



Ethno-Religious Conflicts, State Capacity and The Crisis of Governance in Southern Kaduna

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Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between ethno-religious conflicts, declining state capacity, and the crisis of governance in Southern Kaduna, Nigeria. Drawing on secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, think-tank reports, and documentary evidence, the paper situates the persistent cycle of violence in Southern Kaduna within broader theoretical frameworks of state fragility, conflict transformation, and governance deficit. The paper argues that the recurrent ethno-religious clashes in the region are not merely the product of primordial ethnic or religious animosities but are deeply rooted in colonial legacies of differential incorporation, postcolonial structures of political exclusion, structural inequalities, and the systematic deficit of successive Nigerian governments at federal, state, and local levels to perform basic state functions. The analysis identifies the erosion of state legitimacy, the proliferation of small arms, the

penetration of criminal networks into communal conflicts, and elite political manipulation of ethno-religious identities as the central drivers of the governance crisis. The paper concludes with policy recommendations that emphasise inclusive governance, transitional justice, community-level peacebuilding, and institutional reform as essential pillars for achieving durable peace and sustainable development in Southern Kaduna.

Keywords: Ethno-religious conflict, State capacity, Governance crisis, Political exclusion, Peacebuilding

1. Introduction

Nigeria occupies a paradoxical position in the scholarship on African governance. As the continent's most populous nation and largest economy, it simultaneously embodies the aspirations of democratic consolidation and the pathologies of institutional failure. Among the many fault lines that scar its political landscape, the ethno-religious crisis in Southern Kaduna represents one of the most persistent, and analytically complex configurations of violent conflict on the continent (Hoffmann, 2017; Dan-Azumi, 2025).

Between 1999 and 2021, Nigeria recorded no fewer than 2,811 incidents of ethnic conflict with 18,132 fatalities, 3,703 incidents of religious conflict with 29,957 fatalities, and 117 incidents

of ethno-religious conflict with 2,420 fatalities (Lawal, 2023). A significant portion of these figures is attributable to crises in Kaduna State, where religious and ethnic identities overlap in volatile ways. In 2011 alone, more than 500 people were killed in Southern Kaduna following post-election violence (Hoffmann, 2017). The persistence of this violence raises fundamental questions about the nature and capacity of the Nigerian state. If the first obligation of any sovereign government is to provide security and ensure the physical integrity of its citizens, the Nigerian state's record in Southern Kaduna reflects a profound abdication of this foundational responsibility. Scholars of governance and conflict have identified a constellation of state-level deficits including lack of accountability, corruption, under-resourced security institutions, inadequate justice mechanisms, and political manipulation of ethnic and religious identities as primary drivers of this crisis (Longba'am-Alli, 2022; Angerbrandt, 2018; Lawal, 2023). The governance deficit is not merely administrative; it is fundamentally a crisis of state legitimacy.

This paper argues that the ethno-religious conflicts in Southern Kaduna cannot be adequately understood or addressed without a systematic analysis of state capacity deficits and the architecture of governance deficit in Nigeria. The paper proceeds through eight sections: a conceptual and theoretical framework; a historical contextualisation of the crisis; an identification of the structural drivers of conflict; a critical

assessment of state capacity and governance deficit; an analysis of the humanitarian and developmental consequences; and, finally, a set of evidence-informed policy recommendations for sustainable peacebuilding.

1.1 Conceptual Clarification

Ethno-Religious Conflict

Ethno-religious conflicts are a specific subcategory of communal violence in which the identities, grievances, and mobilisation strategies of belligerent actors reflect an intricate fusion of ethnic and religious dimensions. They are not merely ethnic conflicts with a religious veneer, nor purely religious wars animated by theological divergence; rather, they arise when ethnic and religious cleavages mutually reinforce each other, producing durable and deeply emotive in-group/out-group boundaries that are instrumentalised by political and religious entrepreneurs (Lawal, 2023).

State Capacity

State capacity is a multidimensional concept that refers to the ability of state institutions to perform their core functions effectively: providing security, extracting revenues, enforcing the rule of law, delivering public services, and maintaining the monopoly of legitimate force over a defined territory (Besley and Persson, 2011, as cited in Banda, 2024).



1.3 Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks: conflict transformation theory and state legitimacy theory. The theoretical framework of conflict transformation, advanced by scholars such as John Paul Lederach, moves beyond conflict resolution by insisting on the structural and relational dimensions of violent conflict. It posits that durable peace requires not merely the cessation of hostilities but the transformation of the underlying political, social, and economic structures that generate grievance and exclusion. Applied to Southern Kaduna, this framework demands an examination of how colonial structures of indirect rule, post-independence patterns of political marginalisation, and ongoing failures of distributive justice continue to reproduce conflict (Abuja Journal of Humanities, 2025).

State legitimacy theory complements this framework (conflict transformation) by highlighting the centrality of perceived fairness and accountability in the relationship between the state and its citizens. When the state is perceived as biased, extractive, or complicit in violence as has repeatedly been the case in Southern Kaduna its legitimacy erodes and its capacity for conflict management is fatally undermined (Abuja Journal of Humanities, 2025; Hoffmann, 2017). The opacity of government responses, the failure to prosecute perpetrators of mass violence, and the perceived alignment of security forces with particular ethnic or religious groups are all sources

of acute legitimacy deficits that perpetuate the cycle of violence.

Governance and Its Deficits

Governance, in the broadest sense, is viewed as the processes, systems, institutions, and norms through which authoritative decisions are made and implemented in a society. Good governance is characterised by accountability, transparency, rule of law, inclusivity, responsiveness, and effectiveness (CEPA, 2006, as cited in Lawal, 2023). The deficit of governance, by contrast, is manifested in the declining capacity of political leaders to recognise systemic risks, make evidence-based decisions, and put in place robust institutional mechanisms for managing societal conflicts (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2021). In Nigeria, governance deficit is intimately linked to elite capture of state institutions, corruption, politicisation of security agencies, and the perennial neglect of marginalised communities such as those in Southern Kaduna (Nzere, 2023; Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2021).

Historical Background: Southern Kaduna in Context

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Antecedents

The roots of contemporary conflict in Southern Kaduna extend deep into pre-colonial and colonial history. What is presently known as Kaduna State encompasses the area of the old Zaria (Zazzau)

emirate-cum-province. M.G. Smith's landmark study of Government in Zazzau (1800-1950) identified two broad cultural segments within this emirate: the Muhammadan Hausa-Fulani group, constituting approximately 60% of the emirate population and occupying mainly the northern part of the province, and a diverse "pagan population" of some thirty tribes located in the southern and western half of the territory (IFRA-Nigeria, 2013). This bifurcation between the politically dominant Hausa-Fulani settlers who occupied the towns and controlled the structures of traditional governance, and the indigenous non-Muslim communities who inhabited the periphery was the crucible in which modern ethno-religious tensions were forged.

The British colonial administration institutionalised and deepened these asymmetries through the policy of indirect rule. By governing the Northern Protectorate through the structures of the Fulani emirate system, the British effectively subordinated the indigenous minorities of Southern Zaria to the political and administrative authority of the Zaria emirate. The colonial "divide and rule" strategy promoted and sustained the phenomenon of ethnicity, and in turn fostered ethnic citizenship, making ethnicity the major consideration in the allocation of offices and resources (Wissjournals, 2023). Colonial patterns of differential incorporation through which certain ethnic groups were structurally positioned as politically inferior subjects thus became embedded in the institutional fabric of the

Northern Nigerian state. The non-Muslim indigenous communities of Southern Kaduna found themselves incorporated into a political unit whose structures marginalised them, creating grievances and a sense of political exclusion that would resurface repeatedly in post-independence Nigeria.

Post-Independence Patterns of Conflict

Nigeria's independence in 1960 did not resolve the structural tensions inherited from colonialism. On the contrary, the structures of the postcolonial Nigerian state including the party system, the bureaucracy, the military, and the mechanisms for revenue allocation and resource distribution reproduced and, in many instances, deepened the patterns of ethnic and religious inequality. The ethnic minority communities of Southern Kaduna found themselves on the margins of a political economy dominated by the major ethnic groups: the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the South (Wissjournals, 2023; Obasi, 2019).

The major organised outbreaks of ethno-religious violence in Southern Kaduna in the post-independence period began with the Kafanchan disturbances of March 1987, which started as theological disagreements between Christian and Muslim students of the Kafanchan Teachers College but rapidly degenerated into a violent confrontation between the politically dominant Muslim Hausa-Fulani settlers and the numerically larger indigenous Christian communities (IFRA-

Nigeria, 2013). In its aftermath, the Kaduna State Government set up a committee, but the regulatory responses failed to address the structural grievances that had fuelled the violence (IFRA-Nigeria, 2013). The Kafanchan crisis was significant because it transformed a localised dispute about religious practice into a federally significant confrontation, implicating the fraught relationship between Christianity and Islam in Nigerian political life.

The Democratic Period (1999-Present):

Escalation and Entrenchment

The return to civilian rule in 1999 did not inaugurate peace in Southern Kaduna. On the contrary, Nigeria's fourth democratic republic has been marked by a sharp escalation in ethno-religious violence across the state. The introduction of Sharia law in Zamfara and its attempted extension to Kaduna in 2000 triggered deadly riots in Kaduna city, drawing the broader crisis in the state into the national Sharia controversy (The Impact of Religious Conflicts, 2024). The 2002 Kaduna riots, the 2011 post-election violence in which more than 500 people were killed in Southern Kaduna alone (Hoffmann, 2017) and the sustained cycle of farmer-herder clashes, banditry and kidnapping from 2014 onwards represent a relentless intensification of the crisis.

The period from 2014 to the present has been characterised by a qualitative shift in the nature and scale of violence. The escalation of farmer-

herder conflicts reached a peak in 2016, producing what NEMA described as the bloodiest period since 2011 (Hoffmann, 2017). Southern Kaduna was reported by the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) to have been attacked 41 times between 2009 and May 2016, with hundreds killed and thousands of properties destroyed. The ACLED data shows that between 1997 and 2022, there were 2,416 violent conflicts in Nigeria (Bakare, 2023), with Kaduna State recording the third highest incidence of such conflicts in the country.

Drivers of Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Southern Kaduna

Land, Resources, and Environmental Stress

At the most proximate level, the recurrent violence in Southern Kaduna is driven by competition over land and natural resources. The conflict between indigenous farming communities and Fulani herdsman reflects, at one level, a structural transformation of the Nigerian agricultural economy: the southward migration of cattle herders in response to desertification, drought, and the degradation of traditional grazing routes in the far north has brought them into increasing competition with settled farming communities in the Middle Belt (Dan-Azumi, 2025). The overcrowding of both pastoralists and farmers within diminishing agricultural space creates conditions for violent confrontation over access to land, water, and crops. Findings from empirical research show an intricate interplay of



socio-political, economic, and ethno-religious factors in the violent clashes, alongside a lack of feasible and realistic grazing policies and a lack of strong political will to address the conflict (Dan-Azumi, 2025).

Political Exclusion and Structural Marginalisation

Beyond resource competition, a structural dimension of political exclusion and marginalisation profoundly shapes the conflict in Southern Kaduna. The Southern Kaduna Peoples Union (SOKAPU) has consistently argued that the ethnic composition of Kaduna State's public service is skewed against the region, with the top echelons of the civil service disproportionately occupied by individuals from the northern parts of the state, while southerners are concentrated in subordinate positions (Yahaya, 2021). This claim of systematic under-representation in the machinery of governance is not merely symbolic; it translates into concrete deficits in service delivery, infrastructure, and political voice for Southern Kaduna communities.

Elite Manipulation and Identity Politics

Ethno-religious conflicts are rarely spontaneous eruptions of primordial hatred; they are typically shaped, if not engineered, by political entrepreneurs who stand to gain from communal mobilisation. In Southern Kaduna, political elites at the state and federal levels have at various junctures instrumentalised ethnic and religious

identities for electoral advantage, patronage networks, and the consolidation of political power. The lack of implementation of recommendations by reports from the numerous conflicts, by committees set up to investigate them, is one of the reasons why the conflicts keep recurring suggesting that some political actors benefit from the continuation of instability (Obasi, 2019).

State Capacity and the Crisis of Governance

Security Provision Deficits

The most immediate and devastating manifestation of the governance crisis in Southern Kaduna is the systematic failure of the Nigerian state to provide security to its citizens. The slow or non-response of successive governments federal and state to attacks on Southern Kaduna communities has been a consistent complaint of community organisations, civil society groups, and human rights bodies (Agbiboa, 2021, as cited in Obasi, 2019). In numerous documented incidents, perpetrators of mass violence including those responsible for attacks on villages in Kajuru, Zangon Katab, Kaura, and Kachia local government areas have gone unprosecuted, sending an unmistakable signal of impunity that has encouraged further violence. Government strategies ranging from tribunals to curfews have relied heavily on regulatory containment rather than structural transformation, and while these measures temporarily restored order, they failed to resolve deeper grievances of exclusion,

marginalisation, and non-recognition (Abuja Journal of Humanities, 2025).

Justice System Failures and Impunity

The failure of the formal justice system to hold perpetrators of ethno-religious violence accountable in Southern Kaduna is both a cause and a consequence of the governance crisis. Decades of commissions of inquiry, judicial panels, and investigative committees have produced reports that were either suppressed, ignored, or selectively implemented in ways that deepened grievances rather than resolving them (Abuja Journal of Humanities, 2025). The opacity of commission reports and the perceived bias of tribunals have further eroded state legitimacy, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and recurrence of violence (Abuja Journal of Humanities, 2025). The culture of impunity that pervades the management of communal violence in Nigeria in which virtually no senior official, community leader, or armed actor has faced meaningful prosecution for participating in or inciting mass violence is perhaps the single most corrosive element of the governance deficit in Southern Kaduna.

The deficits of governance in Nigeria manifests in the declining capacity of political leaders to recognise systemic risks such as election fraud, terrorist attacks, herder-farmer conflict, armed banditry, and police brutality, and to put in place institutional mechanisms for addressing them (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs,

2021). This epistocratic failure the inability of the political class to comprehend and respond to the nature and scale of governance challenges is rooted in the structural incentives of Nigeria's patronage-based political economy, in which access to state resources, rather than performance in public service delivery, is the primary criterion for political success. The result is a state that talks the language of conflict resolution while systematically underinvesting in the institutions police, courts, local government, community development that would be necessary to deliver it.

Erosion of State Legitimacy and the Legitimacy Vacuum

The cumulative effect of security provision failure, justice system collapse, and political exclusion has produced a deep and pervasive erosion of state legitimacy in Southern Kaduna. When communities believe that the state is not merely ineffective but actively hostile to their interests, they necessarily develop alternative mechanisms for security and justice: community vigilantes, ethnic militias, religious self-defence organisations, and informal justice systems (Longba'am-Alli, 2022). These parallel structures of governance, while understandable as survival responses, further fragment political authority, create new sites of violence, and complicate the task of state-led peacebuilding. In Southern Kaduna, Joint Task Force (JTF) and Christian militia groups have at various points usurped policing roles, creating de facto religious

governance that enforces sectarian norms and further erodes national unity (The Impact of Religious Conflicts, 2024).

Nigeria's political history has been characterised by the persistent interplay of ethnic and religious identities that often overlap and fuel recurrent crises (Abuja Journal of Humanities, 2025). In the particular case of Southern Kaduna, this interplay is amplified by the state's historical role as a vehicle for the reproduction of Hausa-Fulani political dominance at the expense of indigenous minority communities. The Federal Character Principle designed to ensure equitable representation of all ethnic and regional groups in federal and state institutions has failed to prevent or reverse the structural marginalisation of Southern Kaduna communities in the Kaduna State civil service and political appointments (Yahaya, 2021). This institutional failure is both a symptom and a cause of the crisis of governance

Governance Deficit and Developmental Failure

The governance crisis in Southern Kaduna is not limited to security and justice; it extends to the fundamental development functions of the state. A lack of development, declining quality of education, deepening poverty, and the lack of opportunity for Southern Kaduna's youth population have all played a part in escalating the crisis (Hoffmann, 2017). Years of communal violence and governance neglect have devastated the local economy, displaced farmers from their

land, destroyed infrastructure, and interrupted schooling for hundreds of thousands of children. The recurring clashes between farming communities and herders pose a serious threat to Nigeria's security, worsen food insecurity, and result in the loss of billions of dollars in annual projected revenue (Dan-Azumi, 2025). In a region where the majority of the population depends on subsistence agriculture, the disruption of farming cycles by violence constitutes an existential threat to livelihoods and food security.

Consequences of the Conflict and Governance Deficit

Humanitarian and Human Rights Consequences

The human cost of the ethno-religious crisis in Southern Kaduna is staggering. Between 10,000 and 20,000 people are estimated to have died in incidents across Kaduna State since 1980, a pattern of violence that peaked in 1992 and again from 2000 to 2002 (Hoffmann, 2017). A report from the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) documented 41 attacks on Southern Kaduna communities between 2009 and May 2016 alone. These statistics, disturbing as they are, capture only a fraction of the total human suffering produced by the conflict, which includes the psychological trauma of survivors, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from their ancestral communities, the destruction of social capital, and the disruption of family and



community life across generations (Agbiboa, 2021, as cited in Lawal, 2023).

The human rights implications of the crisis are equally profound. Journalistic documentation of the conflict has itself been suppressed through the arrest and detention of reporters, including the arrests of Stephen Kefas in 2019 and Luka Binniyat in 2021, both of whom were detained for reporting on government responses to killings in Southern Kaduna (Yahaya, 2021). The silencing of journalists covering the crisis prevents accountability and conceals the scale of the governance deficit from public scrutiny. International human rights organisations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented abuses by security forces in the region, including the firing on peaceful protesters by soldiers in March 2021 (Yahaya, 2021). These human rights violations compound the governance failure and deepen the alienation of Southern Kaduna communities from the Nigerian state.

Economic and Developmental Consequences

The economic consequences of sustained ethno-religious conflict in Southern Kaduna are severe and multi-dimensional. The disruption of agricultural activity through displacement, the destruction of farmlands and crops, and the general climate of insecurity has devastated livelihoods across the region. Nigeria is an agrarian society, particularly in its northern regions, and the farmer-herder conflict continues

to affect the regional economy adversely, especially agriculture in the affected communities (Dan-Azumi, 2025). The displacement of farming communities from their lands reduces agricultural output, threatens food security, and forces families into poverty and dependency on humanitarian assistance.

The broader national economic consequences of insecurity in Nigeria are equally alarming. Insecurity costs Nigeria approximately US\$40.6 billion in lost investments annually, and has forced 60% of manufacturers in conflict-affected northern regions to shut down operations (Madueke, 2025). These economic losses compound the governance crisis by reducing the tax base available to fund security and public services, creating a self-reinforcing spiral of underdevelopment and conflict. Investment flight and the departure of skilled professionals further hollow out state capacity, making it even more difficult for institutions to function effectively in conflict-affected areas like Southern Kaduna

Political and Social Consequences

At the political level, the crisis in Southern Kaduna has contributed significantly to the delegitimisation of Nigerian democratic institutions. Democratic competition in the region has been repeatedly distorted by ethno-religious mobilisation, violence, and fraud, undermining the capacity of elections to produce legitimate and accountable governments. Ethno-religious conflicts are hostile engagements where actors



and their motivations reflect a combination of ethnic and religious interests; they have had negative consequences for political stability, national unity, integration, development, security, and Nigeria's international image (Lawal, 2023). The perception that democratic governance has failed to deliver security and justice for Southern Kaduna communities feeds demands for alternative political arrangements including the demand for a separate state of Jema'a or Gurara that, if pursued unilaterally, could destabilise the entire region.

At the social level, the crisis has produced profound consequences for inter-community relations, social capital, and the fabric of civil society in Southern Kaduna. Field research in the region has documented the departure of Fulani communities from areas where they had previously cohabited with other ethnic groups, the abandonment of shared spaces of economic and cultural exchange, and the physical segregation of communities along religious and ethnic lines (Agbiboa, 2021, as cited in Lawal, 2023). Once-vibrant towns like Kaduna city have become informally divided, with the northern half dubbed "Mecca" and the southern half "Jerusalem" a symbolic crystallisation of the cleavage that has replaced an earlier experience of cohabitation (Hoffmann, 2017). These social fractures represent not merely a humanitarian problem but a structural impediment to the cooperative governance arrangements necessary for regional development.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the ethno-religious conflicts, state capacity deficits, and governance crisis in Southern Kaduna through a multi-dimensional analytical framework that integrates structural, institutional, and agency-level perspectives. The analysis has demonstrated that the persistent cycle of violence in the region is not reducible to primordial ethnic or religious animosities but is the product of a complex and mutually reinforcing set of factors: colonial legacies of political exclusion and differential incorporation; postcolonial structures of marginalisation; systematic failures of security provision, justice delivery, and developmental governance by successive Nigerian governments; elite manipulation of ethno-religious identities; environmental stress and resource competition; and the proliferation of weapons and criminal networks into communal conflicts.

At its core, the crisis in Southern Kaduna is a crisis of state legitimacy. When the state is perceived as biased, ineffective, or complicit in violence against its own citizens, it forfeits the moral authority necessary to manage conflict and deliver justice. The Nigerian state at federal, state, and local levels has consistently chosen the instruments of regulatory containment over those of structural transformation in its responses to ethno-religious violence in Southern Kaduna, with predictably inadequate results. The culture of impunity that pervades the management of communal violence, the failure to implement the

recommendations of investigative commissions, and the asymmetric application of state coercion have deepened grievances, eroded trust, and increased the recurrence of violence across successive decades.

The consequences of this governance deficit are profound: a human toll measured in tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of displaced persons; devastating economic losses across the agricultural sector; the criminalisation of the conflict economy; and the progressive fragmentation of social capital and inter-community relations. These consequences are not merely local; they have national and regional implications for Nigerian democratic consolidation, economic development, and political stability. Nigeria's declining regional influence of which the security crisis in Southern Kaduna is both symptom and cause has contributed to a broader weakening of democratic governance in West Africa.

1.4 Recommendations

Addressing the crisis in Southern Kaduna will require:

- i. Inclusive governance and institutional reform, as the primary lesson of the analysis presented in this paper is that sustainable peace in Southern Kaduna requires a paradigm shift from reactive regulation toward proactive structural transformation.
- ii. Transitional justice and accountability, as the culture of impunity that pervades the management of ethno-religious violence in Southern Kaduna should be dismantled through the establishment of credible, transparent, and participatory justice mechanisms.
- iii. Land use, grazing policy, and economic empowerment, as the proximate drivers of violence in Southern Kaduna particularly the farmer-herder conflict cannot be addressed without a workable national policy framework for land use and pastoral management.
- iv. Multi-level peacebuilding and civil society engagement as the sustainable peace in Southern Kaduna will require the engagement of multiple actors across multiple levels of governance.

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