



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA

STANLEY CHIBUZO UGOCHUKWU, JULIET ANULIKA NDOH,  
CHUDI EMMANUEL IWUH

Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria

#### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Religious Extremism and Political Instability in Nigeria. This study critically appraises the relationship between religious extremism and political instability in Nigeria, examining how radical religious ideologies, violent insurgencies, and intolerance exacerbate political crises. Religious extremism has emerged as a significant challenge to political stability in Nigeria, influencing governance, security, and socio-economic development. The study employs secondary sources. This work is anchored on Frustration Aggression and Conflict Theories, which explain the root causes of religious extremism and its destabilizing effects on political institutions. Findings indicate that religious extremism has contributed to electoral violence, insurgency in the Northeast, and increased mistrust among ethnic and religious groups, thereby weakening democratic consolidation. The study concludes that addressing political instability in Nigeria requires a multifaceted approach, including policy reforms, interfaith dialogue, education, and effective counter-terrorism strategies. The study recommends that the Government should tackle structural drivers such as poverty, unemployment, poor governance, and lack of quality education. By expanding access to formal education (especially regulating and integrating informal Quranic schools), creating youth employment programs, and ensuring equitable resource distribution, the conditions that fuel extremist recruitment can be reduced.

**KEYWORDS:** Religion, Religious extremism, Political instability, Insecurity, Nigeria

#### *Corresponding Author*

Juliet Anulika Nдох

Email Address: [anuligr8@gmail.com](mailto:anuligr8@gmail.com)

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## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

Religious extremism has been a defining security challenge for Nigeria in the 21st century. What began as localized communal clashes has evolved into complex insurgencies, banditry, and militias exploiting religious identities. Since 2009, the Islamist insurgency associated with Boko Haram and its splintering into ISWAP has killed tens of thousands, displaced millions, and continuously reshaped Nigeria's political landscape. A recent massacre in Malam Fatori, Borno State, killed nine civilians, underscoring that despite military claims of progress, extremist violence remains resilient and deeply rooted (AP, July 2025).

The emergence of religious extremism has further complicated Nigeria's fragile political landscape. Extremist groups such as Boko Haram and its splinter faction, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), have waged violent campaigns against the Nigerian state, targeting schools, government institutions, and religious minorities (Aghedo and Osumah, 2014). According to the Global Terrorism Index (2020), Nigeria has consistently ranked among the top three countries most affected by terrorism since 2015, largely due to religiously motivated insurgencies. These extremist groups reject secular governance, Western education, and inter-religious tolerance, thereby posing a fundamental threat to democracy and national integration.

Nigeria continues to grapple with the complex challenge of religious extremism, which has evolved from sporadic riots and sectarian clashes into organized insurgencies and violent radicalization. In recent years, extremist ideologies have taken deeper roots, directly undermining peace, democratic governance, and national security. The most prominent example is Boko Haram, whose name is derived from the Hausa phrase meaning "Western education is forbidden". The group's ideology openly rejects democracy, Western education, and interfaith coexistence, promoting instead a rigid interpretation of Islam that seeks to establish an Islamic state in northern Nigeria (Olojo, 2014). This has had devastating consequences on education, particularly in the northeast, where hundreds of schools have been destroyed, teachers killed, and thousands of children denied access to learning (UNICEF, 2021).

Religious extremism is not only expressed through insurgency but also through intolerance at the community level. The tragic killing of Deborah Samuel, a Christian student stoned and burned to death in Sokoto State in May 2022 over alleged blasphemy, highlights how extremist sentiments have spread beyond insurgent groups into ordinary communities (BBC News, 2022).

Despite successive counter-insurgency efforts such as Operation Lafiya Dole and deradicalization programs, the persistence of extremist ideology shows that military solutions alone are insufficient. The problem lies not only in armed insurgency but also in the deeper issues of poverty, unemployment, weak institutions, and the politicization of religion that provide fertile ground for extremism to thrive. Unless these structural and ideological factors are addressed, Nigeria will remain vulnerable to cycles of violence, democratic erosion, and instability. This paper, therefore, examines the structural drivers of religious extremism and analyses its implications for political instability in Nigeria.



### 1.1. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the nature and causes of religious extremism in Nigeria.
2. To investigate how religious extremism contributes to political instability.
3. To recommend measures for reducing extremism and strengthening political stability in Nigeria.

### 1.2. Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. What are the root causes of religious extremism in Nigeria?
2. How does religious extremism contribute to political instability?
3. What measures can reduce religious extremism and ensure sustainable peace and political stability in Nigeria?

## 2.0. CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Conceptualization

Unexplained concept is largely a misnomer obstructing understanding and knowledge, but analysis clarifies, makes explicit, creates better insight, and points out the meaning inherent in words (Chinweuba, 2020). As such, there is a great need to understand religious extremism and political instability, which are the key concepts in this discourse.

#### Religious Extremism

It is an ideology and set of actions based on a radical, inflexible and absolutist interpretation of religious dogma that goes against mainstream religious norms. It often involves a desire to impose their beliefs on others and can lead to hatred, discrimination or violence to achieve its goal. It is a prerogative designation used to indicate uncritical zeal or obsessive enthusiasm that is related to one's own or one's group's devotion to a religion – a form of human fanaticism that could otherwise be expressed in one's other involvements and participation, including employment, role and partisan affinities.

#### Political Instability

Political instability refers to a condition in which the governance of a state is marked by uncertainty, inconsistency, and weakened institutional control. It describes situations where political authority is contested, power relations are unstable, and decision-making processes lack continuity or effectiveness. In such contexts, the ability of government institutions to function predictably and maintain order is significantly undermined. Political instability may also be understood as a deterioration of political structures, resulting in fragile governance arrangements and recurring societal disruptions. These conditions often manifest through episodes of political unrest, including protests, demonstrations, labour strikes, civil agitation, and other forms of dissent (Kolstad, 2019). Rather than reflecting isolated incidents, such events signal deeper systemic weaknesses within the political system.



### **Historical Context of Religion Extremism and Violence in Nigeria**

Religious extremism in Nigeria has deep historical antecedents. The country's colonial experience left behind structural divisions between the Muslim-majority North and the Christian/animist South, fostering long-term mistrust and uneven development (Falola, 1998). Earlier violent movements such as the Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s, led by Mohammed Marwa in Kano, foreshadowed later extremism. Scholars note that Maitatsine rejected Western education, denounced state corruption, and mobilized impoverished youths, themes later replicated by Boko Haram (Adesoji, 2011).

The group Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, popularly known as Boko Haram, emerged in Maiduguri in the early 2000s under Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf's sermons emphasized rejecting "Western" education and governance, drawing followers among disaffected youths (Thurston, 2017). After Yusuf's death in police custody in 2009, the movement became more violent under Abubakar Shekau, conducting bombings, assassinations, and attacks on security forces. This era laid the foundation for the full-blown insurgency of the 2010s.

By 2014, Boko Haram had escalated to international notoriety with mass killings and abductions, notably the Chibok girls' kidnapping of April 2014. The group captured territory the size of Belgium across Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states, declaring a "caliphate" (Zenn, 2019). The violence culminated in bombings of markets, mosques, and schools. According to Pérouse de Montclos (2014), Boko Haram's brutality targeted both state institutions and civilians, eroding local trust in government.

Internal disputes over ideology and tactics led to splits. By 2016, the Islamic State recognized a faction known as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, while Shekau continued with the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS). Scholars argue this factionalism reshaped violence patterns: ISWAP focused more on military targets while Shekau's faction persisted in indiscriminate civilian killings (International Crisis Group, 2019). The death of Shekau in 2021 further consolidated ISWAP's dominance in the Lake Chad Basin (International Crisis Group, 2022).

From 2017 onward, extremist violence expanded geographically and conceptually. Banditry in the North-West, farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt, and communal clashes increasingly overlapped with extremist narratives (Akinyetun, 2021). Okoli and Ugwu (2019) describe this as a "hybridization of violence," where religious extremism intersects with organized crime, kidnapping-for-ransom, and resource disputes. Such diffusion has blurred the boundaries between purely ideological insurgency and opportunistic violence.

Contemporary reports indicate that violence remains entrenched. ISWAP continues to mount deadly attacks on military bases and resettled communities in Borno and Yobe states (Al Jazeera, 2023). Simultaneously, extremist rhetoric fuels conflicts in the North-West, where armed bandit groups operate with occasional ideological cover (Clingendael, 2024). New research highlights that digital platforms also play a role in recruitment and radicalization among marginalized youth (Onyeachu, Okoro & Ugwuoke, 2025).

While religious extremism has manifested in different parts of the world, its dynamics in Nigeria are shaped by the country's unique socio-political and historical context. Nigeria's experience with religious radicalisation is closely tied to colonial legacies, ethno-religious divisions, governance



challenges, and socio-economic inequalities. Understanding these local factors is essential to explaining the persistence of extremism and political instability in the country.

Addressing these deeper issues remains essential for breaking the cycle of violence and instability.

### **Religious Extremism and Political Instability in Nigeria**

Political instability in Nigeria began with the 1914 coercive amalgamation of diverse ethnic groups into one entity. This became the seed of lasting mistrust, suspicion, apprehension and antagonism among these indigenous ethnic groups. This was exacerbated by the activities of pristine Nigerian politicians, who dissipated energy on wrestling power from the colonists, and not on managing the conflicting political interpretations and understandings of the diverse indigenous ethnic groups. In congruence with this, the Constitution drafting committee (1979) documents that these pristine politicians were pre-occupied “with power and material benefits, that political ideologies as to how a society can be governed and ruled to the advantage of all hardly entered their calculation”. As such, the nationalists neglect to put in place the necessary socio-political institutions and structures needed to cushion the effects that often emanate from societal transformations as well as the conflicting ethnic political doctrines. More so, the nationalists refrain from establishing a positive national orientation towards fostering unity and mutual trust among Nigerian ethnic groups (Emeka-Isife, 2020).

The relationship between religious extremism and political instability in Nigeria is complex, deeply rooted in history, culture, and social dynamics. Nigeria is a multi-religious state, predominantly divided between Islam in the North and Christianity in the South, with a minority of traditional religious practices. Religion and politics are therefore tightly interwoven, influencing governance, elections, policymaking, and social relations. Historically, religion has shaped political authority in Nigeria. Pre-colonial societies such as the Sokoto Caliphate in the North and Christian missionary-led communities in the South illustrate how religious institutions influenced leadership and governance structures (Falola, 1998). During colonialism and the post-independence period, religion continued to play a role in determining political alliances and shaping identity politics.

In contemporary Nigeria, religion is a key mobilizing force in politics. Political leaders often rely on religious identity to gain legitimacy, win elections, and secure loyalty from citizens. Campaigns are frequently influenced by appeals to religious sentiments, with candidates presenting themselves as defenders of either Islamic or Christian values. This has reinforced ethno-religious cleavages, particularly in periods of electoral competition (Kukah, 2011).

Furthermore, religion affects public policy and lawmaking. For example, the introduction of Sharia law in several Northern states since 1999 illustrates how religion has influenced the political and legal framework of Nigeria. Similarly, debates around moral issues such as same-sex marriage, women’s rights, and education have often been shaped by religious perspectives rather than purely secular considerations (Adebanwi, 2014).

However, the close link between religion and politics has also been a source of instability. Politicians often exploit religious differences to advance personal or regional interests, fueling division and violence. The manipulation of religion in politics has contributed to the rise of religious extremism, electoral violence, and political distrust. This nexus has at times undermined the secular ideals of the



Nigerian Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion but discourages the use of religion as a tool for governance (Aghedo and Osumah, 2014).

At the same time, religion has also played a positive role in Nigerian politics. Religious institutions often act as mediators during conflicts, advocating peace, tolerance, and reconciliation. Religious leaders have influenced democratic reforms, peacebuilding initiatives, and humanitarian responses during crises. Civil society groups, particularly those with religious backing, continue to promote accountability, social justice, and the protection of human rights (Nmah, 2012).

The nexus between religion and politics in Nigeria is both a strength and a challenge. While religion can foster moral guidance, legitimacy, and social cohesion, its exploitation for political purposes has deepened divisions and contributed to instability. To achieve national unity and political stability, Nigeria must strike a balance between respecting religious diversity and ensuring that religion does not become a tool for manipulation in governance. Promoting inclusive politics, secular accountability, and interfaith dialogue is therefore essential for reducing tensions at the intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria (Ikelegbe and Umukoro, 2016).

### **Religion as a Tool for Peacebuilding**

While religion has often been implicated in violence, scholars also highlight its peacebuilding potential. Onuoha (2014) emphasizes that religious leaders can act as mediators in conflicts by promoting tolerance, forgiveness, and interfaith dialogue. The Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna, founded by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa, is a notable example of religious actors successfully reducing ethno-religious tensions. Similarly, UNDP (2017) stresses that empowering religious institutions to promote peace can complement state security measures. Religious leaders often command greater moral authority and community trust than politicians, making them critical actors in building sustainable peace.

From the foregoing, it is clear that existing scholarship has provided valuable insights into the dynamics of religious extremism in Nigeria. However, most works either focus narrowly on Boko Haram (Adesoji, 2011; Zenn, 2019) or on ethno-religious crises (Danjibo, 2012), with fewer studies explicitly linking religious extremism to broader political instability and governance crises. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to grassroots perceptions of extremism and the lived experiences of displaced citizens. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by adopting a holistic appraisal of how religious extremism undermines political stability in Nigeria, while also proposing policy-oriented solutions.

### **2.2. Theoretical Framework**

The relationship between religious extremism and political instability in Nigeria can be better understood through established social science theories. Frustration Aggression Theory would be used as the major theoretical framework for this study because it demonstrates that religious extremism in Nigeria is not simply about faith but about the interaction of psychological frustration and structural competition, which sustains cycles of political violence.



### **Frustration Aggression Theory**

The Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis was developed by Dollard and Miller (1939) to explain aggression as a response to blocked goal attainment. The theory argues that aggression is likely to emerge when individuals or groups are persistently prevented from achieving desired goals. When socially accepted pathways for advancement are obstructed, frustration accumulates and may be expressed through aggressive behaviour, including violence or rebellion. In this sense, frustration generates emotional tension which can motivate aggressive responses aimed at relieving that tension.

Aggression, however, is not always directed at the original source of frustration. In many cases, the legitimate target may be inaccessible, too powerful, or associated with potential punishment. As a result, aggression is redirected toward safer or more available targets, a process described as displacement. This mechanism helps explain why aggression may be expressed against individuals or groups that are not directly responsible for the initial frustration.

The frustration–aggression hypothesis was further articulated by a group of Yale University researchers; John Dollard, Leonard Doob, Neal Miller, O. H. Mowrer, and Robert Sears in their seminal work *Frustration and Aggression* (1939). In this formulation, frustration is conceptualized as an external event rather than a purely emotional or subjective experience (Breuer and Elson, 2017). Dollard described frustration as the unexpected obstruction of a goal that an individual anticipates achieving.

By defining frustration in terms of observable events and environmental conditions, the theory allows for empirical testing without relying solely on subjective self-reports. This objective framing has influenced later revisions and extensions of the frustration–aggression hypothesis, which continue to emphasize the role of situational barriers in generating aggressive responses. Everyday situations, such as repeated failure to complete a task or the denial of access to a desired object, illustrate the connection between frustrating circumstances and aggressive reactions (Breuer and Elson, 2017).

In the Nigerian context, structural challenges such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and systemic corruption create widespread conditions of frustration, particularly among young people in Northern Nigeria. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2020), Nigeria recorded an unemployment rate of over 27%, with youth unemployment significantly higher. These socio-economic pressures create an enabling environment for extremist groups such as Boko Haram to recruit individuals by offering alternative sources of identity, belonging, and material support (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014).

Empirical research has also examined frustration as a precursor to aggression in other contexts. For instance, studies investigating the frustration–aggression hypothesis in relation to video games suggest that unfavourable outcomes, such as repeated failure or loss, can increase aggressive tendencies by inducing negative emotional states (Breuer and Elson, 2017). These findings support the broader claim that frustration mediates aggressive behaviour, regardless of the specific setting in which it occurs. Frustration may also arise from mismatches between individual abilities and situational demands, even in the absence of interpersonal interaction.



### Critical Evaluation

- Although some scholars argue that expressing aggression produces catharsis, Morlan (1949) contends that aggressive expression often reinforces further aggression rather than alleviating it. Aggressive acts tend to generate consequences that influence subsequent interactions, creating a cycle of escalating hostility (Breuer and Elson, 2017).
- Berkowitz argues that frustration alone creates a readiness for aggression, while situational cues determine whether aggressive behaviour is expressed. This reasoning has been used to support policies aimed at limiting exposure to aggressive cues, such as the concealment of weapons in societies where firearms are widely accessible.
- The frustration–aggression hypothesis does not adequately account for individual differences in responses to frustration. While some individuals respond with aggression, others may withdraw or adopt non-violent coping strategies.
- Anderson and Bushman (2002) found that venting anger does not produce the cathartic effect predicted by the theory; instead, it often increases aggressive feelings and behaviour.
- The theory also overlooks the role of moral values and personal agency. Individuals committed to non-violence, such as pacifists, may experience frustration without resorting to aggression.

### Justification and Application of the Theories

The choice of Frustration-Aggression Theory in analyzing religious extremism and political instability in Nigeria is justified because the theory captures complementary dimensions of the problem, the psychological drivers of violence and the structural-political conditions that sustain it. This psychological lens is important in understanding why large numbers of marginalized citizens embrace violence under the banner of religion.

### 3.0. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology using an explanatory research design. The study relies on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, security reports, policy documents, and credible media sources. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes relating to the causes and consequences of religious extremism in Nigeria. The approach enables a systematic examination of existing literature to establish the relationship between religious extremism and political instability.

### 4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Root Causes of Religious Extremism in Nigeria

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), over 63% of Nigerians live in multidimensional poverty, and unemployment among youths stands at over 40%. Such conditions have been exploited by extremist groups like Boko Haram, who lure impoverished youths with financial incentives, social belonging, and promises of spiritual salvation.



### Poverty

Nigerian poverty situation has been described as an embarrassment and irony to her abundant natural resources buoyed by oil wealth discovered since 1953. Poverty has led to frustration and anger amongst the poor and the marginalized cultural and religious groups in the country. Poverty among the unemployed youths in the North fuelled by corrupt Northern leaders has been identified as cause of the Boko Haram violence. Most of the recruits used by the sect as members and suicide bombers are drawn from the former Almajiris (poor street children, from poor Muslim parentage, who had been denied formal Western education but had been exploited while growing up by rich Islamic clerics who use them as street beggars to ask for alms on the streets of Northern Nigeria (Okeke, 2014).

Equally important is the way poverty erodes confidence in the state. When governments fail to alleviate poverty, often due to corruption and weak governance, many citizens lose faith in secular institutions. Extremist groups exploit this vacuum by presenting themselves as alternative providers of justice and welfare under religious law. Olojo (2014) explains that Boko Haram initially gained support in some Northern communities by offering welfare services, microloans, and food supplies, thereby creating loyalty before introducing violent doctrines.

### Unemployment

Unemployment is one of the most pressing socio-economic problems in Nigeria, and it has been strongly linked to the rise of religious extremism across the country. Nigeria's large youth population suffers disproportionately from joblessness, with millions of young graduates and school leavers unable to secure meaningful employment. This has created a condition of frustration, hopelessness, and vulnerability, which extremist groups exploit to advance their causes (Akinyetun, 2021).

Religious extremist groups, particularly in Northern Nigeria, prey on this pool of unemployed youths who are searching for identity, purpose, and livelihood. With little or no means of survival, many young men find themselves enticed by the financial incentives and promises of empowerment offered by groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). These groups provide not only monetary inducements but also a sense of belonging and status, which jobless youths often lack in their communities. Unemployment provides extremist groups with a ready-made army of recruits willing to engage in violence in exchange for survival and recognition (Onuoha, 2014).

Moreover, long-term unemployment weakens social cohesion and family structures. Families unable to provide for their children often send them to informal religious schools, where some fall under the influence of radical preachers. Others, left idle without productive activities, are more likely to embrace violence as a means of asserting themselves or expressing discontent. This explains why extremist leaders often focus their recruitment efforts on jobless youths, portraying extremism as a path to empowerment and even divine reward (Akinyetun, 2021).

Another dimension of unemployment is the erosion of trust in the state. Many young Nigerians perceive the government as corrupt and incapable of creating opportunities for its citizens. This disillusionment with secular authority makes extremist ideologies more appealing, as they present religious governance as an alternative system that promises fairness, justice, and a better future. Olojo (2014) notes that extremist movements often package their violent agenda within promises of social and economic justice, making their appeal stronger among unemployed populations. A clear example



is found in the North-East, where Boko Haram has drawn thousands of recruits from unemployed youths in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. In addition to indoctrination, the group offers stipends, food, and sometimes even marriage prospects, making extremism seem like a viable alternative to joblessness and poverty. The persistence of high youth unemployment in Nigeria thus ensures a steady stream of vulnerable recruits for extremist groups, perpetuating cycles of violence and insecurity.

### Illiteracy

Illiteracy is another major factor that drives religious extremism in Nigeria, particularly in the northern region where educational opportunities are limited. Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of out-of-school children in the world, with UNICEF (2021) estimating over 10 million school-aged children not enrolled in formal education, the majority of whom are in the North. This lack of literacy and formal education leaves large segments of the population vulnerable to manipulation by extremist ideologies.

Illiteracy contributes significantly to religious extremism by limiting critical thinking and increasing susceptibility to radical interpretations of religious texts. In Northern Nigeria, weak integration of formal education within traditional religious schooling has created gaps that extremist groups exploit for recruitment and indoctrination. Improving access to quality education therefore remains central to countering radicalisation.

Illiteracy also undermines civic awareness and political participation. Many illiterate citizens are unaware of their rights and responsibilities within the state, which makes them susceptible to extremist propaganda portraying the government as corrupt, unjust, or anti-religious. This perception further erodes trust in secular governance and strengthens the appeal of extremist alternatives promising divine justice and religious order. While existing studies highlight poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and bad governance as drivers of religious extremism, a deeper philosophical problem underlies these structural factors. Ugwu and Eneh (2022) argue that in Nigeria “men exist as religious but not moral”; religion is widely practised, but often detached from the universal moral consciousness that should guide human conduct. This distinction is critical: morality is nature-oriented and innate to human conscience, whereas religion is a human-initiated construct that should ideally be anchored in moral principles. When religion becomes divorced from morality, it loses its ethical compass and becomes vulnerable to manipulation by fanatics and political elites.

The core problem is that belief or faith—which is central to religious practice—is not moderated by rational reflection. Ugwu and Eneh (2022) propose that “engaging faith with rationality will bring about a mild conception of and approach towards religion,” reducing the susceptibility of believers to extremist manipulation. Without such rational engagement, adherents become open to fanatical interpretations that negate human dignity and justify violence, producing what Haught describes as the “irony of religion,” whereby a phenomenon supposedly oriented toward kindness and human concern becomes a major source of hatred, war, and terrorism (cited in Ugwu & Eneh, 2022).

These philosophical vulnerabilities intersect with broader structural security deficits empirically documented in Nigeria. Iherue (2021) identifies multiple interconnected causes of insecurity that interact with and amplify religious extremism: porous borders that allow militants and criminals to enter without adequate checks; proliferation of arms and ammunition, much of which ends up with



illegal armed groups; the spread of illegal armed organizations such as Niger Delta militants, OPC, Bakassi Boys, and MASSOB; chronic unemployment and social inequality, particularly among youth, who are easily recruited into extremist movements; widespread fear and distrust of government, as citizens perceive that security agencies are incapable of protecting them; wrong political ambition and theocratic agendas that seek to make the country ungovernable; election-related violence rooted in the mobilization of religious identities; ethnically tinged violence, especially in Plateau and Benue states; and job racketeering and systemic corruption in security institutions, which undermines public trust (Iherue, 2021).

Taken together, these structural, moral, and ideological conditions create a fertile ground in which religious extremism thrives. Any meaningful response must therefore address not only material deprivation but also the philosophical disconnection between religion and morality and the institutional weaknesses that enable extremist mobilization.

### **The Role of Militancy and Insurgency in Compounding Insecurity**

Militancy, defined as “violence, illegal force or the illegal use of unjustified force or the intimidating effect created by the threat of this act,” has become a pronounced feature of Nigeria’s security landscape (Iherue, 2021). While the term first gained prominence with Niger Delta militants protesting against exploitation and environmental degradation, militancy now exists across all regions, with perpetrators often committing atrocities worse than those originally associated with the Niger Delta youth (Iherue, 2021).

The emergence of Boko Haram marked a turning point in Nigeria’s security landscape, intensifying insurgency, bombings, kidnappings, and armed confrontations. The expansion of extremist violence has deepened insecurity and strained state capacity to maintain order.

The convergence of religious extremism with other forms of militancy—including separatist movements like MASSOB, OPC, vigilante groups, and armed herders—demonstrates that while religious extremism is a critical driver of insecurity, it operates within a broader ecosystem of violent non-state actors. Each has specific grievances and agendas, but their cumulative effect is to fragment state authority and create competing zones of control that undermine national cohesion.

### **How Religious Extremism has contributed to Political Instability**

In Nigeria, the rise of extremist groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP has shown how radical religious movements can erode national unity, weaken governance, and undermine democratic processes (International Crisis Group, 2019).

One of the most direct ways religious extremism contributes to political instability is through violence and insecurity. Extremist groups resort to terrorist attacks, bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations, which destabilize regions and weaken the authority of the state. This level of violence disrupts governance structures, hampers service delivery, and reduces citizens’ confidence in the state’s ability to maintain law and order (Aghedo & Osumah, 2014).

Religious extremism also undermines political stability by weakening state legitimacy. When the government appears unable to control extremist violence or provide security, citizens lose trust in state institutions and may even turn to non-state actors for protection. Olojo (2014) notes that this



erosion of state authority not only delegitimizes governments but also deepens divisions within society, making political consensus difficult to achieve.

Another important contribution of religious extremism to political instability is its role in deepening ethno-religious divisions. Nigeria is a diverse society with both Muslims and Christians, as well as various ethnic groups. Extremist narratives often frame conflicts in absolute religious terms, portraying one group as the enemy of the other. This polarization fuels cycles of retaliation, communal clashes, and inter-religious distrust. This undermines national integration and weakens the legitimacy of democratic institutions (Ibrahim, 2013).

Furthermore, religious extremism disrupts political stability by weakening economic development, which in turn fuels more unrest. Extremist violence destroys infrastructure, discourages investment, and displaces farming and business communities. The resulting poverty and unemployment provide fertile ground for further radicalization, perpetuating a vicious cycle of instability.

Religious extremism also affects the democratic process by creating an atmosphere of fear and coercion. In regions plagued by extremist violence, voter turnout is often suppressed due to insecurity, and politicians may exploit religious sentiments to manipulate elections. This weakens democratic participation and fosters authoritarian tendencies, as governments often resort to military crackdowns and emergency powers to contain extremism. Such measures, while sometimes necessary, may undermine civil liberties and deepen citizens' mistrust of the state (Botha & Abdile, 2016).

In the Nigerian context, extremism has shown that insecurity and ideological radicalization not only threaten lives but also destabilize the very structures of governance. Unless addressed comprehensively through education, poverty reduction, interfaith dialogue, and good governance, religious extremism will continue to hinder Nigeria's path to political stability and sustainable development.

### **Measures to reduce Religious Extremism and ensure Sustainable Peace and Political Stability**

Sustainable peace and political stability are essential foundations for national development, security, and social harmony. Nigeria, as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, has faced recurring challenges of religious extremism, ethno-political conflict, corruption, and weak institutions that threaten stability. To overcome these challenges, a comprehensive set of measures political, socio-economic, educational, and security-oriented must be pursued to ensure lasting peace (Okemini, Uroko and Ibenwa, 2025).

One critical measure is the promotion of *good governance and accountability*. Poor governance, corruption, and lack of transparency have long undermined the legitimacy of the Nigerian state and fueled grievances that extremist groups exploit. Establishing strong anti-corruption mechanisms, ensuring inclusive governance, and making political leaders accountable to the people can rebuild trust in state institutions. As Ibrahim (2013) argues, peace is unsustainable where citizens perceive government as unjust or corrupt, hence strengthening governance is fundamental to stability.

Another important step is *poverty reduction and economic empowerment*. Socio-economic deprivation, unemployment, and inequality remain key drivers of unrest and extremism. Alao (2012) emphasized that meaningful development and empowerment reduce the social conditions that enable radicalization to flourish.



*Education reform* is also central to building sustainable peace. The persistence of illiteracy, especially in Northern Nigeria, has made populations more susceptible to extremist ideologies. Expanding access to quality education, reforming the Almajiri system, and integrating peace education into school curricula can foster tolerance, critical thinking, and national unity.

Promoting *interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance* is another key measure. Nigeria's religious diversity must be seen as a source of strength rather than division. Faith leaders should be engaged in promoting peaceful coexistence, debunking extremist interpretations, and fostering respect across religious lines.

Strengthening *security sector reforms* is equally important. Extremist violence persists partly because of weaknesses within Nigeria's security architecture, including corruption, inadequate training, and poor intelligence gathering. Olojo (2014) notes that heavy-handed security responses often backfire, so reforms must balance firmness with fairness.

Finally, Nigeria must embrace *regional and international cooperation* in addressing transnational threats such as terrorism, arms trafficking, and organized crime. Collaborating with neighboring countries and global partners will enhance intelligence sharing, border security, and joint counter-terrorism efforts.

## 5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that religious extremism in Nigeria is rooted in structural socio-economic and governance failures. The persistence of poverty, unemployment, corruption, and political exclusion fuels grievances that extremist movements exploit. The resulting violence undermines democratic stability, weakens institutions, and disrupts socio-economic development. Sustainable political stability therefore requires addressing these structural drivers through inclusive governance, improved service delivery, and strengthened security institutions.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are advised:

1. Government should tackle structural drivers such as poverty, unemployment, poor governance, and lack of quality education.
2. Nigeria should strengthen interfaith dialogue and inclusive governance.
3. A long-term framework for peacebuilding should be institutionalized. This includes investing in community-based peace initiatives, strengthening intelligence-driven security operations, and promoting a national integration policy that emphasizes unity in diversity.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript.

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