Ungoverned Spaces and Human Security Challenges: A Re-emerging Threat on Nigeria's National Security.

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Abstract

Nigeria's current security challenges have escalated, threatening the country's stability and prosperity. Issues such as banditry, kidnapping, terrorism, insurgency, and violent resource-based conflicts have not only jeopardized lives and property but have also undermined socioeconomic wellbeing. This paper explores how ungoverned spaces lacking effective governmental oversight and security presence serve as breeding grounds for various forms of violence perpetrated by terrorists, insurgents, militant herders, and other criminal groups. Drawing from empirical data, the study examined ungoverned spaces as contested regions within Nigeria and the Sahel, analyzing their function as havens where violent actors establish operational strongholds. These spaces are seen as either entirely unregulated by state authorities or controlled by alternative, non-state actors, creating significant national security concerns. Using the Predatory Theory of Government, the paper argues that governmental neglect or failure in asserting territorial control in Southwest Nigeria has allowed bandit groups to flourish, compromising human security and intensifying fear within communities. The study highlights how this dynamic is further exacerbated by porous borders, ineffective anti-grazing laws, and limited technological security measures. While previous literature has connected ungoverned spaces with general insecurity, this paper uniquely focuses on ideological motivations behind the control of such spaces, as seen in Boko Haram's radicalism. Recommendations include strengthening state capacity through modern surveillance, equipping security forces, and enhancing inter-regional cooperation to effectively mitigate ungoverned spaces and reclaim security in Nigeria.

Introduction

The viability of Nigeria's businesses has been threatened by security challenges in recent decades. The country is now dealing with a number of security challenges, including kidnapping, terrorism, insurgency, banditry, political violence, resource-based conflict, agricultural violence, and secession threats. Unfortunately, many Nigerians have had their lives, property, and socioeconomic status impacted by the insecurity that has resulted from these challenges. Ungoverned territories that stretch beyond a few geopolitical zones in the country are a factor that indirectly fosters certain security challenges. Since the government is unable to devise sufficient security measures to halt the increasing instability, the situation has deteriorated. When law enforcement isn't there, criminal behaviour is free to thrive since the government can't enforce its authority. To rephrase, "ungoverned spaces" are uncontrolled land areas where terrorists, criminals, militant herders, and rebels may use their structured networks to seize and terrorise. According to Ojo (2020), ungoverned area is characterised by a lack of basic governmental institutions, social amenities, and law enforcement. Whelan claims that parts of many West African countries, such as Northern Mali and the Niger Delta, are "ungoverned zones" over which the government has little to no authority (2006). In the ungoverned areas of Somalia, Northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Gulf of Guinea, and the Central African Republic, illegal and criminal activity may thrive (Whelan, 2006). Ungoverned zones in the North Central and North West areas promote violent fights between farmers and herders, allowing herdsmen militias and other criminal groups to perpetuate their networks.

Problem Statement

Nigeria faces escalating security challenges that have profoundly disrupted lives, businesses, and national stability. Issues such as terrorism, kidnapping, insurgency, and resource-based conflicts have significantly undermined socioeconomic activities. These challenges are compounded by ungoverned spaces territories devoid of government presence, law enforcement, and basic infrastructure which serve as hubs for criminal activities. In these areas, terrorist groups, militant herders, and other criminal networks operate freely, exploiting weak governance to perpetuate violence and instability. The North Central and North West regions of Nigeria are particularly affected by ungoverned spaces, where violent clashes between farmers and herders are fueled by the activities of armed militias and criminal

syndicates. These territories also facilitate illegal arms trafficking, human smuggling, and other transnational crimes, further destabilizing the country. Similar patterns are observed in other parts of West and Central Africa, as noted by Whelan (2006), with ungoverned zones in regions like Northern Mali and the Niger Delta becoming breeding grounds for criminal enterprises and insurgent activities. Despite efforts by the Nigerian government, the inability to effectively reclaim and govern these ungoverned spaces has allowed insecurity to persist, eroding public confidence in state institutions and exacerbating economic inequality. Businesses are unable to thrive, and livelihoods are continually threatened, impeding national development. Addressing this crisis requires a multifaceted approach that combines enhanced state capacity, inter-regional collaboration, community participation, and socio-economic development to restore stability and reclaim these vulnerable territories.

Objectives

- To enhance inter-regional cooperation and community engagement in intelligence gathering and security initiatives, ensuring a united front against threats.
- To implement socio-economic development programs that reduce poverty, unemployment, and alienation in ungoverned spaces, fostering long-term stability.

Literature Review

There is a lot of evidence in the literature that shows how dangerous ungoverned zones are for human and national security throughout the world. Diggins (2011) argued that weak or vulnerable governments pose a threat to global security, rather than a balance of power being necessary for a state's security. The developed world, especially the West, is vulnerable to the anarchy, chaos, and underdevelopment that define fragile governments, which Diggins claims endanger their security. The phrase "failed states" and "ungoverned un-governed spaces" are sometimes used to benefit the nations and international forces in the Sahel, according to Raleigh and Dowd (2013). Furthermore, the Sahel states are administered by a variety of agencies, and their power over the territories is limited since they are among the poorest, biggest, and most underpopulated African countries. Hence, describing non-state areas as "ungoverned" helps to hide the true nature of state authority (Raleigh et al, 2013). However, they maintained that large, uncontrolled areas are not necessary for the violent players who deal with western interests, international or state forces, and others. According to Ojo (2020),

ungoverned places are strongly associated with the present level of insecurity in Nigeria. Ungoverned places are not under the supervision or authority of security officials. As an example, the Boko Haram terrorists have set up shop in Sambisa's ungoverned regions, where they live and launch their many assaults on unsuspecting populations. Okoli and Lenshie (2018) define ungoverned zones as places where either the government is ineffective or when national security is a major worry. Okoli et al. (2018) defined "ungoverned spaces" as "exploitable and constrained spaces" that are illegally controlled by gangs, local armed groups, militants, or warlords due to either inadequate or non-existent government.

The problems with ungoverned regions, according to Okoli et al. (2018), stem from factors such as the expansion of states, changes in population density and distribution, urbanisation, globalisation, the pattern of income distribution, and the growing riches of violent non-state actors. Another aspect is the government's failure to properly manage territorial borders. The area of the Sambisa Forest is like that of Belgium or Lagos state in southwestern Nigeria, according to Ojo (2020), which means that kidnappings and hijackings of innocent people are possible there. Not only does it provide a secure haven for kidnappees, but it also acts as a logistical headquarters for militants and a venue for activity coordination and organising. Terrorists from Boko Haram and other criminal groups often take advantage of the forest's lack of protection to carry out heinous crimes. Additionally, because there are no technological devices to monitor the activities that take place in the forests, the majority of bandit activities are planned in the unregulated areas of different regions of the country. Campbell (2018) argues that terrorists are not the only criminal organisations that use ungoverned spaces in Nigeria; other criminal organisations include militant herdsmen and cattle rustlers. The North Central and North Eastern areas of Nigeria are home to deep woodlands that criminal groups often use to conduct heinous crimes against rural communities. Rural communities have taken matters into their own hands by forming vigilante organisations and enlisting the support of local hunters who oversee the operation.

Ukwuoma, Oke, and NIMFEL (2020) defined ungoverned spaces as areas where the state does not maintain a physical or virtual presence. The Cross River forest in Maiduguri is the starting point for these areas, which stretch all the way across Nigeria to the states of Katsina, Zamfara, and Kebbi (Ukwuoma, et al., 2020). According to Onwuzuruigbo (2020), the term "ungoverned spaces" refers to locations that are not under government control but yet

represent a serious risk to security and stability. Many see their thriving drug trade, criminal networks, and influx of illegal migrants as an ideal environment for terrorist groups to grow and thrive. Therefore, containing these places is a foremost priority in terms of security strategy. Because of this lack of regulation, these locations serve as criminal havens where they may plan, organise, raise money, communicate, scheme, and operate in a condition of relative security (Villarosa, 2011). The vast majority of Nigeria's landmass is either covered by water, desert, or forests, as indicated above. Some examples of areas that are left unattended and uncared for by civil government or security services are the North-East Sambisa forest, the South-South streams, and the South-East and South-West mangrove forests. In Nigeria, thieves and bandits often use these places. On the other hand, even in "ungoverned spaces," the central government still has some influence over what happens there. Nevertheless, violent non-state actors may take use of them to further their unlawful agendas, and they may be poorly governed, disputed, or under-governed. Along with the problems caused by Nigeria's ungoverned areas and their effects on national security, the growing tensions between farmers and herders in the West African subregion have captured the world's attention. A number of scholars have argued that the ongoing war between farmers and herders in West Africa, and Nigeria in particular, threatens the very survival of the countries involved (Ogu, 2016; Ngbea and Ngbea, 2019; Okoli and Dalhatu, 2019; Adebajo, 2020). They accomplished this by drawing from a wide range of theoretical and methodological frameworks.

Additionally, Okoli and Lenshie (2018) argued that Fulani herdsmen's brutality towards Nigerian rural populations, nomadic migration, and uncontrolled areas are all related. The result has been human suffering, economic instability, and loss of life. In addition, they said that Cameroon, Chad, and Niger may be reached from Libya, Sudan, and Mali by hundreds of pathways. Even while security officials aren't aware of most of these routes, criminals, especially Fulani herders who cause violence in rural areas, use them to get guns into the nation. The assimilation and assumption of an international dimension and the manifestation of identity conflicts in the forms of religion, indigenousness, and ethnicity make the dispute intractable, even when parties have put conflict management procedures in place. Numerous negative socio-economic outcomes have been precipitated by the conflicts between the two agricultural groups. These include: the loss of livestock and human lives, the disturbance of

rural livelihoods, food insecurity, the destruction of private and public property, the increase of vulnerable internally displaced persons, the blockage of development programs, a decline in quality of life, weakening of political and economic institutions, and a deterrent to investment on the local level (Oladipupo, 2018; Njoku, 2018; Adebajo, 2020). It would seem that academics have failed to adequately address the crucial function of ungoverned areas in maintaining the ongoing confrontations between herders and farmers in Nigeria. One possible outcome of this is the creation of a remedy to the problem. Thus, the purpose of the research was to investigate the knowledge gap.

Ungoverned Space

Ungoverned Spaces Conceptualising Ungoverned places are a sneaky and divisive concept. The reason for this is because several attempts to define it have either failed miserably or only achieved limited success. A possible issue is the existence of really ungoverned areas. There is no space that is not physically or orbitally regulated, or so we are led to believe. To rephrase, there are always going to be individuals or groups dictating the rules of any given space, whether it's on an interplanetary scale or not. These groups or individuals think they have the right, if not the legal authority, to govern the areas they rule. The area becomes a battleground when someone tries to force them out. Until then, another power is in charge of the disputed area. Since there is no real lack of control over the area, this line of thought gives rise to the concept of "alternatively governed spaces." Not only is the actual existence of a 'ungoverned space' doubtful, according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2014: 1), but there are no such places as ungoverned areas. Six arguments are advanced in support of this stance.

First, the word fails to account for the real differences that occur both within and across states. Two, it ignores the reality that there are other governing spaces than the state, which means it is state-centric. Three, it fails to take into account the reality that there are alternative governmental structures outside of the state, such as monarchies and sectarian governments. These other forms of government wield tremendous authority and power, which Western theories may overlook within a state-oriented framework, but which are essentially alternative governments. Four, the so-called ungoverned spaces are often believed to be places prone to terrorism and bloodshed. This could not always be the case since, for

instance, terrorists have how to efficiently operate in cyberspace, which is a kind of ungoverned area that is not necessarily physical. Lastly, the idea that even "strong" nations aren't necessarily immune to the occurrence of ungoverned space is often overlooked in favour of focussing on weak or failing states. Terrorists would prefer operate in areas with contemporary conveniences than in large, "barren" areas where they would be rendered useless. Sixth and lastly, contrary to popular belief, it does not provide evidence for why terrorist attacks tend to occur in developed nations rather than weaker ones, which are often said to be less governed, ungoverned, or mis-governed (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2014: 1-2).

Like many other researchers who have written on ungoverned areas, Jennifer Keister (2014) examines them from a political economy or legal perspective. This makes sense, given that their main focus is on formulating policies to control or eliminate ungoverned areas. Political economics, the more prominent component, fails to address the knotty issue of why there are ungoverned zones in well-governed governments with contemporary military hardware and software. It also doesn't address the radicalisation of people (particularly terrorists) who see these areas as a place to establish their own autonomous authority. Politics and economics don't matter as much too radicalised organisations and individuals as their ideological leanings. The issue is, why would individuals choose to run a place independently of the state, even when the political economics is on their side? Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram are two instances of groups that use ideological pressure to consciously establish alternate governing areas. What could possibly motivate a Muslim from Britain to take flight in support of ISIS instead of their country? Another question is why the Boko Haram militant group would want to establish a new government in the territories it has captured near Nigeria's borders. Contrary to popular belief, the motivation is not based on political economics but on intellectual theology. This study addresses a gap in the research on ungoverned places by focussing on Boko Haram and the ideology it promotes, which President Buhari has rejected. A short historical evolution of Boko Haram is relevant before assessing President Buhari's address. The migratory herdsmen access the nation via several ungoverned regions that serve as passageways with permeable boundaries. Conflict between herders and farmers is one of the bloodiest conflicts in Nigeria's history, and it has killed countless people. The inaction of the Nigerian federal government to

intervene has contributed to the conflict's increasingly lethal trajectory. Because herders' migrations often lead to agricultural devastation and water source pollution, the governors of Benue, Ondo, Ekiti, Ogun, Oyo, and Lagos states acted rashly by establishing anti-open grazing legislation to limit their movements. To supplement the work of the security agents in reducing herdsmen-inflicted violence, the state governments of South-West Nigeria have banded together to form the Amotekun security force. In Nigeria, banditry, kidnapping, insurgency, and terrorism have all been linked to ungoverned places, according to studies (Ojo, 2020; Aniche, 2021). Furthermore, there is an abundance of literature on the topic of herder-farmer conflict and humanitarian challenges in Nigeria (Ugwumba, 2018; Adebajo, 2020; Adebajo & Iseoluwa, 2020).

Human Security

As a result of the diverse interpretations of the term "security" and its appropriate application, there is a diverse array of perspectives on the subject. An environment is considered secure when there are no obstacles to the normal activities of individuals, and when there is no concern for their physical or financial well-being or safety (Premium Times, 2019). Safety is the absence of peril, whether it pertains to one's person or their nation. The ability to to protect a nation's interest in the areas of politics, economy and socio-cultural aspect can equally be seen as human Security. (Caleb, 2021). According to Sanchi, Alhassan, Ajibade, and Sabo (2022), security encompasses the following: a consistent income, a predictable schedule, protection from physical and mental harm, and the absence of concern regarding victimisation by criminals. A sense of safety or protection from mental duress is provided by feeling liked, accepted, cherished, and protected by one's community or neighbourhood and, by extension, others involved. Also emphasised are the psychological and affective aspects of the experience of belonging to a social group that may offer security. A broader definition of security would encompass the systems and practices within human civilisation that are designed to mitigate the daily threats that individuals encounter. According to Booth (2007), the more secure a society's members are, the more they are able to conduct their lives in a manner that is distinct from the simple, animalistic struggle for survival. However, it is feasible to mitigate starvation, illness, poverty, unemployment, and natural disasters—among numerous others—only in politically stable and tranquil societies (Ighodalo, 2012). Human security incorporates a broad spectrum of concerns. So, the guarantee of human security is

essential for the advancement of a better society and better individuals. This further demonstrates that security is essential for the survival of Nigerians and their nation. For both individuals and society, security is the foremost concern, as per Caleb (2021) and Temitope (2019). In this article, human security is defined as all actions taken or proposed to be taken to ensure the economic, nutritional, health, environmental, personal, communal, and political well-being of a nation's population.

Theoretical Framework

The Predatory Theory of Government serves as the foundation for this article's investigation. About 1969, the Predatory Theory of Government was proposed by a variety of academics, such as Howard Becker, Olson Mancur, and Eric Hobsbawm (Conroy, 2016). According to Alkhater (2012), a predatory government is one in which the members prioritise their own personal benefit over the welfare of the general population. In the absence of this, there will be social and economic issues that may result in underdevelopment, insecurity, and distrust among various socioeconomic groups. This theory posits that the government's failure to provide public benefits to its citizens would result in civil unrest and violence. The predatory theory of the state placed a primary emphasis on the impact of a state's actions on its ability to establish, cultivate connections, and provide for its population (Egwu, 2015; Currot & Fink,   2012).

The theory posits that endogenous government policy has a direct effect on the maintenance of social order, social security, and the economic progress of individuals. This is due to the fact that banditry and other forms of social insecurity are more prevalent in societies where a small number of affluent and influential individuals leverage their power to advance their own interests (Alkhater, 2012). The government is not sympathetic to bandits who violate the laws imposed by an exploitative regime, as the populace is under the impression that any crime committed against autocrats would ultimately benefit them. As a consequence, in regions where the government lacks authority, armed banditry may intervene to establish and enforce regulations (Egwu, 2015). Despite the fact that the theory recognises the numerous negative effects of armed banditry and ungoverned areas on society, such as the threat to human security posed by the savagery and cruelty. However, Robinson (2001) contends that armed banditry actually enhances the quality of life by preventing the establishment of detrimental government policies and exploitative practices. In other words, bandits will

frequently seize the opportunity to fill the void left by governments that fail. It is perplexing that poor policy is so prevalent, as even regimes that prioritise their own interests would be motivated to promote development if they could capitalise on its advantages. Regrettably, the original organisations that regulate the political system may experience the repercussions of a change in political power as a consequence of policies that encourage economic growth and wealth accumulation. The current custodians of power may find it more advantageous to maintain their position rather than promote change in the event that the individuals entrusted with authority fail to deliver as promised. The government is reduced to a band of immobile criminals; therefore, it is incompatible with actions that promote healthy institutions and economic progress to maintain the status quo. Elites are motivated to indulge in predatory behaviour by the society's elevated level of political engagement (Tafida, 2018). As a result, the leadership of Nigeria, a democratic nation that is endowed with both natural and human resources, is oppressive, and the populace is perpetually concerned about their safety as a result of issues such as armed banditry and ungoverned regions (Abraham & Auwalu, 2022). The rural areas in the South-West region that are susceptible to bandit attacks are characterised by the aforementioned characteristics. The government's exploitative nature has impeded its ability to cultivate an environment in which individuals can achieve their aspirations, which is why this is the case. In order to accomplish their objectives, the bandit organisations view violence against the civilian population as a necessary measure.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach. To achieve the objective of this study, data were sourced from secondary sources including relevant books, journals and internet resources. Put differently, the methodology of this paper entailed a conceptual and contextual analysis of literature and official documents to analyze the area of investigation to reach a conclusion.

Discussion of Findings

The paper highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of ungoverned spaces, illustrating how these areas pose significant threats to human and national security. As Diggins (2011) posits, weak state structures and governance vacuums are not merely local or regional concerns but extend to global security, challenging the notion that state security depends

solely on maintaining a balance of power. This insight emphasizes the need for robust governance mechanisms to address vulnerabilities that allow such spaces to flourish.

The discussion surrounding the Sahel region underscores the limitations of state authority in vast, sparsely populated areas. Raleigh and Dowd (2013) argue that framing these territories as "ungoverned" often serves external agendas, masking the nuanced power dynamics at play. They caution against oversimplifying these regions as anarchic zones, pointing instead to alternative governance systems that may operate outside formal state structures. However, as Ojo (2020) and Okoli and Lenshie (2018) illustrate, the absence of effective government presence in Nigeria's ungoverned spaces facilitates the entrenchment of criminal networks, such as Boko Haram, highlighting the critical link between territorial governance and security.

The operational dynamics of violent non-state actors, as described by Campbell (2018) and Ukwuoma et al. (2020), reveal that ungoverned spaces function as logistical hubs for terrorism, banditry, and other forms of criminality. These areas provide safe havens where militants can coordinate activities, procure arms, and launch attacks with relative impunity. The expansive and challenging terrain of regions like Sambisa Forest exemplifies this phenomenon, where a lack of technological surveillance compounds the state's inability to reclaim control. The interplay between ungoverned spaces and broader socio-political conflicts is also significant. The herder-farmer clashes in Nigeria, explored by scholars like Okoli and Dalhatu (2019), demonstrate how governance failures exacerbate resource disputes, contributing to large-scale violence. The porous borders and migratory routes cited by Okoli and Lenshie (2018) further complicate the situation, facilitating the flow of arms and intensifying identity-based conflicts. This underscores the importance of regional cooperation and border management as components of any comprehensive security strategy.

Critically, the literature challenges the conceptual framing of ungoverned spaces. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2014) and Keister (2014) contend that such areas are rarely devoid of governance. Instead, they are "alternatively governed," with non-state actors imposing their rule. This perspective reframes the discourse, emphasizing the ideological and structural factors that sustain these spaces. The role of ideology, particularly in groups like Boko Haram, underscores the inadequacy of purely political or economic solutions.

Ideological radicalization fuels their quest to establish alternative governance structures, posing a direct challenge to state sovereignty. Finally, the concept of human security emerges as a unifying theme in addressing the challenges posed by ungoverned spaces. Scholars like Booth (2007) and Ighodalo (2012) highlight the intrinsic connection between security and the broader well-being of individuals and communities. Ensuring economic stability, access to basic resources, and protection from violence is essential for mitigating the adverse impacts of ungoverned spaces and fostering sustainable peace.

Conclusion

Armed banditry, ungoverned places, and human security were the subjects of this paper's investigation into southwest Nigeria. The discovery was made that armed banditry is driven by the state's inability or reluctance to exercise territorial authority within its jurisdiction. Additionally, it said that the present climate of tension and uncertainty has put people's lives and property in danger due to ungoverned regions that enable the operations of armed criminals. The paper also revealed that there have been several attempts to lessen the danger, but thus yet, nothing has really changed. As a result, it can be inferred that armed criminals took advantage of the powerlessness of dysfunctional governments to oversee their territory in order to sow fear and endanger the nation's human security. If the government is serious about making a difference, it should equip and train the police, army, Amotekun security group, vigilantes, and local hunters. The government should also use modern technical security gadgets to keep an eye on uncontrolled regions, such satellites, drones, and CCTV cameras.

Recommendations

Below are the recommendations the paper suggests.

- Invest in advanced surveillance technologies such as drones, satellite imagery, and AI-driven monitoring tools to identify and track activities in ungoverned areas.

- Establish centralized command centers for real-time data collection and analysis to improve decision-making.

- Provide modern weapons, protective gear, and communication equipment tailored to counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.

- Train security personnel in intelligence gathering, community engagement, and handling asymmetrical threats.

- Foster collaboration among neighbouring states and regions to address cross-border crimes and insurgency.

- Develop joint task forces with clear mandates and shared resources to combat threats in border regions.

- Engage local communities in intelligence gathering and security efforts through neighbourhood watch groups and vigilante systems.

- Build trust between security forces and local populations to enhance information sharing and reduce alienation.

- Allocate sufficient budgets for personnel welfare, infrastructure development, and operational logistics.

- Conduct institutional reforms to tackle corruption and improve accountability within security forces.

- Establish development projects, such as schools, healthcare facilities, and employment initiatives, to address the root causes of insecurity.

- Encourage private-sector investment through incentives to develop infrastructure in these areas.

- Deploy advanced border surveillance systems and checkpoints to monitor and control the movement of people, arms, and contraband.

- Enhance cooperation with neighbouring countries for coordinated border management and intelligence sharing.

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