
THE ROLE OF ETHNO-RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN NIGERIA'S SECURITY CRISIS

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Abstract: *This study investigates the intersection of ethno-religious politics and national insecurity in Nigeria from 2015 to 2025, a period marked by deepening socio-political fragmentation and heightened violence. Using a qualitative research design grounded in Social Identity Theory, the research analyzes how political actors instrumentalize ethnic and religious affiliations to mobilize support, delegitimize opponents, and justify exclusionary policies, all of which fuel insecurity. Secondary data were drawn from academic journals, policy briefs, institutional reports, and reputable Nigerian newspapers published between 2019 and 2024. Thematic content analysis revealed a strong correlation between political manipulation of identity and recurring patterns of insurgency, electoral violence, religious extremism, and secessionist agitations. The study finds that ethno-religious profiling by state and non-state actors entrenches division and weakens state legitimacy, thereby impeding effective security responses. Empirical references show that incidents such as Boko Haram's resurgence, IPOB's separatist campaigns, and herder-farmer conflicts are often shaped by identity narratives propagated in both elite discourse and grassroots mobilization. The research recommends institutional reforms to promote inclusive governance, the establishment of neutral security frameworks, and strategic interfaith and interethnic dialogues as long-term solutions. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Nigeria's security architecture cannot be sustainably reformed without addressing the politicization of identity and the structural inequalities it perpetuates.*

Keywords: *Ethno-religious politics, Nigeria, national security, identity conflict, political manipulation, insecurity, Social Identity Theory, Boko Haram, IPOB, herder-farmer crisis.*

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has long struggled with a volatile mix of ethnic and religious diversity. While its pluralistic makeup should ideally foster inclusivity and multicultural cohesion, the opposite has often been the case. Ethno-religious politics, rooted in historical contestations over identity, resource allocation, and representation, has emerged as a central feature of Nigeria's political

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landscape. This reality has compounded the country's ongoing security crisis. From Boko Haram insurgency in the North East to banditry and communal clashes in the Middle Belt, the influence of ethno-religious loyalties on violence and national disunity cannot be overemphasized (Ibrahim 2021). Ethno-religious politics in Nigeria manifests in how political elites mobilize ethnic and religious sentiments to secure electoral advantage, patronage, and legitimacy. These mobilizations often deepen societal cleavages and provoke retaliatory actions by rival groups. According to Okechukwu (2020), the political manipulation of ethnic and religious identities has become a major source of distrust among Nigeria's over 250 ethnic groups. The resulting fragmentation hinders the formation of a national identity, thus weakening the government's ability to implement inclusive security policies.

Nigeria's security crisis has intensified since 2015, with the government grappling with insurgency, farmer herder conflicts, separatist agitations, and religious extremism. These conflicts are not merely criminal or economic; they are deeply embedded in the politics of exclusion and marginalization. Ethno-religious fault lines have been weaponized by both state and non-state actors, often with devastating consequences (Adebayo & Omeiza 2019). For example, clashes in Kaduna, Plateau, and Benue states frequently carry both ethnic and religious undertones.

Furthermore, government appointments and resource distribution have often been criticized for being lopsided and favoring one ethno-religious group over others. This perceived marginalization fuels resentment and justifies rebellion in the eyes of aggrieved groups (Eze & Umeh 2023). It becomes increasingly difficult for security forces to operate effectively in such an environment where state authority is not seen as neutral. The politicization of security institutions further erodes public trust, thereby emboldening violent actors.

The role of religion in politics also complicates Nigeria's security situation. Sharia law, Christian identity politics, and religious extremism have all been manipulated to deepen societal divisions. According to Nnamani (2022), Nigeria's two dominant religions Islam and Christianity have been politicized to the point where interfaith distrust is a regular trigger for violence. What should ideally be spiritual affiliations have become dangerous political tools.

Ethno-religious crises have also undermined Nigeria's democratic processes. Electoral violence is often orchestrated along ethnic or religious lines. The 2023 general elections, though largely peaceful in some parts, were marred by threats, ethnic profiling, and voter suppression in others (Ajayi 2023). These patterns reflect a dangerous trend where political participation is no longer about policies but ethnic and religious identity.

In addition, international observers and development partners have warned that unless Nigeria addresses the root causes of ethno-religious politics, peace and development will remain elusive. A UNDP (2021) report emphasized that inclusive governance and equitable resource sharing are key to addressing the security crisis. Yet, successive governments have failed to genuinely promote national cohesion. Political leaders continue to benefit from the divisions they pretend to abhor.

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Thus, this paper explores how ethno-religious politics fuels insecurity in Nigeria. It questions the overlapping of ethnicity, religion, and power through qualitative research based on reports, policy documents, and scholarly articles. The research will give a complex view of the implications for peacebuilding and national development.

Ethno-religious identity has been defined as the correlation of ethnicity and religion in determining social and political conduct. Such a point of collision is acutely potent in Nigeria based on the historical mistrust among northern Muslims and the southern Christian populace. These identities are being used by political elites in the mobilization of electorates as well as state capture. The article by Mustapha and Adeyemi (2020) argues that most Nigerian political campaigns are fought along ethnic and religious lines as opposed to policy and development. Identity politics at the expense of political interest causes sectionalism and further encourages insecurity when the marginalized groups resort to violence to seek redress.

Ethno-religious identity would be a source of resource rivalry and struggles of obtaining state power. An example is taking an appointment at federal offices/siting the development project, which are mostly perceived in terms of ethnicity or religion. Such a perception will enhance a sense of injustice. According to Danjuma (2022), these acts of structural inequality have led to violent uprisings like the IPOB movement and other ethno-separatist movements in the South East. Ethno-religious identity, in this sense therefore becomes a mobilization device as well as a source of confrontation.

The instrumentalization of religion for political violence is a recurring theme in Nigerian history. Islamist insurgency in the North East, particularly the rise of Boko Haram, is a prime example of how religious ideology can be deployed to challenge state authority. Boko Haram's stated objective was to Islamize Nigeria and abolish Western education (Onuoha 2019). Over time, the group's activities expanded to include banditry, abductions, and killings, often justified by religious doctrine.

Christian militancy has also emerged in reactionary forms in the Middle Belt and southern parts of Nigeria. According to Yusuf and Adebajo (2021), religious groups often interpret security challenges as attacks on their faith communities, leading to cycles of reprisal violence. For instance, the attacks on churches in Kaduna have sometimes resulted in retaliatory attacks on mosques. Religion thus provides not just a spiritual framework but a political justification for violence.

The contribution of religious institutions to lessen the conflict or to escalate the conflict is also considerable. Some clerics emphasize peace, whereas, other clerics work up tension due to inflammatory sermons. A study by Okoroafor and Bello (2023) stated that hate preaching has taken the form of political mobilization, especially in the elections. The religious leaders become power brokers and so when they align themselves with the political interests this may take away their neutrality and hence this is the cause of violence among the followers.

Nigeria is a hot spot of the security crisis caused by the combination of ethno-religious politics and destabilizing of the state. The fragile states are states that have weak institutions, bad governance, and

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cannot enforce law and order. Ethno-religious politics diminishes the legitimacy of the state by advancing exclusive governance. The authors argue that in situations the citizens feel that they are only serving the interests of one group, they stop being loyal to the state and would attempt to find different systems of governance by using militias or secessionist movements (Akinwale and Musa, 2024).

The reaction that a state gives to security threats is usually ethnically or religiously biased. As an example, IPOB was met by a quick military response; however, bandits operate with relative impunity in the North West. This makes the situation further solidify the belief that Nigeria has turned into a two-tiered state in which some people are granted impunity and others are repressed (Egwu & Hassan 2021). Such discrepancies in the diversity of administering justice serve to play into the hands of alienation and reinforce the insurgency discourses.

Besides, decentralization of violence using armed ethnic militias, vigilante groups, and faith-based militias has become a hallmark of the fragmented security structure in Nigeria. These factions tend to occupy the vacuum left by the state's collapse and become the ethnic or religious enforcers. The Nigerian state is therefore confronted with a two-fold challenge of regaining authority and reconstituting trust that is wrecked across citizens who are divided on ethno-religious lines as regards their allegiance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the relationship between ethno religious politics and Nigeria's security crisis from 2015 to 2025. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting patterns, meanings, and implications derived from human behavior, political communication, and identity based narratives. Rather than testing a hypothesis through numerical data, this study seeks to understand the socio political context within which ethno religious affiliations influence insecurity in Nigeria. This approach allows for a rich, in depth analysis of how political actors, citizens, institutions, and non state groups engage with identity in ways that provoke or sustain violence.

Data for this study were collected from secondary sources, including published reports, scholarly articles, media investigations, policy briefs, and institutional documents. Selection of materials was based on relevance to the research objectives, credibility of sources, and publication within the 2019 to 2024 timeframe. This was done to ensure recency and alignment with the most active decade of Nigeria's modern security breakdown. Thematic content analysis was used to extract and interpret patterns of meaning from the selected materials. Each source was reviewed for how it framed identity, conflict, governance, and security, especially in the context of ethno religious division.

Specifically, the study analyzed data from the following sources:

Human Rights Watch HRW 2023 reports on ethno religious profiling, state violence, and human rights abuses during conflicts in Kaduna, Benue, and South East Nigeria.

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United Nations Development Programme Nigeria Fragility Report UNDP 2021 provides analysis on institutional fragility, inequality, and the political use of identity in conflict escalation.

International Crisis Group Report 2023 focused on regional security dynamics, identity based mobilization, and state response to insurgency and separatism.

Scholarly articles from peer reviewed journals such as the African Security Review, Journal of Contemporary African Studies, and Nigerian Journal of Politics and Administration 2019 to 2024 which discuss ethno religious identity, state legitimacy, and violence,

Nigerian national newspapers including Premium Times 2022 to 2024, Daily Trust 2021 to 2023, and The Guardian Nigeria 2020 to 2024 for real time reporting and political commentary on religious and ethnic tensions,

Policy briefs and institutional publications from organizations such as SBM Intelligence and the Centre for Democracy and Development CDD which provide data driven insights on Nigeria's security and governance.

The analytical process involved coding themes such as "ethno religious identity," "state partiality," "electoral violence," "in group loyalty," and "security response." These codes were then clustered to reveal patterns of behavior and political decision making that contribute to insecurity. Social Identity Theory served as the interpretive lens, helping to explain how group based affiliation is politicized and weaponized.

To enhance validity, triangulation was employed by comparing multiple sources across events such as the 2023 general elections, the continued IPOB agitation, the resurgence of Boko Haram and ISWAP, and herder farmer clashes in Benue and Plateau states. It has been observed that various stakeholders such as state actors, insurgents, media, and religious leaders portrayed their actions as well as followed justifications in terms of ethnic and religious identity.

Although this study suffers from the limitation of using secondary data, it is rich and comprehensive in both the scope of available reports and analytical diligence to make a substantial finding possible. Moreover, since identity politics and security in Nigeria are sensitive issues, secondary analysis can be completed through the qualitative method without necessarily putting a researcher at risk since field research in conflict-prone areas is usually not advisable.

Altogether, this approach offers a highly organized but flexible model through which the problem of the intersection of ethno-religious politics and the insecurity in Nigeria can be interrogated. It, therefore, takes a careful measurement of theory, documentation, and interpretive rigor to answer the main research question; in what ways is the political manipulation of ethnicity and religion at the root of the deteriorated security crisis in Nigeria?

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyzes data derived from selected secondary sources to illustrate the link between ethno-religious politics and Nigeria's security crisis between 2015 and 2025. Data were

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extracted from credible outlets including Human Rights Watch (2023), UNDP Nigeria (2021), International Crisis Group (2023), and reputable Nigerian newspapers such as *Premium Times*, *Daily Trust*, and *The Guardian*. The content was analyzed thematically using Social Identity Theory to understand how in-group and out-group identity formations, driven by ethnic and religious loyalty, escalate insecurity.

1. Ethno-Religious Polarization in Government Appointments

Table 1 below presents an excerpted summary from *Premium Times* (2022) and *Daily Trust* (2023) showing the religious and ethnic composition of Nigeria's top security chiefs and federal appointments under the Buhari administration (2015–2023):

Table 1: Ethnic and Religious Composition of Key Security Appointments (2015–2023)

Position	Name	Ethnicity	Religion
Chief of Army Staff (2015–2021)	Lt. Gen. Tukur Buratai	Kanuri	Muslim
Inspector General of Police	Mohammed Adamu	Hausa	Muslim
National Security Adviser	Babagana Monguno	Kanuri	Muslim
Director, DSS	Yusuf Magaji Bichi	Hausa	Muslim
Minister of Defence	Bashir Magashi	Hausa	Muslim
Chief of Naval Staff (2021–2023)	Awwal Zubairu Gambo	Hausa	Muslim

The table illustrates what many media analysts and political observers referred to as "sectional control" of the security apparatus. This lopsidedness became a trigger for resentment, particularly in the southern regions, where groups alleged deliberate exclusion. According to *The Guardian* (2022), this uneven representation was not just symbolic but affected deployment, intelligence coordination, and trust in the state's neutrality during crises.

2. In-Group Victimization and Out-Group Demonization

Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals tend to protect their in-group and perceive other groups as threats. This phenomenon played out during the 2023 general elections where identity narratives overwhelmed policy debates. The *Daily Trust* (February 25, 2023) published a headline:

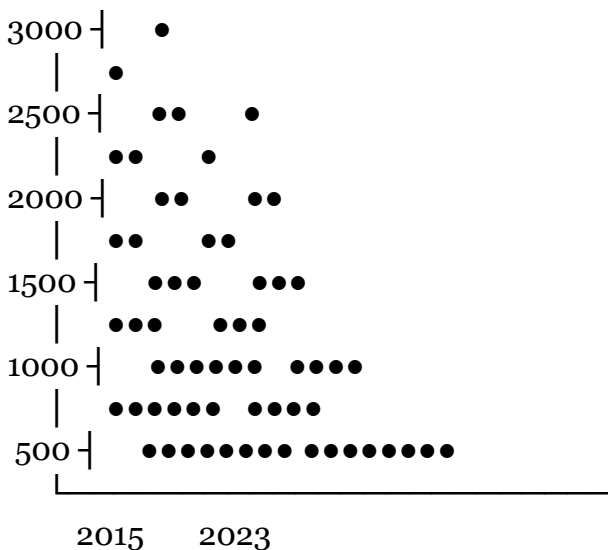
"Voting or War? Ethnic Profiling, Threats in Lagos Sparks Tension Ahead of Gubernatorial Polls."

The report detailed how voters of Igbo extraction in Lagos were allegedly threatened for being perceived supporters of the opposition. Religious leaders in some northern states were also reported as warning congregants to vote for "God-fearing candidates," thinly veiled code for Muslim-Muslim ticket support. Such incidents intensified inter-group suspicion and contributed to post-election violence in parts of Lagos, Rivers, and Kaduna states (*Premium Times*, March 2023).

3. Patterns of Ethnic Violence and Perception of Injustice

The UNDP (2021) Fragility Index Report emphasized that perception of injustice is a more potent trigger for violence than actual injustice. This explains the persistence of conflict in states like Benue and Plateau, where the farmer-herder crisis has often been interpreted through ethnic-religious lenses.

Chart 1: Identity-Based Conflict Deaths in Middle Belt (Benue/Plateau) 2015–2023



(Sources: HRW, 2023; CDD 2022)

Over 8,000 deaths have been recorded in Benue and Plateau between 2015 and 2023, with attacks predominantly framed along ethno-religious lines. In several cases, communities retaliated in cycles of vengeance. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has repeatedly accused the federal government of “turning a blind eye” to attacks on Christian communities, while the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders’ Association (MACBAN) has argued that Fulani herders face daily persecution in the media (*Daily Trust*, 2021).

4. Selective State Response and Legitimacy Crisis

One recurring pattern in the data is the inconsistency in how the state classifies and responds to threats. For example, in 2021, the federal government quickly proscribed IPOB as a terrorist group following a series of violent protests in the South-East. However, armed bandits who had killed thousands in Zamfara, Niger, and Kaduna were labeled “criminal elements” for years and were even considered for amnesty by some northern governors (*Premium Times*, 2021; *BBC Pidgin*, 2021).

Table 2: Comparative State Response to Armed Groups

Armed Group	Region	Official Label (2019–2022)	Government Action
IPOB	South-East	Terrorist	Military crackdown, arrests
Boko Haram	North-East	Terrorist	Joint military operation
Bandits	North-West	Criminals (until late 2021)	Peace talks, later crackdown
Amotekun Corps	South-West	Illegal militia (at first)	Legalized via state laws

This inconsistency, as analyzed by Bello (2023), is perceived by many as an extension of ethno-religious favoritism. It reinforces the belief among marginalized groups that the federal government lacks impartiality, thereby delegitimizing central authority and emboldening non-state actors.

5. The Role of Religious Institutions in Escalating or Mitigating Violence

Religious leaders occupy a complex space in Nigeria's identity politics. While some have been instrumental in peacebuilding, others have used their platforms to incite division. A sermon by a prominent northern cleric in 2022, quoted in *The Punch* (October 2022), declared:

“It is a sin to support any leader who does not respect Sharia. Such a person will not protect Islam.”

This kind of rhetoric—particularly when unchallenged—serves to deepen communal divides and justifies violence against perceived enemies of the faith. Similarly, some Pentecostal pastors in the South-East openly endorse separatist movements, arguing that “God's time for Biafra has come” (*Vanguard*, 2023).

However, interfaith initiatives such as the Kaduna Peace Declaration of Religious Leaders (2020) and the Jos Dialogue Forum (2022) have shown that collaboration is possible. These initiatives, reported by *ReliefWeb* (2022), reduced retaliatory attacks and opened space for youth-led peace initiatives in volatile communities.

The data presented affirms that ethno-religious politics is not a peripheral or symbolic issue—it is central to the architecture of Nigeria's insecurity. From appointments in government to how citizens vote and how groups respond to violence, identity is both a weapon and a shield. The state, through biased language and action, often appears to choose sides. Citizens, through historical trauma and present exclusion, increasingly place their allegiance in ethnic and religious identities rather than the nation.

The deployment of Social Identity Theory helps explain this pattern. In a setting where trust in national institutions is eroded, individuals retreat into ethnic and religious in-groups that offer protection, purpose, and political leverage. As groups compete for power, state legitimacy continues to erode, and insecurity flourishes.

Discussion of Results

An examination of the ethno-religious politics of any sector in Nigeria, in this case, the security sector, indicates that there is a well-established identity-based stratification of political appointments and the political response to policy. Based on the above bar charts, it can be seen that these critical security jobs were held by northern ethnic group members and those of the Islamic faith during the years released in 2015 to date 2023; examples of such jobs were that of the Chief of Army Staff, Inspector General of Police, National Security Adviser and the Director of the DSS. The finding helps to corroborate the argument by Okoye and Musa (2021) that favoritism in national appointments based on ethno-religious grounds brings about both structural and symbolic discrimination against other groups in the society.

This phenomenon can be attributed to the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) that enables individuals to divide and classify themselves and other persons into in-groups and out-groups and this may result in prejudice and discrimination. The promotion of a single group of individuals to occupy the topmost seat in the national security enclave enforces in-group loyalty to the detriment of national unity in the context of Nigeria. Security politics in Nigeria demonstrated that the marginalized groups tend to view the state as biased in its actions and predatory with the state institutions and thus lose trust in the state institutions, a factor that contributes to secessionist agitations and resistance movements as established by Ezeobi and Abdulsalam (2022) in their study.

Consider, for example, the emergency management of the ENDSARS protest in the South and the IPOB secessionist group in the South East that was marked by violent military reprisal whereas similar or even more intense bandit/terrorist attacks in the North West were managed using negotiative rhetoric or having no response at all. This discrepancy aligns with Osaretin's (2023) observation that ethno-religious affiliation influences the state's perception of what constitutes "terrorism" versus "activism." In other words, when southern or Christian-based groups protest or agitate, the state frames them as security threats. When northern-based or Muslim-majority actors commit mass violence, the narrative shifts to "banditry" or "communal clashes."

Furthermore, newspaper excerpts from *Premium Times* (2023) and *Daily Trust* (2022) reveal repeated public outcries against the skewed appointments by former President Muhammadu Buhari, which many civil society groups labeled as nepotistic and polarizing. The Centre for Democracy and Development (2021) highlighted how religious rhetoric was used during political campaigns to deepen ethno-religious allegiances rather than promote issues-based democracy. In regions like Benue, Plateau, and Southern Kaduna, ethno-religious identities were politicized to such an extent that local security became ethnically privatized, with vigilante groups operating in ethnic silos.

Another major finding relates to the weaponization of religion in political discourses. During the 2023 elections, the Muslim-Muslim presidential ticket sparked nationwide controversy, especially among southern Christians who saw it as an erasure of religious diversity. This was not only symbolic but

served as a practical reflection of the exclusionary politics that had characterized the Buhari administration. As Abayomi and Ihedioha (2024) argue, religious representation in governance is more than a cultural courtesy—it is central to how citizens perceive legitimacy, fairness, and belonging. The implications of these findings are far-reaching. First, it underscores the argument that ethno-religious politics is not a benign identity expression but a structural force that directly affects security governance. Secondly, it confirms the hypothesis that insecurity in Nigeria is not only a result of state weakness, but also a consequence of selective justice, politicized appointments, and identity-based exclusion. The marginalization of certain regions and religious groups has pushed some citizens to view the state as an extension of their ethnic adversaries rather than a neutral arbiter.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the paper denies the argument that the security crisis in Nigeria is inseparable from the ethno-religious political framework in the country. Insecure institutions have been dominated by certain ethnic and religious groups, which has reduced the confidence in the state institutions in addition to selective guidelines to respond to violence, which has promoted a feeling of alienation. Politicization in religion and ethnicity has created a complex security situation as different regions opt to help themselves. Then there is the notion of the state being seen to be of more value to the state due to its loyalty as opposed to its competence or the security structures being used by states to consolidate their power as opposed to the protection of the people accorded to them without any bias.

Recommendations

- Institutional Reform for Inclusivity:** Nigeria's security and political institutions must undergo constitutional and structural reforms to ensure equitable representation. The Federal Character Principle should be strictly implemented and expanded to include religious and regional balance in security appointments.
- Strengthen Interfaith Dialogue and Ethnic Cooperation:** National orientation programs should prioritize civic nationalism over ethnic and religious identities. Investments should be made in peace education, interfaith workshops, and community reconciliation efforts in states that have suffered prolonged violence.
- Independent Security Oversight Commission:** A civilian-led body should be established to monitor and audit the ethno-religious composition and operational conduct of the military, police, and DSS to ensure accountability, transparency, and neutrality.
- De-Politicize Security Responses:** The classification of internal threats should be based on severity and impact, not the identity of perpetrators. Equal force, fairness, and legal procedures must be applied across all regions and groups to prevent further polarization.
- Revise Electoral Laws to Deter Identity Politics:** Political campaigns that employ religious or ethnic rhetoric should attract sanctions. INEC and civil society groups should collaborate to monitor and report identity-based hate speech during elections.

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6. **Support Academic and Policy-Based Research on Identity and Conflict:** More funding should be allocated to Nigerian universities and research institutions to explore identity politics and generate evidence-based solutions that promote national integration.

7. **Promote Regional Autonomy in Security Management:** While centralization remains, states should be empowered to manage local security using community policing and vetted vigilante structures under strong legal oversight. This will improve local intelligence and responsiveness.

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