

Beyond the Bounds of Order: Ungoverned Spaces and the Challenges of Insecurity in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

For decades, the Nigerian state has been concerned with the issue of expanding insecurity within its borders. The insecurity manifests primarily in the form of Boko Haram (BH) terrorism, Niger Delta militancy, Unknown Gun Men (UGM) conundrum, banditry, kidnapping, cattle rustling, oil theft, sea robbery, armed robbery, and so on. Although, the literature appears to identify several causative factors to the insecurity. However, this study attributes the country's precarious security situation to ungoverned spaces in all geo-political zones, states, local governments, and nearly all communities. These areas serve as havens, hideouts, training grounds, points of reconnaissance, and operational bases for terrorists. The study is anchored on the theory of state fragility through which it argued that the lack of capacity, and authority, on the part of the Nigerian state to assert its sovereignty over its territory enhances the ability of criminals, dissidents, and belligerent groups to unleash terror on the state and its citizens. Data for the study were generated from secondary sources and were analysed using the qualitative descriptive method. The study discovered that the inability of the Nigerian state to effectively police and maintain its presence across its territory accounts for the expanding security threats. The study recommends restructuring and reformation of the Nigerian security architecture and the adoption of state and community policing options. No one can know and better protect a place more than its inhabitants.

Keywords: Insecurity, State fragility, Nigerian state, Security. and Ungoverned spaces.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the Nigerian state is experiencing the most serious security challenge in its history (Ibrahim, 2021). The country suffers expanding violent attacks by non-state actors. Prominent among these security challenges are terrorism, banditry, Boko Haram (BH), unknown gunmen (UGM), herders terrorism, piracy, kidnapping, herder-farmer clash, armed robbery, sea robbery, cattle rustling, oil theft, gold theft, diamond theft, timber theft, human trafficking, gunrunning, and so on. These have resulted in the death of over half a million persons, displacement of more than two million, forced migration, and a prolonged humanitarian crisis that advances security risks (Ojo, 2020).

The tipping point of the security challenges in Nigeria was evidenced in the threefold terrorist events in early 2022: the attack at Kaduna International Airport by over 200 armed bandits on motorbikes that overran the tarmac and demobilized the airport, the derailment and abduction of scores of passengers in the Kaduna-Abuja bound train, and the attack cum jailbreak at the Kuje maximum security prisons in Abuja where hundreds of hardened criminals were freed. Currently, abduction of students and mass kidnapping for ransom is a thriving business in the country with more than 1,000 children kidnapped in 2021.

Although, scholarly explanations have attributed these security menaces to variables such as ethnic politics, and religious politics, among others. This study, however, blames it on the existence of ungoverned space across the country that constitutes threats to national security. For instance, there is Sambisa Forest in the northeast, creeks in the South-South, and Mangrove Forest in the South-East and South-West, and similar

areas are left unmanned and unsecured in other parts of the country. Criminal activities have become the norm in many of Nigeria's ungoverned spaces. Ungoverned spaces in Nigeria often refer to locations unreachable by the government, hence they are vulnerable to criminal elements. It is against this background that this study examined the link between ungoverned spaces and insecurities in Nigeria.

Conceptual clarifications

The concept of 'ungoverned space' features prominently in contemporary discourse on security threats and risk factors. Conceptually, ungoverned spaces are areas where the government does not have control due to the lack of security agents giving room for criminality to proliferate. In other words, ungoverned spaces are uncontrolled land territories vulnerable to occupation and control by violent nonstate actors such as terrorists, insurgents, militant herders, and other criminal elements who maintain organized networks to perpetrate their reign of terror (Aderayo & Olusola, 2022). Ungoverned territories are characterized by the absence of basic institutions of the state to enforce rules and regulations, law enforcement agencies, and social amenities (Ojo, 2020). Aniche, Nshimbi & Moyo (2021) see it as areas where there is a political vacuum and no state governance structures. The US Department of Defense defined ungoverned spaces as an environment not effectively governed, under-governed, or ill-governed by the state or central government because of conflict or inadequate governance capacity. In his dynamic explanation of ungoverned territories, Taylor argues that an ungoverned space is:

a place where the state or central government is unable or unwilling to extend control, effectively govern, or influence the local population, and where a provincial, local, tribal, or autonomous government does not fully or effectively govern, due to inadequate governance capacity, insufficient political will, gaps in legitimacy, the presence of conflict, or restrictive norms of behavior. Ungoverned areas should be assumed to include under-governed, ill-governed, contested, and exploitable areas (Taylor, 2016).

For Okoli & Lenshie (2018), ungoverned spaces are places of governance deficits or areas that have constituted general concerns to national security. They noted that the area is under the illegitimate control of gangs, local armed groups, militants, and/or warlords due to under-governance, misgovernance, or the total absence of governance within a defining space. Besides, they opined that ungoverned spaces are caused by the size of the state, population growth, density, spatial distribution, pattern of wealth distribution, urbanization, globalization and increasing wealth of violent non-state actors, and lack of capacity by government to exercise effective control of territorial boundaries.

Ungoverned Spaces and Violence

Security literature has established a correlation between ungoverned spaces and violent security threats. Although these misgoverned, ill-governed, and ungoverned (even disconnected) spaces do not constitute threats in themselves, they, however, contribute to and facilitate terrorist operations within a state. It offers 'safe havens' where terrorists plan, train, and indoctrinate secure weapons and equipment, engage in illegal smuggling to generate income, and transit zones (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014). This makes ungoverned spaces permanent. For instance, the virtual or cyber haven is ungoverned spaces that rely on physical infrastructure but exists in the vague world of cyberspace. Here, criminals exist and operate evading detection not as a physically contiguous space, like a remote, urban, or maritime area, but as a network (Hoiston, 2012). Similarly, armed militias and sea pirates set up their camps on seas, creeks, swamps, and river channels for their operations (Lenshie, 2018).

The security implications of ungoverned spaces were evident in Iraq, within the Hamrin Mountain range, which spreads along Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Kirkuk provinces that fell under the control of the Islamic State (IS), from where they launch attacks due to lack of government presence. The IS was able to finance its operation through robberies, kidnappings for ransom, extortions, and carjackings (O'Driscoll, 2019), which is like the situation in Nigeria. Indeed, the security threats posed by ungoverned spaces can be found in many conflict-ridden nations such as Syria, Somalia, and so on. In 2003, the Director of the Central Intelligence's Worldwide Threat Briefing argued that the threat posed by 'vast stretches of ungoverned areas – lawless zones, veritable "no man's lands,"' demanded 'a constant level of scrutiny'. Suggesting that ungoverned spaces are

areas and zones in countries and regions that lie beyond the reach of the government, with a high attraction for violent radicalism and extremism because of their peculiar geographical and administrative exclusion (Odogwu, 2021). These spaces pose a significant threat to national security and stability. Considering that they serve as hotbeds of terrorist organisations and sundry terror activities (Paraphyte, 2022).

Often, governments pay little attention to rural communities and forests within the country apart from the extraction of raw materials and mineral resources. It is this absence that offers terrorists, insurgents, separatists, rebels, ethnic irredentists, jihadists, and criminals the opportunity to take over these disconnected and ill-governed spaces. It does not mean that ungoverned spaces exist only in rural communities, and weak states as often suggested in the literature. Experience over the years has demonstrated that it also exists in urban and advanced societies. Ayu & Ayu (2018) argued that criminals prefer secluded locations and dark spots that shield them and their activities from public glare. These areas have been observed to be remote and inaccessible and offer refuge, funds, and food for its members (FAO, 2005). They are often perceived as fertile grounds within which terrorist organisations incubate and thrive, proliferating drug trafficking, criminal networks, and the presence of illegal migrants, and therefore, containing these spaces falls within the strategic frontier of security priorities. Thus, these ungoverned spaces serve as safe havens where criminals organize, plan, raise funds, communicate, recruit, train, transit, and operate in relative security (Villarosa, 2011).

The nature of ungoverned spaces, such as geographical remoteness makes them a hotspot for breeding terrorists; illegal businesses such as piracy, drugs, and human trafficking; and unofficial banking and so on. On its part, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2014) blames the existence of ungoverned spaces on the inability of the government to penetrate some areas; the absence of government authorities; the lack of physical infrastructure; and the inability of the government to exercise a monopoly of force. Climate change and poor resource and forest governance have been implicated in the emergence of ungoverned spaces across the universe. Given its capacity to displace people from their natural settlements and push them into an urbanized society where they constitute a menace and threat to social order. This is the case with the current herder-farmer conflict in the Sahel. Suggesting that its existence can be the consequence of governmental negligence, unwillingness, and diminishing governance dividends.

The Nexus between Ungoverned Spaces and insecurity in Nigeria

To what extent can ungoverned spaces become a threat to security in Nigeria? And how do ungoverned spaces constitute security threat within the Nigerian states? These are the questions that this section attempts to answer. Before going into the details of this subheading, a quick note needs to be made on the state.

The state as conceptualized in political science literature performs three basic functions: 1) extraction of resources from citizens through taxation, 2) provision of public goods like security, social services, and infrastructure, using the taxes so extracted, and 3) social control through the formulation of laws that govern the country and punishment of lawbreakers by the judiciary and law enforcement agencies (Ibrahim, 2021). This implies that the state knows everyone that resides within its territory, provides, and protects them from dangers, regulates human conducts and enjoys the monopoly of instruments of violence over all individuals, groups associations, and organizations within its territory. Contrary to the notion of the state as the entity with the monopoly of force and violence, the Nigerian state features individuals and non-state armed groups (NSAG) that possess various instruments of violence, which they use to terrorize fellow citizens and the state itself. The situation makes life within the country nasty, brutish, and short. As stated earlier, ungoverned spaces enhance the capacity of criminals and dissident groups to hatch violent terrorist attacks that fuel insecurities against the state and the citizens.

In Nigeria, there exists a significant relationship between ungoverned spaces and insecurities especially in the north which has been the hotbed of terrorism. The pervasiveness of banditry, insurgency, mass kidnapping of school children, cattle rustling, and so on, in the area have been attributed to the many unguarded locations such as the Sambisa Forest, and Gwozo mountain. Others include Kiyambana forests, Duste forest, Rijana forest along Kaduna - Abuja Expressway and Dajin Rugu, a forest that stretches from Birnin-Gwari in Kaduna State through Katsina to Zamfara forests (Adewuyi and Daful 2021; Olaniyan and Akinyele 2017). The Sambisa Forest in Borno State serves as a fortress for the dreaded BH insurgents that have been terrorising the

country for over a decade. The contributory roles of ungoverned forests and Sambisa Forest to BH terrorist operations were aptly captured by Ojo (2020, p.86) when he observed:

The forest gained its global recognition when the Boko Haram abducted the Chibok Schoolgirls, who were later taken to the forest. Sambisa forest provides a safe haven for the Boko Haram for their operational, logistical, technical and organizational base and destination for the insurgents' prisoners of war. It is also considered as a training ground for recruitment of new members, radicalization, executions, a detention place for the abductees, it has bomb-making factories, illegal mining, arms trafficking as well as a prayer-ground for the terrorists. It has been a battleground for counter-insurgency between the Boko Haram and the Nigerian military.

Territorially, the Sambisa Forest has been equated to the size of Lagos State in Nigeria, or Belgium. An April 2022 report by Dataphyte indicated that over 35,000 people have been killed in northern Nigeria since 2009 by the BH insurgent group, in addition to an estimated 2.2 internally displaced persons in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states. Meanwhile, a 2021 UNDP study estimated the death toll from the BH conflict at about 350,000 direct and indirect persons. The BH insurgent campaign had led to the destruction and truncation of health services, education, and other basic infrastructures. Regrettably, the Nigerian state is aware that members of BH and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISAWP) occupy the Sambisa Forest. However, it appears the state cannot overrun them and take back the territory despite several reports of the group being degraded. Similarly, the bandits and cattle rustlers that threaten the northwestern and northcentral zones of the country exploit the ungovernable character of various forests in the area to perpetrate their atrocious activities. These include bandit hideouts in Kwiambana and Ajjah forests in Zamfara, herdsman camps in Birnin Kogo forests in Katsina, havens for kidnappers in Guma forests between Benue and Nasarawa States, hideouts of gunmen on the Plateau, and so on. Because of the state's fragility in securing these areas, criminal elements fill the vacuum created by its absence in the form of a 'shadow state' and establish a "social contract" with the people. In 2022, terrorists operating in Zamfara State collected an estimated ₦19 million as a protection levy in addition to a canoe from residents of 14 communities in Anka Local Government Area of the state for them to access their farms (Sahara reporters, 2022). Zamfara state also has illegal gold-mining sites inside its bushes as well as an enclave of banditry for cattle rustlers (Odogwu, 2022). The capacity of terrorist to utilize forest covers in their operations were evident in the kidnappings of school children in Katsina, Zamfara, Kaduna, and Niger States. This was evident in the abduction of 333 schoolboys from Kankara in Katsina State, 42 students from Government Science College, Kagara, Niger State, Chibok school girls in 2014, Dapchi school girls in 2018, and so on.

In Southeast as elsewhere in the country, the unknown gunmen (UGM) conundrum has resulted in a series of attacks against civilians and security personnel. Attacks on security formations, outposts, and police stations in the zone had led to varying degrees of injury, loss of countless human lives, and destruction of property worth billions of naira. The situation is such that police personnel hardly walk on the streets in their uniform. During the said period, banks, and other financial institutions in Anambra state close business for the day around 2:00 pm in addition to weekly Monday sit-at-home. At the height of the security threat, most police stations in the Southeast often have their gates locked out of fear of a sudden attack. Within the same period, police personnel rarely went for arrest, or conducted stop and search except under joint taskforce. Similar, to the situation elsewhere in the country, most UGM strongholds in Southeast are characterized by swathe of ungoverned and disconnected spaces in areas such as Orlu in Imo State, Orumba North and Ihiala in Anambra State, Igbo Eze North and Igbo Eze South in Enugu state, and so on. The Reliefweb pictured the dire security situation in the geopolitical zone in the following words:

Currently, in southeast Nigeria, the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and unknown gunmen (UGM) are pushing many locations in the region into an ungoverned status. While formal and informal security arrangements strive to maintain stability in the region, many locations remain vulnerable to criminal gangs. Mondays are still observed as sit-at-home days in the southeast despite government encouraging people to go about their normal activities. Many residents are sympathetic to IPOB's cause, afraid of disobeying their orders or do not trust security agencies to protect them on Mondays. Hence, the stay-at-orders meet widespread compliance on designated days (Reliefweb, 13 September 2022).

In the South-South, militants, crude oil thieves, sea robbers, and pirates exploit the porous character of the nation's creeks and waterways to engage in sea robbery, kidnapping, boat hijacking, pipeline vandalization, and so on. Armed robbery and kidnapping frequently occur around the Ekpoma and Auchu axis of Edo State. Similarly, the Southwest geopolitical zone suffers the security challenge of herder-farmer crisis, kidnapping, and bandit attacks as exemplified in the massacre of worshippers at St Francis Catholic Church Owo, Ondo state on June 5, 2022, that resulted in an estimated 22 deaths, 18 injured persons and 88 other casualties.

Reliefweb captured the security implications of ungoverned spaces to Nigeria's national security in the following words:

Ungoverned spaces create largely unfettered opportunities for NSAGs to market themselves and undermine government authority. For instance, in 2021, some communities in Niger state negotiated peace deals with insurgents by offering them motorcycles and cash gifts in return for safety. In other cases, terrorists provide makeshift governance frameworks in some communities, imposing taxes and levies and ensuring fragile peace. The unaddressed nature of Nigeria's ungoverned spaces is a breeding ground for underdevelopment and the spread of non-state armed actors. It also engenders a disconnect between residents in the ungoverned spaces and the government. Due to ungoverned spaces, government's authority is weakened by the rise and dominance of non-state armed groups who provide an agenda-driven ideology that is often at variance with that of the Nigerian state. The northeast insurgency and banditry in the northwest and northcentral zones are clear cases (Reliefweb, 13 September 2022).

The citation above suggests that security and stability in the affected communities largely depend on the decisions and actions of the dominant Non-State Violent Armed Group (NSVAG) that reign within a given locality. Expectedly, these NSVAGs undermine the social trust and bond between the state and the citizens by extracting taxes from the people. They also offer protection and settle disputes which are traditional duties of the state.

Accordingly, the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2019 stated that “ungoverned spaces especially, around our international boundaries, forests and game reserves provide opportunities for criminal networks to fester and generally promote crime.” Criminal herdsmen had used forest areas in the Southwest and Southeast to stage kidnappings for ransom, invasion of villages, and killing of farmers notably in Benue, Ebonyi, Ondo, Delta, and Enugu among other states (Nwezeh, 2021). The NSS further stated that ungoverned spaces “constitute critical fragility in Nigeria's national security and are antithetical to the nation's security system” (Nwezeh, 2021). Nigeria possesses many unguarded and ungoverned borders that enhance unregulated migratory trends in and out of the country. The movement has serious implications for peace and security because of arms proliferation. An estimated 70 percent of Small Arms and Light Weapons in circulation in West Africa is said to be in Nigeria. This explains the heightened threat of insecurity that pervades the country.

Over the years the Nigerian state has persistently ranked low in the annual Ibrahim Index on African Governance (IIAG). The index ranks African states in the following four areas security and rule of law, participation, rights and inclusion, foundation for economic opportunity, and human development. In 2014, Nigeria was ranked 49th out of 52 countries in personal safety and 48th in national security categories (Halakhe, 2015). It ranked 34 out of 54 countries in 2020 and was named among 13 other African countries witnessing increasing deterioration in that year. In 2024 it ranked 33 out of 54 countries and was once again named among 11 other countries undergoing increasing deterioration in the Security and Rule of Law dimension of the IIAG since 2014. In his interrogation of the conditions and variables that created the ungoverned spaces fueling insecurities across Nigeria, Ibrahim (2021) observes:

The most serious feature of the Nigerian state is that no institution today has the mission and capacity to monitor, track and govern what is going on in our communities. From colonization to the 1980s, this was done by traditional rulers. Under military rule, they were stripped of their powers and responsibilities, at the same time the local government system was being dismantled and completely stripped of resources by State governors. The result was that rural Nigeria became an ungoverned space. Even the police were withdrawn from rural Nigeria and refocused on providing VIP guard services to men of power and wealth. It was in this

context that the precariat did their research and discovered new routes out of their poverty and the precariousness of their lives by being Niger Delta militants, Boko Haram jihadists, cattle rustlers, rural bandits, kidnappers and highway robbers. Today, they are sucking billions of naira out of Nigerians, who are being pauperized while their masochists are making fortunes.

The citation above indicates that the Nigerian state and its agents have not been living up to their constitutional responsibility for the security and welfare of the people. The state fragility in terms of security provisioning is currently felt at all three levels of federal, state, and local government. Based on this, one may wish to: who guards the forest and secluded places in the country? Who monitors movement in and out of our communities? Who identifies, and takes records of the occupation of residents of our communities? Who ascertains the source of wealth being flaunted in society? Who protects the communities to ensure that the people are safe? and so on. The logic of the study analysis is that whenever states fail to impose their monopoly of force across their territory, such spaces which can be referred to as ungoverned, misgoverned, ill-governed, and contested spaces are likely to fall under the control of violent nonstate actors that will transform it into their forward operational base, and haven. This depicts the existential realities of the Nigerian state where organized criminal gangs and bandits have taken over ungoverned forests across the country.

Corroborating the positive relationship between disconnected or ungoverned spaces and security threats in the country and Niger State in particular, Governor Abubakar Bello of Niger State following attacks in the state in early January 2022 cited a lack of access roads to communities under bandit attacks as a factor aiding the activities of these terrorists. The preceding analysis demonstrates that most bandit activities are carried out from these ungoverned spaces in different parts of the country.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study examined the nexus between the expanding incidence of insecurities and ungoverned spaces in Nigeria within the analytical framework of state fragility. It revealed that ungoverned spaces being areas that are not effectively policed by state institutions possess features that facilitate various criminal acts within the country. The result of the inability of the state to assert its authority and monopoly of force among others is evident in the BH insurgency, banditry, nationwide kidnapping industry, and cattle rustling. Others include farmers-herders conflict, separatism, militancy, and so on. These security threats are not unconnected to the fact that ungoverned spaces in the country such as forests are a haven for criminal elements. These areas serve as planning and training grounds, points of reconnaissance, forward operating bases, transit camps, holding points for kidnap victims, rustled cattle, routes for drug trafficking, human trafficking, weapon smuggling, and so on.

To that end, reducing the heightened insecurity in the country involves the imposition of state authority and monopoly of force in all the ungoverned spaces and criminal hideouts. Governance should extend to all the nooks and crannies of the country, considering that the modern state system is a stranger to the primitive notion of “no man’s land.” The pervasive security threats faced in all six geopolitical zones in the country should be addressed by enhancing the operational capacities of the Nigerian security agencies. This should be done through needs assessment-driven provision of equipment that is needed to dislodge, recover, and reclaim all the ungoverned spaces from criminal elements. Failure to enhance the state's capacity to successfully impose its authority across its territory, the country will continue to witness a precarious security situation.

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