

THE IMPACT OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS ON NATIONAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA, 2015 AND 2023

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of ethno-religious affiliations on national security in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023, focusing on the drivers, implications, and policy responses to ethno-religious conflicts. Using a qualitative methodology, the research draws on secondary data, including published works, government reports, and media sources, to analyze the interplay between identity politics and insecurity. Findings indicate that ethno-religious affiliations have been exacerbated by political manipulation, economic deprivation, and weak governance, leading to widespread violence, insurgency, and social fragmentation. While interventions such as peace building initiatives and social investment programs have been implemented, their success has been limited by corruption, inadequate grassroots engagement, and human rights abuses. The study highlights the need for inclusive governance, interfaith dialogue, and equitable economic policies to address the root causes of conflict and ensure national stability in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethno-religious affiliations, National security, Identity politics, Peace-building strategies, Inclusive governance

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is a multi-ethnic state with over 250 ethnic groups and diverse religious affiliations. These features, while rich in cultural diversity, have often been at the heart of national crises, especially when ethno-religious differences are politicized. Since 2015, under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari and his successor, there has been an escalation of security challenges linked to these affiliations. From communal clashes in the Middle Belt to the insurgency in the North East, and from herders-farmers conflicts to ethnic separatist agitations, Nigeria's fragile national security has come under immense strain. According to Okwudiba Nnoli "ethnic and religious loyalties in a multi-ethnic state such as Nigeria often compete with national identity, thereby undermining national cohesion and security."¹

The problem of ethno-religious affiliations transcends the ordinary dynamics of social diversity and finds roots in colonial history. The British colonial strategy of "divide and rule" deepened ethnic and religious divisions for administrative convenience. These divisions continued post-independence, with political elites exploiting them to consolidate power. For instance, the allocation of political offices based on ethnic and religious considerations has created a zero-sum political landscape, where groups feel marginalized and resort to violence to assert their identity. This phenomenon resonates with the elite theory propounded by Vilfredo Pareto, which posits that elites manipulate societal structures to serve their interests.²

The security implications of these affiliations are glaring. In the North East, the Boko Haram insurgency, initially founded on religious grievances, evolved into one of the deadliest terrorist organizations globally. Similarly, the rise of banditry and kidnappings in the North West has taken on ethnic undertones, while the activities of unknown gunmen in the South East highlight the intersection of ethnic and political grievances. In each case, national security is compromised, as law enforcement agencies are overstretched and overwhelmed. The Structural-Functionalist Theory, as articulated by G. A. Almond and G. B. Powell offers a lens to analyze these dynamics by examining how dysfunctions in social institutions exacerbate insecurity.³

Moreover, ethno-religious affiliations have polarized Nigerian society, making consensus-building in governance difficult. The accusations of favoritism leveled against the Buhari administration, particularly regarding the appointment of security chiefs predominantly from the North, fueled perceptions of marginalization in the South. These perceptions, whether real or imagined, underscore

the dangers of neglecting inclusivity in a multi-ethnic state. According to D. L Horowitz “inclusive governance in plural societies is not merely an ideal but a necessity for stability and development.”⁴ In addressing these challenges, there is a need for policy responses that promote inclusivity, dialogue, and justice. The government must foster a sense of national identity that transcends ethnic and religious affiliations. This study will delve into these complexities, analyzing the interplay between ethno-religious affiliations and national security in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023, with the aim of offering actionable recommendations.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Ethno-religious affiliations and national security are complex concepts that require precise definitions to establish their interconnectedness within a multi-ethnic state like Nigeria. Ethno-religious affiliation refers to the alignment of individuals or groups with specific ethnic and religious identities, which often shape their social, political, and economic behaviours. In Nigeria, this alignment is a dominant factor in shaping political discourse, social cohesion, and conflict dynamics. National security, on the other hand, encompasses the protection of a nation's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the safety of its citizens from threats. It envisages protection of the state and the individual safety from a broad range of existential threats such as crime and criminality, hunger, poverty, violation of human rights, environmental degradation, conflict, and political instability, *et cetera*. According to R. McNamara:

In a modernizing society, security is not military force, though it may involve it, security is not traditional military activity, though it encompasses it, security is not military hardware though it may include it. Security is development and without development there can be no security... food shortages, population explosion, low level of illiteracy, a fragile infrastructure base for technological development, inadequate and insufficient public utilities and a chronic problem of unemployment has a false sense of security.⁵

In the Nigerian context, the interplay of ethnic and religious identities has created vulnerabilities that undermine the state's capacity to ensure security and stability.

The theoretical foundation for this study is grounded in Structural-Functionalism and Elite Theory. Structural-Functionalism, as articulated by G. A. Almond and G. B. Powell, examines how dysfunctions within societal institutions lead to systemic instability. In Nigeria, institutions like the judiciary, law enforcement, and political parties often fail to function equitably due to the pervasive influence of ethno-religious biases. For instance, the selective appointment of security chiefs along ethnic or religious lines, as observed under the Buhari administration, has exacerbated tensions among marginalized groups. This dysfunction weakens national security and fuels grievances, aligning with Almond and Powell's argument that systemic imbalance within institutions leads to societal breakdown.⁶

Elite Theory, first introduced by Vilfredo Pareto and expanded by Gaetano Mosca, offers another critical lens for understanding the role of ethno-religious affiliations in Nigeria's security challenges. The theory posits that societal elites manipulate ethnic and religious divisions to maintain their dominance. In Nigeria, political elites often exploit these affiliations to consolidate power.⁷ For instance, during the 2019 elections, accusations of religious favoritism and ethnic bias in the allocation of political appointments sparked widespread discontent. These elite-driven divisions undermine national unity and create a fertile ground for insecurity, as marginalized groups resort to violence to assert their identity and demand inclusion.

The persistence of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria also aligns with the Instrumentalist Perspective, which argues that ethnic and religious identities are not inherently conflictual but are politicized by leaders for personal or group gains.⁸ A clear example is the herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt region, which, while rooted in resource competition, has been amplified through religious and ethnic narratives. The politicization of these affiliations not only deepens societal divisions but also compromises the state's capacity to address underlying grievances, as the focus shifts from equitable solutions to sectional interests.

Ethno-religious affiliations in Nigeria: Historical and contemporary perspectives

Ethno-religious affiliations in Nigeria have played a significant role in shaping the country's political, social, and security landscape. These affiliations, which refer to the overlapping of ethnic and religious identities, have historically been a source of cohesion within groups but a trigger of division between them. The origins of these affiliations can be traced back to the colonial era when British colonial administrators exploited ethnic and religious divisions to sustain their "divide and rule" strategy. The artificial boundaries created by colonial authorities grouped diverse ethnic and religious groups into a single political entity, fostering competition rather than unity. According to T. Falola "Colonialism institutionalized ethnicity and religion in ways that transformed them into instruments of political mobilization and conflict."⁹ For example, the Northern and Southern Protectorates, which were amalgamated in 1914, were predominantly Muslim and Christian, respectively, with significant ethnic differences between the Hausa-Fulani in the North and the Yoruba and Igbo in the South. These divisions were amplified in the post-independence era, as political elites exploited them for political advantage.

The politicization of ethno-religious identities became more evident during Nigeria's First Republic (1963–1966), when political parties were formed along ethnic and religious lines. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) represented the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani of the North, while the Action Group (AG) and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) catered to the Yoruba and Igbo, respectively. This alignment created a deeply fragmented political landscape, with political competition taking the form of ethnic and religious rivalries. For example, the 1966 coup, which was perceived as being led by Igbo officers, and the subsequent counter-coup, which was seen as a Northern response, highlighted the deep mistrust and tensions among ethnic and religious groups. These events culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), a tragic chapter in the country's history that demonstrated the destructive potential of ethno-religious affiliations when politicized.

In contemporary Nigeria, ethno-religious affiliations remain a defining factor in political and social interactions. Since the return to democracy in 1999, political appointments, resource allocation, and electoral outcomes have often been influenced by considerations of ethnicity and religion. For instance, the zoning arrangement adopted by political parties, which alternates the presidency between the North and South, is a reflection of the need to balance ethnic and religious interests. However, this arrangement has not prevented accusations of marginalization, as seen during the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023). Critics accused Buhari of favouring the predominantly Muslim North in key appointments, fueling tensions in the predominantly Christian South. This aligns with the Elite Theory, which posits that political elites manipulate ethnic and religious divisions to consolidate power.¹⁰

The security implications of ethno-religious affiliations are most evident in the numerous conflicts that have plagued Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency, which began in 2009, is one of the most prominent examples. Initially a religious movement advocating for Sharia law, Boko Haram evolved into a violent extremist group targeting both Christians and Muslims who opposed their ideology. Similarly, the herder-farmer conflict in the Middle Belt, which has both ethnic and religious dimensions, has led to thousands of deaths and displaced communities. The conflict is often framed as a struggle between predominantly Muslim Fulani herders and predominantly Christian farmers, although its root causes include climate change and competition for resources. As Almond and Powell argue in their Structural-Functionalist theory, dysfunctions in societal institutions, such as the inability of the government to address resource scarcity and enforce laws, exacerbate these conflicts.¹¹

Another contemporary issue is the rise of ethnic separatist movements, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the South East and calls for Oduduwa Republic in the South West. These movements, driven by perceptions of ethnic and religious marginalization, challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. IPOB, for example, has accused the federal government of systematically excluding the Igbo people from political and economic opportunities, a sentiment echoed by other groups. These movements highlight the failure of the state to foster a sense of national identity that transcends ethnic

and religious affiliations. According to Horowitz “In deeply divided societies, the absence of inclusive governance structures often leads to the rise of ethnic nationalism and separatist agitations.”¹²

Efforts to address these challenges have yielded mixed results. Policies such as the Federal Character Principle, which aims to ensure equitable representation of all ethnic groups in public service, have been criticized for entrenching ethnic and religious identities rather than promoting meritocracy. Similarly, interfaith dialogues and initiatives to promote national unity have often been undermined by political elites who benefit from the status quo. To address the root causes of ethno-religious conflicts, Nigeria must strengthen its institutions and promote inclusive governance. According to D. A. Baldwin “security is not just about the absence of conflict but about creating conditions that prevent conflict from arising.”¹³ This requires addressing structural inequalities and fostering a sense of shared national identity.

Impact of ethno-religious affiliations on national security (2015–2023)

Ethno-religious affiliations have significantly influenced Nigeria’s national security between 2015 and 2023, often exacerbating tensions and creating vulnerabilities within the state. These affiliations shape perceptions of governance, access to resources, and socio-political interactions, often leading to grievances among marginalized groups. For instance, during President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration (2015–2023), accusations of ethnic and religious favouritism in key political appointments created widespread dissatisfaction, especially among the predominantly Christian South. The perception that the government favored the Muslim-majority north heightened tensions and weakened trust in state institutions. As Almond and Powell argue in their Structural-Functionalist theory, the dysfunction of societal institutions due to perceived biases can destabilize the system.¹⁴ The lack of inclusivity in governance, coupled with the politicization of ethnic and religious identities, weakened Nigeria’s ability to maintain unity and effectively address national security threats.

The activities of violent groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and bandits further highlight the impact of ethno-religious affiliations on security. These groups have leveraged religious ideologies to justify their actions, deepening existing divisions. For example, Boko Haram’s attacks, which initially targeted Christian communities, later expanded to include Muslim populations opposing their ideology. Similarly, the persistent farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, often framed as ethno-religious disputes between Muslim Fulani herders and Christian farmers, are rooted in resource competition but exacerbated by religious and ethnic narratives. As Horowitz observes, “Ethnic and religious identities in deeply divided societies often become a rallying cry for political and violent mobilization.”¹⁵ These conflicts have resulted in significant loss of life, displacement, and destruction of property, straining the government’s capacity to ensure security.

Ethno-religious affiliations have also influenced separatist movements, which have posed challenges to national security. For instance, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), predominantly driven by Igbo ethnic nationalism, gained momentum during this period, accusing the federal government of marginalizing the South East. Similarly, calls for Oduduwa Republic by Yoruba groups in the South West reflect dissatisfaction with perceived ethnic and religious imbalances in governance. These movements not only highlight the failure of the state to promote inclusivity but also undermine its legitimacy. Elite Theory provides a useful lens to understand these dynamics, as political elites have often exploited ethno-religious divisions to consolidate power, further alienating marginalized groups.¹⁶ For example, leaders of IPOB have used rhetoric emphasizing Igbo marginalization to rally support, while government responses, often characterized by excessive force, have deepened grievances and escalated tensions.

In addition to violent conflicts, ethno-religious affiliations have contributed to mistrust among security agencies and the public, complicating counter-terrorism efforts. Accusations of bias in military operations, such as claims that the Nigerian Army disproportionately targets Christian or Igbo communities during counter-insurgency campaigns, undermine cooperation between citizens and security forces. For example, during the military’s Operation Python Dance in the South East, allegations of extrajudicial killings and targeting of IPOB members created a perception of ethnic and religious persecution. This mistrust weakens the effectiveness of security agencies and hinders efforts

to build collective resilience against security threats. According to Baldwin “Security is not only about the absence of violence but also about creating conditions that prevent its occurrence.”¹⁷ Without addressing the root causes of ethno-religious grievances, the state’s capacity to maintain security remains compromised.

Policy responses and interventions: Successes and failures

Nigeria has employed various policy responses and interventions to address the challenges posed by ethno-religious affiliations to national security. One notable effort is the adoption of the Federal Character Principle, enshrined in the 1999 Constitution, which seeks to ensure equitable representation of all ethnic and religious groups in federal appointments and resource allocation. This principle has been pivotal in promoting inclusivity in a multi-ethnic state. For example, key national institutions such as the Nigerian Armed Forces, police, and civil service have strived to reflect the country's diversity. However, critics argue that this principle has often been undermined by political elites who manipulate it for their benefit. Appointments sometimes favor certain ethnic or religious groups, leading to perceptions of marginalization among others. According to E. E. Osaghae “Policies intended to promote inclusivity can inadvertently entrench divisions if not implemented transparently.”¹⁸ The Federal Character Principle has achieved some success in fostering representation, but its implementation has largely failed to reduce grievances over perceived ethnic favoritism, particularly during the Muhammadu Buhari administration (2015–2023).

Another significant intervention is the establishment of peace-building commissions and interfaith dialogues aimed at reducing tensions between religious and ethnic groups. States such as Plateau and Kaduna, which have been hotspots for ethno-religious violence, have implemented peace-building programs to encourage dialogue and reconciliation. For instance, the Plateau Peace-building Agency has facilitated community discussions that have reduced violent clashes in some areas. Similarly, interfaith initiatives led by organizations such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) have created platforms for Christian and Muslim leaders to promote co-existence. Despite these efforts, the success of peace-building programs remains limited by lack of political will and inconsistent funding. Additionally, some initiatives have been criticized for focusing on elite-level dialogue rather than addressing grassroots grievances. J. P. Lederach’s theory of conflict transformation emphasizes the importance of involving local actors in peace processes to ensure sustainable outcomes.¹⁹ However, the limited grassroots engagement in these interventions has often hindered their effectiveness.

The Nigerian government has also implemented security-focused interventions, such as military operations and anti-terrorism measures, to address ethno-religious violence and insurgency. Operations like Lafiya Dole in the North East and Python Dance in the South East were aimed at curbing Boko Haram insurgency and separatist agitations, respectively. While these operations have achieved tactical successes, such as the recapture of territories from Boko Haram, they have also been marred by allegations of human rights abuses and disproportionate targeting of specific ethnic groups. For instance, the military's heavy-handed approach during Operation Python Dance in the South East was widely criticized for exacerbating tensions with the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). According to Baldwin “Security policies that undermine human rights often weaken the legitimacy of the state and fuel further resistance.”²⁰ The failure to address the root causes of insecurity, such as poverty, unemployment, and political exclusion, has limited the long-term effectiveness of these security interventions.

Economic policies have also been employed to address the underlying causes of ethno-religious conflicts. Programs like the National Social Investment Program (NSIP), which includes initiatives such as N-Power and the Conditional Cash Transfer, aim to alleviate poverty and reduce inequality. By addressing economic disparities, these programs seek to mitigate grievances that often drive ethno-religious violence. However, the implementation of these programs has faced significant challenges, including corruption, inadequate funding, and political interference. For example, allegations of favoritism in the distribution of resources have undermined the credibility of these initiatives. This aligns with Gurr’s (1970) Relative Deprivation Theory, which posits that perceived inequality and deprivation can lead to collective violence.²¹ The inability of economic policies to adequately target

vulnerable populations has limited their success in fostering social cohesion and reducing ethno-religious tensions.

Despite the mixed outcomes of these interventions, some community-led initiatives have demonstrated significant success in promoting peace and security. For example, local vigilante groups and traditional leaders in parts of Zamfara and Benue states have played crucial roles in mediating disputes and preventing violence. These community-driven efforts often succeed where government policies fail, as they are rooted in local contexts and leverage existing social structures. However, the absence of institutional support for these initiatives limits their scalability and sustainability. According to Falola “Effective conflict management in multi-ethnic societies requires the integration of indigenous approaches with state policies.”²² The Nigerian government’s failure to institutionalize successful grassroots interventions reflects a broader weakness in its policy framework. Moving forward, a holistic approach that combines top-down and bottom-up strategies is essential to address the complexities of ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of ethno-religious affiliations on national security in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023, with a focus on identifying the drivers of ethno-religious conflicts, assessing their implications for national stability, and evaluating policy responses. The findings reveal that ethno-religious affiliations, though historically rooted in Nigeria's socio-political structure, have become increasingly weaponized by political elites and extremist groups, thereby exacerbating insecurity. The role of economic deprivation, political exclusion, and the manipulation of religious and ethnic identities emerged as critical factors fueling violence and insurgency. Furthermore, while government interventions such as peacebuilding initiatives, military operations, and social investment programs have achieved some level of success, their effectiveness has been undermined by poor implementation, corruption, and inadequate attention to grassroots realities.

The study underscores the urgent need for a holistic approach to managing Nigeria’s ethno-religious challenges, one that integrates inclusive governance, equitable economic policies, and community-led peacebuilding strategies. By addressing the root causes of conflict, fostering interfaith dialogue, and ensuring equitable representation, Nigeria can mitigate the security risks posed by ethno-religious affiliations. This research contributes to the broader discourse on security and development in multi-ethnic states, highlighting the interplay between identity politics and national stability. The findings call for a reorientation of Nigeria’s policy framework to prioritize social cohesion and inclusivity as foundational elements of national security.

Endnotes

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