

An appraisal of ethnic dynamics of insurgency in the north-east: A threat to Nigeria's unity and cohesion

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ABSTRACT: The persistence of insurgency in Nigeria's North-East has continued to pose a serious threat to national unity, security, and socio-political stability of the state. This study appraises the ethnic dynamics underlying the insurgency in the North-East, with particular attention to how ethnic identities, marginalization, and inter-group relations have shaped both the emergence and escalation of violent extremism in the region. The paper argues that while the insurgency, largely associated with Boko Haram and its splinter groups is often framed primarily in religious or ideological terms, ethnic factors such as historical grievances, socio-economic exclusion, weak state presence, and competition over political and economic resources have significantly influenced its trajectory. Using qualitative analysis of secondary data drawn from academic literature, government reports, and policy documents, the study examines how ethnic tensions have deepened mistrust among communities and weakened national cohesion. The findings reveal that the manipulation of ethnic sentiments, combined with poor governance and unequal development, has undermined Nigeria's efforts at nation-building and intensified centrifugal forces threatening unity. The paper concludes that addressing the insurgency requires not only military responses but also inclusive governance, equitable development, and policies that promote inter-ethnic dialogue and social cohesion. Such an approach is critical to safeguarding Nigeria's unity and fostering sustainable peace in the North-East.

Keywords: Ethnicity, ethnic dynamics, insurgency, threat, unity and cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and pluralistic state whose stability and unity depend largely on the effective management of its diversity. With over 250 ethnic groups, varying religious beliefs, and complex historical experiences, the Nigerian state has continually faced challenges related to national integration and social cohesion. One of the most profound contemporary threats to Nigeria's unity is the persistent insurgency in the North-East region, which has resulted in widespread insecurity, humanitarian crises, and socio-economic dislocation. While insurgency in the region has often been attributed to religious extremism, poverty, and weak governance, the ethnic dimensions of the conflict remain insufficiently examined.

The North-East region is home to diverse ethnic groups such as the Kanuri, Babur/Bura, Marghi, Fulani, and Shuwa Arabs, whose historical interactions, political relations, and patterns of dominance have shaped local power structures. The emergence and evolution of insurgent groups, particularly Boko Haram and its splinter factions, cannot be fully understood without considering these ethnic dynamics. Ethnic identity has influenced patterns of recruitment, community support or resistance, and the framing of grievances against the Nigerian state. In many cases, perceptions of ethnic marginalisation, exclusion from political power, and unequal access to resources have reinforced feelings of alienation and

injustice among affected communities.

The insurgency has also intensified ethnic polarisation, fostering suspicion and hostility among communities and between civilians and state security forces. Mass displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and the stigmatisation of certain ethnic groups as collaborators or sympathisers have further strained inter-ethnic relations. These developments pose serious challenges to Nigeria's unity, as prolonged insecurity in one region undermines national cohesion, weakens trust in state institutions, and fuels broader debates about citizenship, belonging, and the legitimacy of the Nigerian state.

Against this background, this study seeks to appraise the ethnic dynamics of insurgency in Nigeria's North-East and examine how they constitute a threat to national unity and cohesion. By analysing the intersection between ethnicity, insurgent violence, and state responses, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the conflict and highlight the need for holistic strategies that address both security concerns and the underlying ethnic and structural factors driving instability in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This study is anchored on a combination of Social Identity Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, and Conflict Theory. These theories collectively explain how ethnic identity, perceived injustice, and structural inequalities interact to fuel insurgency and undermine national unity and cohesion in Nigeria's North-East.

Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and belonging from their membership in social groups such as ethnicity, religion, or region. In multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria, ethnic identity often becomes a primary basis for social interaction, political mobilisation, and conflict. In the context of insurgency in North-East Nigeria, ethnic identity has been exploited by insurgent groups to mobilise support, foster in-group solidarity, and create hostility toward perceived "out-groups," including the state and other ethnic or religious communities. This process reinforces ethnic polarisation and deepens mistrust among Nigeria's diverse groups, thereby threatening national unity and cohesion. This theory helps to explain how ethnic consciousness and group loyalty contribute to the persistence of insurgency and weaken collective national identity in Nigeria.

Relative Deprivation Theory, associated with scholars such as Gurr (1970), argues that conflict arises when individuals or groups perceive a gap between what they believe they deserve and what they actually receive. Feelings of deprivation—whether economic, political, or social—can generate frustration that leads to aggression and violence. In North-East Nigeria, long-standing issues such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, political

marginalisation, and uneven development have created strong perceptions of deprivation among certain ethnic communities. These grievances have provided fertile ground for insurgent movements, which exploit ethnic narratives to justify violence against the state and rival groups. This theory is relevant in explaining how ethnic grievances linked to socio-economic exclusion contribute to insurgency and pose a serious challenge to Nigeria's unity and national cohesion.

Conflict Theory, rooted in the works of Marx and Friderich (1932), later expanded by scholars such as Ralf Dahrendorf, views society as an arena of competition over scarce resources, power, and opportunities. According to this theory, conflict is inevitable in societies characterised by inequality and domination. Applying this theory to the North-East insurgency, ethnic groups compete for political power, access to state resources, and recognition. The perceived domination of some groups over others intensifies ethnic resentment and fuels insurgent violence. The state's coercive response to insurgency can further exacerbate ethnic tensions, leading to cycles of violence that undermine social cohesion and national integration. Conflict Theory thus provides a framework for understanding how structural inequalities and ethnic competition contribute to instability and threaten Nigeria's unity.

The integration of Social Identity Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, and Conflict Theory provides a comprehensive understanding of the ethnic dynamics of insurgency in North-East Nigeria. While Social Identity Theory explains the role of ethnic consciousness and group solidarity, Relative Deprivation Theory highlights the grievances that motivate insurgent participation, and Conflict Theory situates these dynamics within broader struggles over power and resources. Together, these theories explain how ethnic dynamics not only sustain insurgency but also weaken Nigeria's unity and cohesion by deepening divisions, eroding trust in state institutions, and undermining national integration.

METHODOLOGY

This work adopts a qualitative analysis of secondary data drawn from academic literature, government reports, and policy documents related to the subject matter on the ethnic dynamics of insurgency in the north-eastern Nigeria and the threat to its unity and cohesion. Given the complex and nuanced nature of ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, this method provides the flexibility and depth needed to uncover underlying patterns, themes and implications inherent in insurgency in the state. This methodological framework is grounded in three primary techniques: textual analysis, contextual analysis, and document analysis. Each of these methods play major role in exploring the research questions and objectives of the study.

Textual analysis entails the close reading and interpretation of various written texts related to insurgency in the north-east, which includes books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents and related literature concerning the subject matter of the study. This afford researcher to identify recurring themes, concepts and arguments that illuminate the complexities of insurgency and national unity in Nigeria.

Contextual analysis situates the findings from textual analysis within a broader socio-political and historical framework. This method acknowledges that the understanding of insurgency in the north-east and Nigeria's unity and cohesion cannot be isolated from the context in which it occurs. Events, historical experiences, cultural factors and socio-economic conditions profoundly shape ethnic behaviour and beliefs in Nigeria. Contextual analysis aims at understanding how specific historical events, political development and cultural narratives inform the current state of insurgency in Nigeria. Contextual analysis involves reviewing relevant historical and political literature, official government narratives, and previous research studies that provide a backdrop against which ethnic insurgency dynamics and its threat to Nigeria's unity and cohesion can be understood. Content analysis involves carefully reading and interpreting the collected documents to extract significant themes, patterns and data related to insurgency and unity in Nigeria.

The integration of findings from textual, contextual and document analysis form an approach that enhances the validity of the research outcome. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles, allowing for an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena while recognizing the interplay between ethnicity, insurgency, unity and cohesion.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INSURGENCY IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA

Nigeria, in recent times, has witnessed an unprecedented level of insecurity occasioned by the activities of insurgencies and Boko Haram Terrorists in the North-eastern part of the country. The sustained attacks by this group for more than a decade now have continued to heighten fears among the populace and the international community. The insurgency has challenged the stability and peace of the entire region. The act of terrorism unleashed by this Islamic sect has remained a disturbing concern. As data reveals, a comparison of fatalities in killings in the geo-political zones for the year 2023 alone showed that the North-east topped the list of fatalities recorded in each of the regions with 3412 cases (Ojo *et al.*, 2023). Despite all efforts at containing the activities of this dangerous sect, its activities are still negatively and savagely felt across all strata of the Nigerian state. The coordinated assaults from the Boko Haram Terrorist (BHT)

group have made life miserable and posed a serious threat to the unity and corporate existence of Nigeria.

To adeptly trace the roots of the Boko Haram group, scholars have shed light on the socio-political conditions that incubated its formation (Adejoh, 2023; Emoefe, 202; Hanson, 2023). According to Izak (2023), the most prominent early foundation for what later became the Boko Haram debacle was the massive influence of the Salafist ideologies that characterised the 1990s and the early 2000s in Nigeria. These ideological tenets advocated for an austere and stringent interpretation of Islamic law, aiming to emulate the practices of the early Muslim communities. This ideological wave emanated from various sources, including international networks, local clerics, and the advent of new media platforms (Oluyemi, 2023; Ikyer, 2023; Gambo, 2020). As these Salafist doctrines were disseminated, they found fertile ground within the socio-political landscape of northern Nigeria.

The resonance of Salafist ideologies within a region with a historically conservative stronghold of Islamic traditions provided a receptive environment for these teachings (Oluyemi, 2023). Furthermore, the Salafist movement provided a sense of empowerment and agency to segments of the population who felt marginalised or voiceless in the broader political discourse. That is, it offered a vision of societal transformation guided by a strict adherence to Islamic principles, promising a more just and equitable socio-political order (Idahosa *et al.*, 2023). This appeal was particularly potent among young people who yearned for a sense of purpose and a meaningful role in shaping their communities.

The gradual emergence of Boko Haram has also been traced to the embryonic phase of the insurgency, spanning from 2002 to 2009, representing a critical period in the group's evolution (Oluyemi, 2023; Oyedeji and Ogungbe, 2023). During this formative stage, Boko Haram transitioned from a relatively obscure radical movement to a significant security threat in Nigeria. This phase witnessed the initial stirrings, actions, and the gradual crystallisation of Boko Haram's ideological and operational foundations. This period saw the emergence of a charismatic figure like Mohammed Yusuf, who played a pivotal role in shaping the group's ideology and doctrine. Yusuf's teachings emphasised a strict adherence to Sharia law and criticised Western education and governance.

Yusuf's influence extended beyond theoretical teachings; he played a significant role in mobilising and radicalising individuals, particularly among marginalised and disaffected segments of society. He established Quranic schools, known as "Majalis", to disseminate their radical interpretation of Islam (Olawoyin *et al.*, 2021). These schools became breeding grounds for ideological indoctrination and recruitment. His charismatic leadership and unwavering commitment to his ideological principles were instrumental in galvanising support for Boko Haram's cause in the Northeast region of Nigeria (Sjahputra and

Tisso, 2021). This ideological foundation, firmly rooted in Yusuf's teachings, laid the groundwork for the group's subsequent actions and strategies. Under his leadership, Boko Haram gained momentum before he was killed in 2009 during a confrontation with Nigerian security forces (Olawayin *et al.*, 2021), leading to a shift in Boko Haram's leadership and tactics.

In its early years, Boko Haram's activities were low-profile as the group engaged in sporadic clashes with local authorities, primarily in the north-eastern states of Nigeria (Oriola, 2021). These early confrontations were often localised and did not attract significant national or international attention. In this nascent phase, Boko Haram primarily targeted local governance structures, including police stations, government offices, and religious leaders who were perceived as collaborating with the state. Security forces were often at the forefront of their attacks, reflecting their anti-establishment stance. The turning point came in July 2009 when Boko Haram launched a series of coordinated attacks on police stations and government buildings in Bauchi, Borno, and Yobe states (Okwara, 2023). This marked a significant escalation in their tactics and demonstrated a newfound capacity for coordinated large-scale violence.

Due to the low profile of its attacks and activities, the Nigerian government's initial response to Boko Haram was fragmented and lacked a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. This allowed the group to gain momentum and expand their influence, and by the end of 2009, the initial phase had laid the groundwork for Boko Haram to evolve into a full-scale terrorism and a formidable insurgency (Ojo *et al.*, 2023). This July 2009 attack marked a critical turning point, signalling the group's capacity to launch large-scale coordinated assaults simultaneously across the country (Duyile, 2023).

Furthermore, the leadership dynamics and the organisational structure of Boko Haram since its inception have not only been evolving but rather complicated. What was initially an insular and closely-knit group under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf had transformed into a more decentralised network with factions and splinter groups. According to Obumunaeme *et al.* (2023), understanding the leadership and nature of the organisational structure of Boko Haram as a terrorist group is crucial in comprehending the group's operations. Following the death of Mohammed Yusuf in 2009, there was a temporary power vacuum within the group until Abubakar Shekau emerged as the new leader. Boko Haram's tactics escalated, including targeting civilians and expanding its scope beyond Nigeria. The years following 2016, however, saw significant fractionalization within Boko Haram with internal disputes, differing strategic priorities, and ideological disagreements contributing to this fragmentation (Oluyemi, 2023). Prominent among the splinter groups post-2016 was the group known as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), a group

affiliated with the global ISIS network, with a more organised and focused approach compared to Boko Haram (Sjahputra and Tisso, 2021). At this same time, the Shekau-led faction still retained Boko Haram's original radical ideology with a focus on regional attacks and asymmetric warfare.

The apparent confusion generated by the plethora of theories attempting to explain the Boko Haram challenge also characterises the origin of the sect and its motive. The confusion not only reflects in the narratives about the exact date and who the actual founder was, but also as to the true source of these expositions. For instance, Okoye (2016) observed that while the popular belief is that it was founded around 2001 or 2002, scholars traced the date to as far back as 1995, and argued that one Lawal Abubakar, who later left for further studies at the University of Medina, Saudi Arabia, actually founded the book Haram sect. Under Abubakar, the sect was known as Sahaba (Okoye, 2016). But just as the sect itself may be less concerned about who to credit for its formation than wagging its war against the Nigerian State, the State too may be less concerned with the origin than it is with the threat the group now poses to the society.

ETHNICITY, RELIGION, AND THE COMPLEXITY OF THE INSURGENCY IN THE NORTH-EAST

It was perhaps Nigeria's pride that she achieved her independence with a minimum of social disturbances or violence. However, it is rather unfortunate that after independence, Nigeria stumbled from crisis to crisis and near disintegration as the country witnessed a marked increase in the bitterness of party, ethnic, religious, and regional competition.

Northern Nigeria is a vast and diverse region, encompassing a variety of ethnic groups and religious communities (Emoefe, 2020). Furthermore, the region is characterised by diverse ethno-religious identities, each with its own historical and cultural significance, however competition for resources, political representation, and power often exacerbates ethno-religious tensions (Oluyemi, 2023). Meanwhile, the region has also been plagued by several challenges, including poverty, inequality, and insecurity. These challenges have been compounded by a perceived marginalisation of the Muslim-majority population by the Christian-dominated federal government (Sjahputra and Tisso, 2021; Ikyer, 2023). Scholars like Adejoh (2023), Emoefe (2020) and Hanson (2023) have shed light on the socio-cultural conditions that incubated the formation of the sect. They argued that the insurgency in the north-east has the colouration of the combined ethnic groups. Boko Haram's leadership has historically been dominated by Kanuri individuals, which has contributed to the group's strong presence in Bornu State. Hausa Fulani have also been

involved in Boko Haram and other insurgent groups, often providing logistics and financial support. The Shuwa Arabs have historically been marginalised in the region, which has contributed to their vulnerability to recruitment by insurgent groups. The insurgency in the north-eastern Nigeria is a complex phenomenon involving multiple groups and factions. The Boko Haram insurgency in the region is a multifaceted conflict that has caused widespread human suffering, displacement and economic devastation.

The advent of the terrorist group called Boko Haram insurgency has introduced a guerrilla dimension, hitherto unknown, into the criminal space in the north-east of Nigeria. To Gambo 2020, Boko Haram's status as a terrorist organisation is universally acknowledged. The north-east may be the epicentre of the insurgency, but their activities reverberate through the entire country, operating under different names, bandits, Fulani Herdsmen, cattle rustlers, etc.

The ideological conception of insurgency in the north-eastern is deeply rooted in a complex mix of religious, political, and socio-economic factors. Religiously, the ideology is rooted in a complex mix of Islamic extremism, i.e. *Salafism* and *Wahhabism*. These were based on;

- a) Rejection of Western education; Salafist and Wahhabist ideologies rejected western influence and values, viewing them as corrupting and incompatible with Islamic principles
- b) Puritanical approach to Islam: These ideologies advocate for a strict, puritanical approach to Islam, rejecting innovations and interpretations that deviate from the original teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Islamic sect (Boko Haram) that is at the centre of the insurgency in the north-east believes a group of corrupt, false Muslims has seized northern politics. The group is waging war against them and the Federal Republic of Nigeria generally, to create a "pure" Islamic state ruled by Sharia law. Since 2009, it has been driven by a desire for vengeance against politician, police and Islamic authorities for their roles in a brutal suppression of the group, and the group has proved itself to be very adaptive, evolving its tactics swiftly and changing its target at the behest of charismatic leadership.

Domestically, it was contented by scholars that the Boko Haram insurgency in northern part of the country enjoys the support of rich Muslim in the north especially those that identified with the group because of its Sharia prologue despite the fact that the insurgent group receives financial support from foreign states and non-state actors such as Libya, Algeria and al Qaeda terrorist organization, the group also receives financial support from some rich northerners. Externally, the group receives technical support and training from Afghanistan, Libya and Iran under the pretext of studying abroad (Mbombo, 2015).

Unfortunately, Boko Haram is not the foremost major group or militia group Nigeria has had, or has faced before, in the 1970s and 1980s, the Maitatsine fundamental sect from the North came on board, and it could be argued that the Boko Haram sect represent the version and mission of a fundamentalist Islamic movement in Nigeria as a fundamental Islamic sect that intends to supplant government structures that politicized, corrupted and bastardized proper implementation of Sharia in the north, and to install Islamic regime where Sharia law will be applied (Ebi, 2018). According to Okwara (2023), of all the security challenges in Nigeria, insurgency in the north seems to be an exception and has been growing in strength, sophistication, and most importantly, quite ominous and very difficult to combat. In a nutshell, the country is at the edge of a dreadful precipice if the threat emanating from terrorism is not successfully surmounted. Ironically, the activities of the sect and its affiliate groups have been complicated by occasional political violence, hereditary corruption, nepotism, tribalism, indiscipline in all facets of the public, abduction and kidnappings, armed robbery, murder, extortion, bombings of places of worship and innocent Nigerians, hence making it difficult for the Federal government and its security agencies to combat. The act of terrorism unleashed by this Islamic sect has remained a disturbing concern.

Nigeria has a long and unfortunate history of communal conflicts and ethno-religious violence since its return to democracy in 1999. Different sets of groups had arisen in Nigeria with little or real militancy approach in prosecuting their different objectives. Among them is Oodua People's Congress (OPC) within Yoruba, Bakassi Boys and Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) among Igbos, Niger Delta Militant, as well as Boko Haram, which operated in the north-eastern part of Nigeria. The activities of the sects have increased tension between ethnic communities, interrupting development activities, frightened off investors, generated concerns among Nigeria's northern neighbours, undermining Nigeria's unity and cohesion.

In prosecuting their objectives, Boko Haram are used to bombing churches, mosques, police stations, schools, universities inclusive and other government owned properties, as well as privately owned property without excluding innocent souls through the machinery of suicide bombers as well as slaughtering and kidnapping people, even outside their original sphere of operations, including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The most pitiable fact is that most of those suicide bombers are teenagers and lately women, which can be summarily believed to be the resultant effect of brainwashing. It should be noted that Boko Haram, during the course of prosecuting their objectives, has done greater harm to this nation than other sects of militants that have emerged in Nigeria. Corroborating this assertion, Izak (2023) stated that "since the end of the civil war, no calamity of enormous

proportion has befallen the Nigerian state more than the harrow unleashed by the dreadful sect Boko Haram and its activities in the north eastern Nigeria. Many lives have been lost, and property worth billions of naira has been destroyed. Nobody is insulated from the attack. Government officials and buildings, traditional rulers, police, military formation and church worshipers are targets on a daily basis. There is panic. Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has elicited several reactions and raised several questions about the nature of Nigeria and the question of national unity and integration. The current event that surrounds the insurgency suggests that the impact it has on the nation's development is marginally cataclysmic.

IMPACT OF INSURGENCY ON NATIONAL UNITY AND COHESION IN NIGERIA

Since the return of democratic rule, the Boko Haram insurgency in the northern part of the country has been the most antagonistic and dangerous threat to the unity and cohesion of Nigeria. The Islamic terrorist organisation is not just posing a great threat to lives, properties, human rights and dignities, and democratic values, but also to the existence of Nigeria (Mevayerore, 2020). Whether the insurgency is regionalised in the northern part of the country or not, its activities over the years have great negative effects to the nation in general.

Nigeria as a nation is heterogeneous in nature, because it comprises over 250 ethnic groups and nationalities living together as a country, but it is a pity that history has shown that this ill-unity has been compounded by the activities of Boko Haram and insurgency in the north-east. The initial target of the Boko Haram sect was non-Northerners. The Da'wah Coordination Council of Nigeria (2009) stated that Nigeria is kept one rather than made one and said that to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done. The phrase keeping Nigeria one should be replaced with to make Nigeria one. The ill-unity in Nigeria showed the level of disintegration in the polity and led it to be in bad shape as it is now.

The unity of Nigeria has been shaken because of the political motive attached to the activities of Boko Haram, which have instigated some regions to continue clamouring for succession. The foundation of Boko Haram is rooted in the problem of national integration and lack of religious and ideological unity in Nigeria (Adebile, 2015). The activities of the group have ranged from the use of heavy ammunition to the detonation of bombs in perpetrating assassinations, mass killing and destruction of public properties. To date, the Islamic sect has claimed responsibility for various attacks across the nation, primarily executed in Maiduguri, Bauchi, Jos, Kaduna, Niger and FCT-Abuja, among other suburbs of northern Nigeria and some other states in Nigeria. The activities of

the sect spell doom for the national peace and create cracks in the wall of national unity (Ebi, 2018).

It is poignant that the activities of this dreaded sect have unleashed terror on Nigerians, and it is rapidly breaking the cords of unity and cohesion between various ethnic entities in the nation. It is a matter of fact that the siege of insurgency in the region has resulted in large-scale emigration of the diverse ethnic people back to their native land within Nigeria, most especially the Southerners. It is generally acknowledged that the ugly development has not only threatened the polity but also the very existence of the Nigerian nation. Okpaga (2012) argued that the situation is so crucial that many indigene have fled the zone. He posited that over 20000 Igbos and Yorubas residing in the region had left due to the security situation in the area.

The insurgent activities even affected the institution of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme, established in 1973 to address the issue of integration and unity in Nigeria. Actually, the aim of the scheme, according to the Decree No. 23 of 1973, but now supplanted by an Act in 2004, was to develop common ties among Nigerian youths and promote National unity and integration. The scheme was to address the ethnic loyalties, mutual group suspicion and distrust that have bedevilled Nigerian society. It was implemented in such a way that fresh tertiary institution graduates are distributed to serve the nation in states or communities other than their native land with the intention of broadening their socio-cultural orientation and instilling in them the virtue of tolerance. Unfortunately, members of the scheme are not immune to the attack of the Boko Haram group. So many corps members had been kidnapped, killed or still missing. The attack on the corps members made the scheme to adjust its policy by posting corps members to states and communities that are safe from unnecessary attack. Akwara and Udaw (2013) contend that the unity and integration motive of the program for the country has been defeated, and the unity and cohesion among the Nigerian youth shaken to the core.

The insurgent activities in the north-east have also led to the displacement and migration of people, most especially the southerners and expatriates from the region to safer areas in the country. Millions of people have been displaced, resulting in a massive migration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to other parts of the country. This has put a strain on the resources of host communities and exacerbated social and economic tension in the area (Adejoh, 2023). According to the report, over 2.5 million people have been internally displaced, while thousands of people have fled to neighbouring countries, such as Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, seeking safety and asylum. The displacement of people has also led to significant psychological trauma; people struggle to cope with the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and above all love ones. According to Abakpa (2020), the majority who have been able to move out of the troubled region promised not to

come back, most especially those who have been able to relocate to neighbouring countries, which raised a lot of questions about the unity of the country.

Displacement because of the insurgent activities in the north-east has led to loss of livelihood, as people are unable to engage in their usual economic activities, such as farming or trading with in turn led to rising cost of living not only in the northern part of the country, but also other part of Nigeria because the north entirely serve as a food hub of the nation. The Federal government's effort to augment food production in the Chad Basin has come under serious threat from the activities of the Boko Haram insurgency in the area. An investigation showed that several hectares of arable land prepared for the cultivation of rice and other grains in the region have been abandoned because of the activities of the insurgents. Virtually all the farmers involved in rice cultivation and other agriculture-related activities have abandoned the vast expanse of land in the area because of the activities of the insurgents (Abakpa, 2021).

The insurgency has had a devastating impact on Nigeria's economy with far-reaching consequences for the country's growth, development, and stability. The activities have resulted in significant losses to Nigeria's GDP, estimated to be over \$9 billion since 2009. The conflict has also led to higher inflation rates, as the disruption of economic activities has reduced the supply of goods and services. Also, the government's efforts to combat the insurgency have resulted in a significant fiscal deficit, as military expenditures have increased. The militants, not limited to Boko Haram alone by their nature, are used to crippling the economic activities of any place they spread their tentacles. It must be noted that insurgency in the north-east has not only led to closure and or abandonment of people's business activities within the affected region, but also led to migration of people from affected places without excluding government executed projects. The 2011 World Investment report of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development reported that the lull in business activities caused by insecurity in Kano state alone has cost the Nigerian economy #1.3 trillion (\$6 billion) as a result of attacks by the Boko Haram group. It was also observed that the report monitored on the Voice of America (VOA) also showed that the Centre for Research and Documentation in Kano attributed the development to a drop in earnings for nearly all businesses in the state.

Socially, the activities of the insurgents in the area have made some non-Muslims who do not have privileges to mingle with Muslims in their lives believe that all Muslims are fundamentalist while some of them were mischievous with their opinion, with little exclusion about a few Muslims from the Yoruba part of Nigeria. The insurgency has exacerbated ethnic and religious tension, leading to increased mistrust and hostility between different groups. Most southerners refer to an average northerner as Boko

Haram in their minds because people hardly differentiate between the insurgents from the north-east and other northerners who are not Hausa, Kanuri and others. The insurgent has resulted in the destruction of cultural heritage and artefacts as well as the destruction of traditional practices and ceremonies, leading to loss of cultural continuity and identity. Most areas or monuments that were reserved as National Monuments in the area have been reduced to rumbles. Mostly, women and children have been disproportionately affected by the conflict, facing increased vulnerability to violence, abuse, and exploitation. It also resulted in the loss of education and opportunities for women and children, exacerbating existing social and economic inequalities. It also widens the educational gap between the north and the south, rendering government efforts in closing the gaps an effort in futility. The social impact of the insurgency in the north-east of Nigeria as a country has been devastating, affecting various aspects of society, including humanitarian crisis, social cohesion, trust, cultural heritage and identity.

Insurgent groups like Boko Haram have unleashed terrorism and violence, causing widespread fear and insecurity not only in the North-East, but in Nigeria as a whole. It has weakened Nigeria's institutions, including the military, police, and judiciary. It has exacerbated social and ethnic tensions, eroding social cohesion and national unity. Ethnic sentiments in the country had been built in a way that the local groups have started asserting their local independence and exhibit secessionist tendencies, as it has been the case with the states in the South-East region of the country, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB); and the Movement for the survival of Ogoni People (MASOP) in the South-South region; and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger-Delta (MEND) in the South-South region; and Boko-Haram in the North-East, North-Central and North-West regions. Out of all the ethnic agitations in Nigeria, Boko-Haram insurgency has been the most lethal in terms of operations and spread. The activities of others have not gone beyond their regions, and at most, protest in the Federal Capital, Abuja. But for Boko-Haram, their mode of operations in terms of terrorism, kidnapping, cattle rustling, Fulani herdsmen, banditry and suicide bombing transcend their traditional region. These made Boko Haram operations a national embarrassment compared to other insurgencies. The sect, through its terrorist attacks all over the country, is seeking the establishment of an Islamic State across Nigeria. With these, the citizens of the country cannot unite for a common purpose, face a common enemy or solve a national problem collectively. Development programmes in the country would not be planned and coordinated because the citizens do not see themselves as a people with a common goal and destiny.

Nigeria, as a nation, since its independence, has witnessed several unrest and violent situations, most of

which emanated from the seeming incompatibility of the various ethnic groups, which often see each other as “the devil’s cousin” coexisting in the same nation (Chika, 2016). Violent situations, often caused by minor misunderstandings between two people of different origin grow to become full blown massacre around the various states of the country. Each of these violent clashes greets the nation with so much unnecessary bloodletting and often a waste of resources to fix. In the face of this, a lot of people become disillusioned and lose faith in the nation since there is little progress and more hatred which advances and deepens by the day. In the face of these, one wonders if the unity of the country can ever help it achieve any development. It is this kind of hatred which bedevils the country from the time of its self-consciousness as a multi-ethnic nation that Boko Haram insurgency builds on.

Since no secular country like Nigeria can achieve economic and political progress without the unity and cohesion among the ethnic and religious groups in the polity, the activities of the insurgency group in the north-east if not addressed as soon as possible, can lead to the disintegration of the country within the shortest time. The need for the dividend of democracy, i.e. good governance, political stability and economic development within the various ethnic nationalities in the same country has further complicated the problem posed by the multiplicity of ethnic groups. The absence of unity and cohesion among the various ethnic nationalities is giving rise to a search for local and natural identity by various ethnic groups. These search which come in the forms of ethnic armies or militia, religious and ethnic conflicts and insurgency, now challenge the legitimacy of governments and the very existence of the state.

As been rightly observed, insurgency in any part of Nigeria will have far-reaching implications on the state as much as the ethnic entity. Ethnic and religion crisis in any part of Nigeria always have more than immediate implications on the polity; they threaten national security and the stability of the country. The frequency of insurgent attacks in the North-East has resulted in collateral damage to peace, unity, stability, cohesion, development and sovereignty. It has also undermined Nigeria’s state capacity to control domestic and foreign conditions, which are necessary for the public to enjoy self-determination, prosperity and well-being.

The absence of unity and cohesion in the state weakens the government structures and institutions, thereby creating a national crisis and political instability. It is only when the various groups and peoples in the country are involved in the formulation of governmental policies and their implementation, get a fair share of the nation’s resources, and are not considered as peoples whose values, opinion and feelings do not matter in the country that they can cultivate the necessary sense of belonging and promote unity of the country. It should be noted that the unity of Nigeria is shaking because of the political

motive attached to the activities of Boko-Haram which have instigated some regions to continue their clamouring for succession. The insurgency in the North-East has negatively affected the relationship between Nigeria and other nations of the world because of bombing couple with kidnapping and hostage taking, with or without ransom demands. Particularly of alien which have resulted in the demise of some of them and have greatly been a source of disturbance not only to Nigeria but include international community. This has made some countries like the United States of America, Canada and other European countries warn their nationals not to visit some states in Nigeria.

The activities of Boko-Haram insurgency and its affiliate groups have been complicated by occasional violence, hereditary corruption, nepotism, tribalism, indiscipline in virtually all facets of the public, abduction and kidnappings, armed robbery, murder, extortion, bombing of places of worship and innocent Nigerians, hence, making it very difficult for the Federal Government and its security agencies to combat. Until recently, this surge of insecurity was thought to be motivated by ethnic sentiment, but currently it appears to be an organised transnational Islamic jihad movement with a determined motive of the importation of Islamic ideology and beliefs on the people, using dreadful strategies and tactics such as intimidation, guerrilla warfare, suicide bombing, and abduction of young women and children. The primary activities of this group are indiscriminate mass murder, creation of fear and instability, theft and general rapine. The food insecurity in the country has further deteriorated due to the abandonment of farming activities for fear of attack by the insurgency. Because of their activities, some of the crops farmer produced get perish since they are not consumed on time or marketed at the right time.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the ethnic dynamics underlying insurgency in North-East Nigeria and their implications for national unity and cohesion. Drawing from theoretical perspectives such as Social Identity Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, and Conflict Theory, the study established that insurgency in the region is not merely a security challenge but a complex socio-political phenomenon deeply embedded in ethnic identity, socio-economic deprivation, political marginalisation, and governance failures. The findings reveal that ethnic grievances, reinforced by poverty, unemployment, weak state presence, and historical neglect, have created fertile ground for insurgent mobilisation. Insurgent groups have strategically exploited ethnic and communal ties to recruit members, sustain violence, and challenge state authority. This has intensified mistrust among ethnic groups, weakened inter-communal relations, and undermined citizens’ confidence in the Nigerian state.

Furthermore, the persistence of insurgency in the North-East has had far-reaching consequences for Nigeria's unity and cohesion. It has deepened regional divisions, contributed to mass displacement, disrupted social structures, and reinforced stereotypes that associate entire ethnic or regional groups with violence. These developments threaten national integration and weaken the collective sense of belonging essential for a stable and united Nigeria. The study, therefore, concludes that addressing insurgency in North-East Nigeria requires more than military solutions. Sustainable peace and national cohesion can only be achieved through holistic strategies that address ethnic grievances, promote inclusive governance, and foster social justice and development.

Remedies towards unity and cohesion in the face of insurgency in Nigeria

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Government at all levels should promote inclusive governance by ensuring fair political representation of all ethnic groups in the North-East. This will reduce feelings of marginalisation and strengthen citizens' sense of belonging to the Nigerian state.
2. Special development interventions should be intensified in the North-East to address poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and infrastructural decay. Equitable distribution of resources will help reduce ethnic grievances that fuel insurgency.
3. Platforms for inter-ethnic dialogue should be established and strengthened to rebuild trust among communities. Traditional rulers, religious leaders, and civil society organisations should be actively involved in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts.
4. Security operations should adopt a human-rights-based and community-oriented approach. Building trust between security agencies and local communities will reduce ethnic suspicion and improve intelligence-gathering.
5. Effective deradicalisation and reintegration programmes should be expanded to rehabilitate former insurgents and reintegrate them into society. Such programmes should be sensitive to ethnic and cultural contexts to prevent further alienation.
6. Government and educational institutions should strengthen civic education that promotes national identity, tolerance, and unity beyond ethnic and religious lines. This will help counter divisive narratives used by insurgent groups.
7. Transparent and accountable governance is essential for restoring public trust. Efforts to combat corruption and improve service delivery in the North-East should be prioritised.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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