et al., 2016). Educational institutions have also been severely affected, with repeated closures disrupting learning schedules. Critics argue that while IPOB's actions highlight grievances, they exacerbate economic and social hardships in the region (Osita et al., 2022).

Niger Delta Militancy

Militancy in the Niger Delta has roots in long-standing grievances categorized as remote and immediate causes. Remote causes include environmental degradation, underdevelopment, marginalization, and oppressive legislation such as the Petroleum Act of 1969 and the Land Use Act of 1978. The execution of environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 also fueled regional discontent (Ebienfa, 2011). Immediate causes involve the militarization of the Niger Delta, the "Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha" program, oil bunkering by local youths, and political manipulation, especially during the 1999 elections. These factors radicalized Niger Delta youths leading to militant actions (Ukiwo, 2009).

The "Youths Earnestly Ask for Abacha" program marked a turning point. During this initiative, Niger Delta youths, upon visiting Abuja, were shocked by the

wealth disparity and infrastructural development financed by oil revenue from their region. This exposure deepened their sense of deprivation, sparking protests and eventually the militant-driven Kaiama Declaration of 1998 (Ebienfa, 2011). Militancy in the Niger Delta emerged as a violent response to political and economic grievances. While some groups initially sought justice through peaceful means, they transitioned to militancy when these efforts failed. Militancy became a tool for advocating resource control and regional development, but over time, criminality infiltrated the movement.

The Niger Delta has witnessed various typologies of militant groups. Resource-agitator militants, initially driven by the exploitation of the region's resources, emerged from peaceful protests (Tobor, 2014). Political-thug militancy evolved from election-related violence, with politicians arming youths who later turned to criminal activities (Ebienfa, 2011). Cult-group militancy rooted in university fraternities leveraged political patronage for electoral violence and expanded into oil theft and kidnapping. Finally, community/ethnic-warlord militancy arose from the defense of land and resources, with leaders eventually engaging in broader militant activities. These diverse groups have had severe environmental consequences, with oil spills from sabotage and routine operations causing widespread damage to ecosystems (Ebienfa, 2011). The 2009 Amnesty Program, while successful in reducing violence and reintegrating some militants (Egwemi, 2010; Oluwaniyi, 2011), has been criticized for failing to address the root causes of the conflict, such as environmental degradation and youth unemployment (Aghedo, 2012; Aghedo, 2015).

The Boko Haram Insurgency

The origins of Boko Haram, a Salafi jihadist group, have been linked to various historical and ideological contexts in northeastern Nigeria. One narrative traces its roots to the reformist movement Jama'at izalat al-bid'a wa-iqamat al-sunna, established in 1978 in Jos, Nigeria, by Malam Isma'ila Idris. The movement sought to preserve Islamic values amidst modernization in the northern region. Mohammed Yusuf, a follower of Salafist teachings under the Yan Izala movement and Ja'afar Mahmud Adam, eventually diverged due to ideological differences, rejecting modern Islamic schools and Western institutions. In 2002, Yusuf founded Jama'atu Ahlus Sunna Lidda'awati Wal Jihad (Boko Haram), advocating violent jihad to establish a strict Islamic state (Amara, 2020; Anugwom, 2019).

Another account suggests Boko Haram's precursor was the Shabaab Muslim Youth Organization, founded in 1995 in Maiduguri, Borno State, by Abubakar Lawan. Leadership transitioned to Yusuf in 2002, who

radicalized the group's ideology and practices. Regardless of its origins, Boko Haram emerged under Yusuf's leadership as a militant group rejecting Western education and advocating for the replacement of Nigeria's secular system with an Islamic one (Ekhomu, 2019; Onuoha, 2014). The group's violent confrontation with Nigerian security forces began in July 2009 after a clash with police escalated into widespread violence across Bauchi, Kano, Yobe, and Borno states. Over 700 Boko Haram members, including Yusuf, were killed during the uprising. Yusuf's extrajudicial killing by police catalyzed the group's transformation under Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf's deputy. Shekau intensified attacks on civilian and government targets, including the 2010 Bauchi prison break, the 2011 U.N. building bombing in Abuja, and the 2014 kidnapping of over 270 Chibok schoolgirls (Blanchard, 2016).

Boko Haram's operations expanded beyond Nigeria into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, destabilizing the Lake Chad Basin. The insurgency has caused over 37,500 deaths, displaced 2.5 million people, and created more than 244,000 refugees since 2011 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). In 2016, the group split into two factions: the original Boko Haram led by Shekau, targeting civilians, and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which prioritizes military targets (International Crisis Group, 2019). Boko Haram's ideology is rooted in Salafi Jihadism, which promotes a return to early Islamic practices and justifies violent rebellion to establish an Islamic state. Mohammed Yusuf rejected Western influence, including democracy, education, and Christianity, viewing these as corrupt and antithetical to Islam. This ideology evolved alongside grievances over socioeconomic and political marginalization in northern Nigeria (Solomon, 2013).

The northeast's severe poverty, high unemployment, and low literacy rates have fueled Boko Haram's rise. In 2012, poverty rates in the northeastern and northwestern zones stood at 76.3% and 77.7%, respectively, compared to the national average of 53%. Educational disparities further exacerbated these conditions, with literacy rates in Borno State below 15%, starkly contrasting with 92% in Lagos State (Hoffman, 2014). The region's lack of development created fertile ground for radicalization and recruitment (Edeh, 2011). Boko Haram's insurgency has devastated communities and regional economies, displacing millions and disrupting education and healthcare. While counterterrorism efforts, including military operations and international collaborations, have weakened the group, its factions, particularly ISWAP, continue to pose significant security threats.

The enduring conflict underscores the need to address root causes, such as governance failures, economic disparities, and regional underdevelopment, to achieve lasting peace.

Farmer-Herder Clashes in Nigeria

Farmer-herder relations in Nigeria historically involved a mutually beneficial relationship. Farmers relied on manure from herders' livestock, while herders benefited from crop residues and access to grazing lands. The Fulani, Nigeria's predominant herding community, have traditionally combined herding with crop cultivation, challenging stereotypes of their solely nomadic identity (Bello, 2013). Conflicts historically arose during the rainy season when herding activities overlapped with farming, causing farm trespasses and crop damage. Pre-colonial systems, such as the RUGA leadership, helped manage these disputes, but colonial rule disrupted traditional governance structures, favoring herders and complicating land access (Davidheiser & Luna, 2008).

The escalating farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria stem from a complex interplay of factors. Increasing land scarcity driven by urbanization, climate change, and expanding agricultural activities has intensified competition for resources. The diminishing availability of communal grazing lands and the encroachment of commercial crop production into traditional grazing reserves have exacerbated tensions (Okello, 2014). The southward movement of herders, primarily due to environmental degradation and desertification in the north, has brought them into contact with unfamiliar territories and communities with distinct cultural practices and land use patterns (Tonah, 2006).

Declining governance structures, weakened by military rule and local government reforms, have undermined the traditional authority of local leaders to mediate disputes effectively (Onah & Okeke, 2017). The conflicts have increasingly taken on an ethnic and religious dimension, pitting predominantly Northern, Muslim Fulani herders against Southern, Christian farmers. This has fueled identity-based narratives and exacerbated hostilities (Conroy, 2014). These conflicts have had devastating consequences. They have resulted in the loss of countless lives and the displacement of thousands of people, disrupting livelihoods and increasing dependency in affected communities (Ofuoku & Isife, 2010). The destruction of crops and degradation of land have significantly impacted agricultural output, threatening food security and hindering rural development (Ajibefun, 2018). Furthermore, the proliferation of small arms and the erosion of traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms have contributed to widespread social instability in

affected regions.

The Nigerian government has implemented various measures to address these challenges. The National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), launched in 2018, aims to promote ranching and provide resources to modernize livestock practices and reduce open grazing (Adisa, 2012). The RUGA initiative, while controversial, sought to establish settlements for herders with essential infrastructure (Adisa, 2012). Several states have enacted anti-open grazing laws to prevent land disputes, although their effectiveness is limited by enforcement challenges and the lack of alternative grazing options. Other proposed solutions include educating herders on modern grazing techniques, disarming those carrying weapons and investing in the development of dedicated grazing ranches across the country.

DISCUSSION

From the study's findings, it is clear that political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria stem from deeply rooted historical dynamics and manifest in ways that severely affect national security. The study finds that the historical roots of Nigeria's political and ethno-religious tensions lie in colonial-era policies that institutionalized divisions. The amalgamation of northern and southern regions in 1914 and the "divide-and-rule" strategy employed by the colonial administration fostered disparities in governance, resource allocation, and intergroup relations. These policies favored northern elites, leaving other regions marginalized and planting the seeds for post-independence conflicts. Case studies such as the favoritism shown to northern leaders during colonial times demonstrate how governance structures entrenched inequalities that persist today. From a theoretical perspective, Marxist and Neo-Marxist frameworks highlight how colonialism exploited ethnic and religious divisions to suppress class consciousness, perpetuating systemic inequalities in post-colonial Nigeria (Nnoli, 2008; Mayer, 2016). Functionalist theory further explains how the disruption of traditional systems weakened mechanisms for social cohesion, leading to a fragile foundation for nation-building. These findings align with previous research by Ayinla (2024) and Orngu (2018), who identify colonialism as the root cause of identity-based rivalries. By connecting historical grievances to contemporary challenges, this study emphasizes the enduring influence of colonial boundaries on Nigeria's political and socio-economic landscape.

The study also finds that, political and ethno-religious tensions in contemporary Nigeria manifest primarily through electoral violence, insurgencies, and resource-

based conflicts. Politicians exploit ethnic and religious identities to mobilize support, creating cycles of hostility and division. For instance, the 2011 post-election violence, where ethnic and religious identities were manipulated to incite unrest, illustrates how these tensions escalate into widespread violence. Group Conflict theory adds that competitive struggles for dominance among ethnic and religious groups often drive these tensions. Previous studies, such as those by Adenuga et al. (2023) and Chigbu et al. (2024), also document the role of identity politics in fueling electoral violence. This study, however, expands on these analyses by illustrating the intersection of historical grievances with contemporary political strategies, emphasizing the need for institutional reforms to mitigate identity-based conflicts.

Furthermore, the study finds that political and ethno-religious tensions have significant implications for Nigeria's national security, resulting in widespread violence, displacement, and economic disruption. Insurgencies such as Boko Haram and IPOB, along with farmer-herder conflicts, have undermined the nation's territorial integrity and governance capacity. For example, the Boko Haram insurgency has led to over 37,500 deaths and displaced more than 2.5 million people in the Lake Chad Basin, destabilizing not only northeastern Nigeria but also neighboring countries. From a Functionalist perspective, these security challenges illustrate the state's inability to fulfill its core responsibilities, such as maintaining order and protecting citizens. Marxist analysis further underscores how governance structures that prioritize elite interests exacerbate marginalization and foster resistance movements. Studies by Mshelia (2024) and Nakanda et al. (2024) echo these findings, highlighting the socio-economic and humanitarian crises caused by insurgencies. By integrating theoretical insights, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how systemic governance failures perpetuate insecurity, emphasizing the need for holistic solutions that address root causes.

The study finds that addressing political and ethno-religious tensions in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach, including addressing historical grievances, promoting equitable resource distribution, and implementing sustainable policies. Initiatives like the National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP) and anti-open grazing laws have shown promise but face challenges in execution due to mistrust among stakeholders and poor implementation. Case studies, such as the Niger Delta Amnesty Program, reveal the limitations of short-term solutions that fail to address underlying issues like socio-economic inequality and environmental degradation. The Functionalist theory

supports rebuilding social cohesion through integrative policies and inclusive governance. While previous studies, such as Aghedo (2012) and Hinshaw (2012), critique the amnesty program for its focus on pacification over structural reform, this study advocates for comprehensive approaches that address both immediate and systemic issues. By incorporating historical, political, and socio-economic dimensions, the study offers a roadmap for sustainable peace and national stability.

CONCLUSION

From the findings, the study concludes that Nigeria's political and ethno-religious tensions are deeply rooted in historical injustices stemming from colonial policies, exacerbated by contemporary political manipulation, resource competition, and systemic inequalities. These tensions manifest in forms such as electoral violence, insurgencies, and farmer-herder conflicts, significantly undermining national security and stability. The study highlights the failure of governance structures to address these issues effectively, perpetuating cycles of marginalization and violence.

Applying theoretical perspectives such as Marxist and Neo-Marxist frameworks and Functionalist theory, the research demonstrates that these tensions are both a consequence of historical legacies and a reflection of governance deficiencies. Addressing them requires not just immediate interventions but also structural reforms that tackle the underlying causes. The study underscores the urgent need for inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and sustainable conflict-resolution mechanisms to achieve long-term peace and stability.

Recommendations

To address Nigeria's political and ethno-religious tensions and bolster national security, the study recommends the establishment of a national reconciliation commission to facilitate dialogue and address historical grievances, complemented by civic education campaigns to promote unity and reduce divisive rhetoric. These efforts aim to foster national healing and reconciliation among Nigeria's diverse groups.

Institutional reforms are critical, including decentralizing governance to empower local governments and reduce disparities in representation and development. Policies should also depoliticize ethnic and religious identities, particularly during elections, to prevent manipulation by political elites.

Addressing economic inequalities is vital for reducing tensions. This includes frameworks for equitable

resource distribution in marginalized regions like the northeast and Niger Delta, alongside initiatives to create youth employment opportunities that address grievances and reduce the appeal of insurgent recruitment.

Enhancing security frameworks is essential. Increased funding and training for security forces, coupled with community policing, can improve trust and collaboration between local communities and security agencies. This approach ensures conflicts are managed effectively while minimizing human rights violations.

Engaging diverse stakeholders is necessary for effective policy implementation. Civil society and religious leaders should be included in decision-making processes to build trust, while conflict-resolution programs like the Niger Delta Amnesty Program should be regularly monitored and evaluated for improvements.

Promoting interfaith and interethnic harmony can reduce societal tensions. Interfaith dialogues and cultural exchange programs should be facilitated to foster understanding and unity among Nigeria's various groups. Finally, legislative enforcement, such as passing anti-open grazing laws and strengthening land use policies, can address land and resource disputes, ensuring fairness and preventing future conflicts.

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