

# The Rising Religious Extremism and Mob Violence in Nigeria

## Threats to National Integration and Sustainable Development

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### Abstract

Before the emergence of the Boko Haram terrorist group in the early 2000s, religious extremism in Nigeria had sparked large-scale crises in Kaduna and Plateau, among other states in the country. Since the inception of the Nigerian Fourth Republic, such crises have been undermining public safety and, by implication, the country's quest for national integration and sustainable development. In light of mob violence that resulted in the gruesome murder of a college student who allegedly uttered blasphemous comments, this paper examined the rise of religious extremism in Nigeria. Looking beyond human security threats like poverty and illiteracy, the paper utilised desk review of published documents to establish the historical and political factors that sowed in the country, the seeds of religious extremism now germinating. The paper found that the nature of the pre-colonial empires that now make up the Nigerian state, coupled with colonial and post-colonial factors, including the dissipation of knowledge on the Islamic justice system, competition over political powers, and the politics of divide and rule, have converged to make religion a volatile phenomenon in the country. Therefore, the paper concludes that until the multidimensional factors are addressed through mitigating and preventive efforts—such as robust religious education, religious regulation, interreligious dialogue and economic empowerment—the country's quest for peace, justice, and strong institutions among other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will remain a mirage.

**Keywords:** Christian, development, Islam, Nigeria, religion, violence

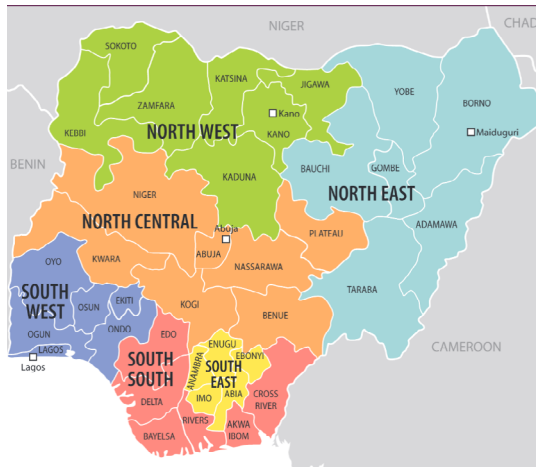
## 1. Introduction

As the world becomes a global village, Nigeria “represents the best and worst of what African states offer the world” (Bouchat 2016, p. 163). This is because, notwithstanding its enormous potential as Africa’s largest economy and democracy, Bouchart rightly observed that it “demonstrates many of the problems that plague much of Africa’s need for stability and progress.” No country in the entire African continent and only a few worldwide are as divided as Nigeria. As the most populous country in Africa and the sixth most populous in the world, Nigeria has over 216 million people (United Nations 2022, p. 6). The Nigerian people spread across over 250 ethnic and 500 ethnolinguistic groups, with just three of the ethnic groups—Hausa (30%), Igbo (15.2%), and Yoruba (15.5%)—constituting an overwhelming majority (European Asylum Support Office 2021, p. 20).

Though neither the majority nor the minority ethnic groups are united among themselves, research has revealed that religion rather than ethnicity is the major dividing factor in the country, being the people’s most salient source of identity (Okpanachi 2010, p. 7). With only 0.6 % of the Nigerian population practising other religions, Islam and Christianity are the dominant religions in the country, with about 53.5% and 45.9% adherents respectively (European Asylum Support Office, 2021, p. 20). This makes it “the greatest Islamo-Christian nation in the world” (Onaiyekan 2008, p. 5).

Broadly, the country is divided into the majority Muslim northern region and the majority Christian southern region, which are subdivided into six geo-political zones (three from each region) and 36 states (19 northern and 17 southern). These are held at the centre by Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The northern region, about three times bigger than the south, as shown in Figure 1, is more heterogeneous. Though consisting of a predominantly Muslim population across different ethnic groups, it has a sizeable population of indigenous Christians in other states, including Borno, Kaduna, and Adamawa. This, coupled with the large population of southern Christian settlers, made it a home to Christians, even as three of the 19 northern states—Taraba, Plateau, and Benue—have

been under Christian leadership since the inception of Nigeria’s Fourth Republic in 1999.



**Fig. 1:** Nigerian States and Geo-political Zones. **Source:** Adapted from Sodipo (2013, p. 2).

Due to the heterogeneity of the northern region, some historical circumstances and some prevailing realities, it has been a hotbed for violent ethno-religious crises and terrorist attacks. The dreaded Boko Haram sect operates there. Additionally, religiously motivated mob violence has been flourishing in the region. While this continued to polarize the north as a region, it also strained the relationship between the north and the south. A secessionist group from the southeast—itsself not a good example of sub-regions where religious tolerance permeated—has recently stepped up efforts to cut off the tie. The recent mob violence that resulted in the gruesome murder of Shehu Shagari College of Education students in Sokoto state for alleged blasphemy has sparked much outrage in the country. And this reminds everyone of the threats religious extremism poses to the country’s quest for national integration and sustainable development.

Looking beyond push factors like poverty and unemployment as drivers of violent extremism, this paper examines the historical basis of the phenomenon in the north in particular and the country

in general. But at this time when the country faces its severest existential threats since the civil war of 1967, discourses on such phenomena need to dwell more on exploring possible solutions than just analysing the problems. This, therefore, informs the ultimate focus of the paper.

## 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Overview

### *Religious Extremism*

Derived from the Latin word 'religere', which means 'to bind together as by oath', religion is an integral part of people's lives (Lawal 2002). It is primarily related to spiritualism but performs various social functions. These include: offering a meaningful framework for understanding the world, creating rules and norms that link individuals to the wider movement, linking individuals together, and legitimizing behavior (Fox 2004).

'Religious extremism' is one of the terms used to describe people's expression of religion. Others more or less related to it include religious 'activism', 'fundamentalism', and 'radicalism'. Like the others, religious extremism has been a subject of scholarly contentions. It is, for example, referred to as the support of a particular belief to the extent of feeling obliged to engage in certain duties, including physical violence (or holy war) against the unbelievers (Webber et al. 2017). In this vein, Schmid (2014) has identified five warning signs of its manifestation at the individual or group level: belief in absolute truth, endorsement of blind obedience, a quest to establish utopia, the belief that the end justifies the means, and a declaration of holy war.

However, Wibisono et al. (2019) have observed that many of the term's definitions have failed to "go far enough in unpacking the multiple ways in which extremism can be expressed" (pp. 2-3). This, as they further observed, is owing to their focus on violence, which births "the need to explore religious extremism on multiple dimensions and be open to the idea that not every form of religious extremism is associated with a willingness to achieve goals in violent

ways”. They, therefore, went beyond the folds of many definitions to define it as the extent to which there are clear norms about appropriate behavior and very little latitude in accepting different patterns of norms or particular behavior manifesting in different dimensions—theological, social, political, and ritual.

To explain the conditions under which the expression of religion leads to violent extremism and a spectrum of goals for the same, Gregg (2016) explored three theories of religious activism. They are the social movement theory (which explains religious groups that seek political influence), fundamentalism theory (which explains groups or individuals who seek to restore the purity of religious doctrines in the face of perceived distortions), and apocalyptic war theory (which explains groups or individuals who engage in violence as a sacred duty). These theories, summarized in Table 1, have, in the words of Gregg, moved:

*beyond just modern causes of religious activism and violence; they transcend time and space and seek to explain common historic and contemporary causes of religiously motivated violence and activism. Taken together, these three theories cover the bulk of religious activism and violence, both historically and in contemporary times. (p. 342)*

## *Mob Violence*

The act of mob violence is a form of collective behavior, defined as “actions by a group of people who bypass the usual norms governing their behaviour and do something unusual” (Henslin 2005, p. 614). As Henslin further explains, this is preceded by tension, exciting events, milling, a common object of attention, and common impulses. Though some forms of collective behavior do not involve violence, mob violence, as the concept suggests, has led to the wanton destruction and the brutal killing of many people in different places across the globe (Baloyi 2015).

Mob violence, among other forms of collective behavior, has been adequately explained by the emergent norms theory of Turner and Killian (1972). Contrary to the conceptions of contagion and convergence theories which view the mob as a headless or irrational

**Table 1:** Three Lenses of Religious Activism

Type	Goal	Size	Leadership structure	Members	Use of religion	Violence
Social movements	Specific and limited	Large, highly visible	Charismatic leader, possibly leaderless	Loose affiliation, porous borders	Mobilization, legitimacy framing (not necessary)	Instrument (not necessary)
Fundamentalists	Limited but less specific	Small to medium with clear borders	Charismatic leader	Committed	Religion is the core issue (orthodoxy and orthopraxy)	Instrument (not necessary)
Apocalyptic warriors	Vague and conflating, spiritual with earthly [goals]	Small, can be clandestine	Charismatic leader, prophetic	Highly committed	Apocalypse and millennium	Necessary sacred duty

**Source:** Gregg (2016, p. 352).

entity, the emergent norms theory explains collective behavior as a consequence of a precipitating event and the mob's suddenly created norms. According to Turner and Killian, it is these new norms that exempt the mob from the feeling of guilt and provide a rationale for their engagement in collective behavior. Mshelia and Yusuf (2022) have applied the theory in their case study on the phenomenon of crime and mob justice in a Nigerian market.

### *National Integration*

In multicultural or multi-religious countries, the term 'national integration' implies cooperation and unity among all the segments of the population, hence its interchangeable use with terms like 'social cohesion' and 'national unity' (Ojo 2009). As Africa's most diverse country, Nigeria has national integration as one of its cardinal objectives. This is necessary given that it is a creation of colonialism, described as not a nation but a mere geographical entity or a conglomeration of hitherto separate and independent kingdoms and empires. Not only Nigeria but:

*almost all the modern states in Africa today were built on political ontologies, oozing from this engineered political metaphysic. The people never dialogued their differences as a basis for federating. They never talked to each other about a political union. They woke up one morning, and saw themselves conscripted into geopolitical constructs they neither chose nor bargained for. (Ogbunwezeh 2005, section 2, para. 6)*

Many scholars have observed that this anomaly significantly contributes to most of the conflicts being faced in many African countries. As Mazrui (1973, p. 183) observed, "where Europe attempted to unify those who were different, it sowed the seeds of future separatism" and "where Europe divided, it sometimes left behind latent passions for reunification". In light of this, grasping the instrumentality of national integration requires viewing it through the lens of system theory, which, based on the analogy of biological organisms, emphasized the indispensability of interdependence among the various parts of a social system, the absence of which precipitate instability and "anomie" (Durkheim 1933).

According to Easton (1953), who adopted the theory to explain political systems, corresponding inputs (citizen's support and demands) and outputs (essential services by leaders) are the determinants of the survival and stability of a political system. Therefore, the focus of the approach on the analysis of forces that engender stability in the political system strengthens its relevance in the discourse on violent extremism, among other dysfunctional phenomena in contemporary Nigeria (Omodia & Aliu 2013, p. 37). The bottom line is that violent extremism and other challenges that affect the cooperation of all Nigeria's federation segments need to be considered and addressed if national integration is to be achieved (Samson 2019). To achieve this, however,

*every citizen and ethnic group in Nigeria has valued roles to play for the survival of the nation. Each of these roles should be considered, appreciated, appraised and valued. It would help to promote value consensus, policies and programmes of national integration. (Nweke 2007, p. 79)*

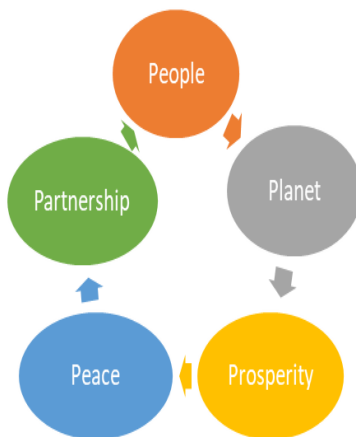
### *Sustainable Development*

As a technical concept, development has been a subject of varying scholarly interpretations, most of which look beyond mere growth. Bailing people and society out of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy are also considered (Otakey & Mshelia 2023). Achieving such also requires sustainability which revolves around improving a healthy economic, ecological, and social system for human development (Mensah & Enu-Kwesi 2018). According to Stoddart et al. (2011), sustainability points to the efficient and equitable distribution of resources, intra-generationally and inter-generationally with the operation of socio-economic activities within the confines of a finite ecosystem.

The combined term 'sustainable development', therefore, means an enduring development process that has no adverse effect on the ecosystem and future generations (Browning & Rigolon 2019). Its three conceptual pillars are economic, social, and environmental sustainability (Mensah 2019). The United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), signed by Nigeria and 192 other countries,



are built upon these pillars. The SDGs are therefore the comity of nations' "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity, for people and the planet, now and into the future" which traverse on five Ps as shown in Figure 2 (Halderen et al. 2019, p. 1).



**Fig. 2:** The Dimensions of Sustainable Development (Five Ps).  
**Source:** Adapted from United Nations, cited in Ansari et al. (2021, p. 3).

One classical approach to development on which the SDGs, among other international developmental agendas, find expression is a 'basic needs approach'. It is a product of the 1976 World Employment Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The approach advocates the prioritization of basic human needs like food, clothes, and shelter in the developmental agenda. In other words, rather than anything stressed in a want-driven economic system, developmental mechanisms should first and foremost be adequately responsive to humans' physical, mental, and social stability (Streeten 1979). Accordingly, the approach emphasized that:

*so long as the poor remain deprived of the essentials required for an economically productive life, they would neither contribute to, nor benefit from, economic growth, but rather remain outside the economic process for all practical purposes. Overall economic development cannot occur unless it reaches all sections of the*

*population, and this is not possible if large groups of people are impoverished.*  
(Keeton 1984, p. 279)

As the SDGs seek to eliminate poverty and hunger as goals one and two respectively, it is apparently in line with the basic need approach. And on the realization that these and other lofty ideals will hardly be achieved in countries like Nigeria where violence and division among other threats hold sway, the SDGs are wrapped up with ‘peace, justice and strong institutions’ (goal 16), and ‘partnership’ (goal 17).

### 3. Methodology

In this paper, desk review of secondary data is used. Published documents including peer-reviewed articles, reports, and national dailies served as the major data sources. In addition, hard-copy textbooks were consulted for conceptual and theoretical clarification.

The major data were generated online using Google Scholar and Google Search Engine. Research and review articles were searched through Google Scholar (advanced search option) using the following phrases: ‘religious extremism’, ‘mob violence’, ‘national integration’, and ‘sustainable development’. Thus, a total of 296 keyword-matched documents were generated. These were screened and the 94 most relevant articles were selected. The criterion for the selection was contextual and comparative relevance to religious extremism and mob violence in Nigeria. Google Search Engine was utilized to search for reports using the foregoing keywords. In addition to a pool of documents gathered, verified national and international mass-media web pages were explored.

The documents and web pages selected after preliminary screening were stored according to basic parameters related to the subject matter. These are: ‘Nigeria’, ‘concepts and theories’, ‘incidents’, ‘causes’, ‘effects’, and ‘solution’. Documents in these categories were then extensively reviewed and relevant data extracted.

#### 4. The Wave of Religious Extremism and Mob Violence in Nigeria

Mob violence and violent crises on religious grounds are not recent phenomena in Nigeria. But their frequency and magnitude have increased since the inception of the Fourth Republic. Viewed through the lens of Gregg's theories of religious activism, the phenomenon is obviously an interplay of fundamentalism, social movements, and apocalyptic war.

Having been sown since the pre-colonial era and watered over the years, the seed of religious extremism in the country began to germinate in the form of rising fundamentalist groups in the 1970s. One of them was the Muslim Brothers (now the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, IMN) which emerged in 1979. Though not directly deploying physical violence, their militant posture, staunch opposition to the Nigerian formal authority, quest for an Islamic state, and affiliation to 'Shi'a' ideology set them at variance with not only the government but also other Muslims. They had, at different times, incurred the wrath of the Nigerian security forces. The bloodiest of such occurred in Zaria city between December 12-14, 2015 when the military massacred over 340 people, mostly their members, demolished their buildings, and arrested their leader alongside his wife, both of whom were also brutalized (Aljazeera 2016).

In 1980, the Maitastine sect emerged and became the first fundamentalist movement to sanction physical violence (Alao 2013). The sect was against Western ideology, and its founder, Muhammad Marwa, was famous for rendering curses against the government and other Muslims. The name '*maitastine*' (the curser) was in fact derived from his excesses. Between 1980 and 1992, an uprising followed his killing by the Nigerian security forces, which led to the death of over 4,177; 763; and 175 people in Kano, Jimeta, and Kaduna respectively (Ikengah-Metuah 1994).

Even before the emergence of the IMN and Maitastine, other Islamic and Christian fundamentalist groups had begun to breed intra and inter-religious disharmony and conflict. The Sunni (strict prophetic tradition) Islamist group 'Jama'atu Izalatul Bidiah wa Iqamatissunnah' (shortly called Izala) was founded in 1978. The

group advocates strict adherence to undiluted Islamic doctrines and many of their clerics have been famous for the condemnation of other Muslims, whom they regard as ‘innovators’. This has triggered reactions from other Islamic sects and a sort of enduring rivalry. Similarly, there was an upsurge in Christian fundamentalism when revival and Pentecostal movements emerged in the 1970s, setting the stage for fierce inter-religious rivalry and conflict (Marshal-Fratani 1998). As Nmah and Amunnadi (2011) observed:

*The conjuncture of the two trends may have intensified the violent atmosphere. It should be emphasised that the demonisation of Islam in Nigerian Pentecostal rhetoric and the lack of a dialogical theology and praxis among this rapidly growing form of Christianity may have caused much harm and hindered conflict transformation. (p. 331)*

In addition to their yearnings for reform, which precipitates intra-religious conflicts, the intense proselytization of the Izala and Pentecostals, as they try to convert the followers of other religions, has been breeding inter-religious conflict. For example, in the course of their *da’awah* (evangelism), the Izala vociferously attack Christian scriptures and doctrines and, by so doing, breed mutual disharmony. The Christian Pentecostals tread the same route as well.

*Just like the Muslim fundamentalists, they also seek to expand their support base, hence conversion and poaching of followers of other religions through stereotypes, hate preaching, distortion, misrepresentation and misinterpretation of the various religious texts in such manners that promoted prejudice and intolerance in both camps. (Okpanachi 2010, p. 10)*

The first violent inter-religious conflict in the country was the Fagge (an area in Kano) violence of 1982. After attacks and counter-attacks by Muslim and Christian extremists, “several hundreds of people were left dead and valuable properties destroyed” (Ugwu 2023, p. 22). While the military junta contained a series of such crises throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in addition to curtailing the Maitastine uprising, the same cannot be said about the civilian governments that wielded power since May 1999. The immediate introduction of the Shariah legal system in 12 northern states when democracy returned was

protested by Christians who fear 'Islamization', resulting in a crisis in Kaduna state. Consequently, over 63,000 people were displaced and over 3,000 lives lost. As the then president of the country asserted, it was the worst violence since the 1967 civil war (Okpanachi 2010, p. 25).

More than all others, Plateau and Kaduna states have, in the last two decades, become flashpoints for religious crises. These are fueled by ethnic and political factors. Intolerance led to the first crisis in Plateau state which erupted in 2001 following the insistence of a Christian woman to pass through a road blocked by the Muslims during Friday prayer—a situation that had for years been generating tension in the area (Best 2007, pp. 66–67). As signals for the continuation of hostility on the first day “church bells were ringing and there were Muslim calls to prayer throughout the night” (Human Rights Watch 2001, p. 10). It led to the killing of hundreds of people in Jos, the hitherto peaceful Plateau state capital and its segregation into Muslim's 'Sharia line' and Christian's 'new Jerusalem' (Danfulani & Fwatshak 2002, p. 253). That was the beginning of intractable ethno-religious hostility in the state.

In the Kaduna metropolis, the publication of a column in *This Day* newspaper had again sparked a riot in 2002. The column—a rejoinder to the critics of the Miss World beauty pageant scheduled to be held in Nigeria—had needlessly and sarcastically dragged prophet Muhammad into the matter. It did not go down well with the generality of Muslims, and the extremists deemed it offensive enough to spark a violent reaction. Neither the newspaper's apology nor the columnist's was enough to calm the storm until at least 215 people were killed, while the Kaduna office of the newspaper and many properties got burnt (Emelonye 2011, p. 25). Both Muslim and Christian extremists have since then sparked violent conflicts in different parts of the state.

Borno state is another hotbed for religious extremism. When a Danish newspaper irked the entire Muslim world with a cartoon of the prophet Muhammad in 2006, police's attempt to disperse a group of protesters in Maiduguri, the state capital, sparked a rampage that resulted in the loss of many lives and properties (Abimboye 2009).

Since the early 2000s, an anti-Western Islamist group ('Jama'atu ahlussunnah lidda a wati wal jihad') had been active in Maiduguri. Popularly called Boko Haram (Western education is forbidden) for their opposition to Western education and lifestyle, it was more or less a reincarnation of the Maitastine cult. It metamorphosed into a violent group in 2009 after a clampdown on the group by the Nigerian security forces which resulted in the destruction of their physical structures and the extra-legal killing of many people, including their leader (Muhammadu Yusuf). The surviving members of the group then adopted guerrilla warfare and later developed a linkage with international terrorist organizations (Al-Qaida and ISWAP). Courtesy of their onslaughts, Nigeria has become a hotbed for terrorism, rising to the third position on the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace 2020).

Besides the manifestation of extremism in the form of violent groups and violent clashes between Muslims and Christians, there have been different cases of mob violence against individuals on religious grounds. Among the most recent victims of this are Deborah Samuel, Ahmad Usman, and Usman Buda, all of whom were brutally killed for alleged blasphemy. Owing to her religious affiliation, the killing of Deborah (a Christian) sparked more outrage across the country. As a second-year student of Shehu Shagari College of Education in Sokoto state, Deborah allegedly cast aspersion on Prophet Muhammad in a voice recording she sent to her class' WhatsApp group in May 2022. She was then fished out, beaten, and burnt down by some of her coursemates (The Guardian 2022). Though some arrests were made, the matter has probably been already swept under the carpet. The subsequent killings of Ahmad Usman and Usman Buda in separate incidents (in the FCT and Sokoto state respectively) are obvious manifestations of the impunity that characterize such actions in recent times (Adenekan 2022).

While such acts of mob violence are quite rare in developed countries owing to their effective justice systems, they flourish in many other developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. These include the Republic of Congo (Verweijen 2016), Malawi (Kasalika 2016), South Africa (Baloyi 2015), and Tanzania (Chalya

et al. 2015). Unlike the situation in Nigeria, however, religious extremism is hardly a causative factor in these countries.

## 5. The Causes of Religious Extremism and Mob Violence in Nigeria

According to Sampson (2012), “religious intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism are deliberately chosen to kick-start discussions on the drivers of religious violence in Nigeria because they form the base (sub-structure) upon which other sources of religious violence (super-structure) rest” (p. 114). What births extremism in the first place? In general, many complex, multifaceted, and inter-related factors converge to make Nigeria, especially the northern region, a fertile ground for extremism with its attendant implications. In a mutually reinforcing manner as subsequently analysed, these broadly cut across historical, political, economic, and social dimensions.

### *Historical Factors*

The nature of the pre-colonial entities that make up the Nigerian state, colonialism, and post-colonial events have built up religious extremism in Nigeria. First, in the pre-colonial period, much of what now constitutes the northern region was under empires largely being influenced by the Islamic religion. These were the Safyawa Dynasty (1086–1616), Kanem Borno empire (1380–1893), and Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903), all of which had advanced civilizations and latently created “enabling environment[s] for extremist ideologies to thrive” (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2015, p. 2).

The Sokoto Caliphate was a product of the resistance movement headed by Usman Dan-Fodio in the wake of the misuse of powers by Hausa rulers. Having eventually triumphed, Dan-Fodio established an Islamic empire wherein the Islamic Shariah was “more widely, and in some respects more rigidly applied than anywhere else outside Arabia” (Anderson 1955, in Ostien & Fwatshak 2007, p. 3). Though Islam had since the thirteenth century made incursions into the Hausa land through Malian traders, the region had, until the 1804 Jihad, been a profane environment. As the Shariah sanitized

society and institutionalized Islam as a religion and way of life, the introduction of Christianity by missionary groups in some northern enclaves threatened the monopoly Islam used to enjoy. The result is an enduring rivalry between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority in the region.

While the activities of the missionaries in most of the areas that now form part of southern Nigeria made the region predominantly Christian, the amalgamation of the north and the south by the colonial administrators in 1914 made it a part of the bigger political entity (Nigeria) wherein Islam is a rival religion. The singularity of the two hitherto separate entities and the minimal contact between them meant there was no footprint for tolerance and peaceful coexistence. The bitter political rivalry with religion significantly influencing the course ensued between them throughout the colonial period. In the words of Okpanachi (2010):

*under colonialism, administrative exigencies warranted the nurturing and exacerbation of an “us” versus “them” syndrome’ as ‘religious, regional and ethnic differences were given prominence in conceiving and implementing social, educational and economic development policies and projects. (p. 6)*

This assumed a dangerous dimension after independence in 1960 as it shortly after led to a military coup, a counter coup, and 30-month civil war (1967-1969). Since then,

*mutual distrust and strong ethno-religious identities in both north and south prevented a truly Pan-Nigerian identity from developing. Nigerian politics were and remain characterised by a keen competition for socioeconomic resources with the state seen as the main dispenser of these benefits. (Sodipo 2013, p. 4)*

### *Political Factors*

Competition over political powers has, on the one hand, set the northern Muslims against northern Christians and, on the other hand, pit the Muslim north against the Christian south. This is because religion is a card politicians play to galvanize support among the electorates. At the regional level, this accounted for the various



clashes in Kaduna and Plateau among other northern states. For example, when the Muslim president of Nigeria died in 2009, the Muslim governor of Kaduna state was—in what seemed a systematic plot—selected as a deputy to the new Christian president. This automatically created a vacuum for his Christian deputy to become the governor, resulting in bitter rivalry and electoral violence when the new Christian governor contested against a Muslim candidate in the 2011 election.

At the national level, politics has often triggered the religious button to spark controversies and electoral violence. At no time was this more manifest than during the 2011 and 2023 presidential elections. Intense campaigns for a southern Christian candidate in churches and equal effort for a northern Muslim candidate in mosques made the 2011 election a kind of Muslim (north) vs Christian (south) war. The northern politicians had tried to stop the incumbent Christian president from contesting the election to allow the north to complete its two terms—interrupted by the death of the immediate past president—based on some unofficial power rotation agreement. When the incumbent president was declared the winner of the election, violent attacks and counter-attacks between the Muslims and Christians erupted in the north, mainly Kaduna and Bauchi states. These left over 800 people dead and 6,500 others displaced, making it the worst post-election violence in Nigerian history (Bekoe 2011).

In preparation for the 2023 general elections, the northern Christians—who always side with the south in religious wars like the 2011 election—were denied the slot of a running mate to the southern Muslim flagbearer of the ruling party. It was, due to the power of incumbency, deemed the winning ticket, hence a large-scale controversy over the prospect of a Muslim-Muslim presidency. To prevent that, both the southern and northern Christians massively supported a southern Christian candidate whose ticket was balanced with a northern Muslim running mate as the political tradition of the country required. Consequently, mosques and churches turned to campaign grounds for and against Muslim-Muslim tickets, respectively. The opposing Christian candidate had allegedly referred

to the election as “a religious war” while canvassing for Christian support through a prominent cleric, calling on them to “take back our country” (Adeyemi 2023). Though the declaration of the ruling party’s candidate as the winner of the election did not generate post-election violence like the 2011 scenario, it did generate controversy and will go down as one of the most religiously motivated elections in the country.

### *Economic Factors*

Many scholars have identified poor economic conditions as one of the drivers of religious extremism (Kwaja 2011). Over six decades of misgovernance in Nigeria has made the country the poverty capital of the world, an unwanted feat it achieved in 2018, having dethroned India (Adebayo 2018). About 87 million people in the country live in extreme poverty (below one dollar per day) even as they are projected to increase to over 120 million by 2030, the target year for the SDGs (World Bank 2019). This means unless something is done drastically and urgently to reverse the trend, Nigeria would, instead of achieving the ‘no poverty goal’, be home to about 25% of the people living in extreme poverty the world over. But the prevailing realities in the country offer no course for any optimism. According to the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 63% (133 million) of Nigerian people are multi-dimensionally poor in 2022, even as the unemployment-to-population ratio rose to 77.1% in 2023 (NBS 2022, 2023). More worrisome is that the inflation rate has also been constantly rising. For example, it rose to 33.69% in 2024 (Channels Television 2024) from 20.77% in 2022 (Oyekanmi 2022).

First, this situation affords politicians a good opportunity to politicize religion to wield power, as pointed out above. Second, it serves as a push factor for extremism as many people, especially in the north where the threats are most endemic, seek solace in religion. In particular, the Muslims have been reminiscing about Sokoto Caliphate as an ideal society. The Izala and the IMN largely reinforced this. While the former has been “critical of traditional rulers, of corruption in government, and of declining moral values of the society, without calling for a wholesale overthrow of the system”,

the latter sought such revolution, having been motivated by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran (Mohammed 2014). Also, while the Izala largely supported the introduction of Shariah in the early 2000s, the IMN opposed it for its subordination to the Nigerian constitution. The Boko Haram, which not only seeks an Islamic state but also adopts violence to facilitate it, is partly a product of “perceived injustices and economic inequalities” (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2015, p. 2).

### *Social Factors*

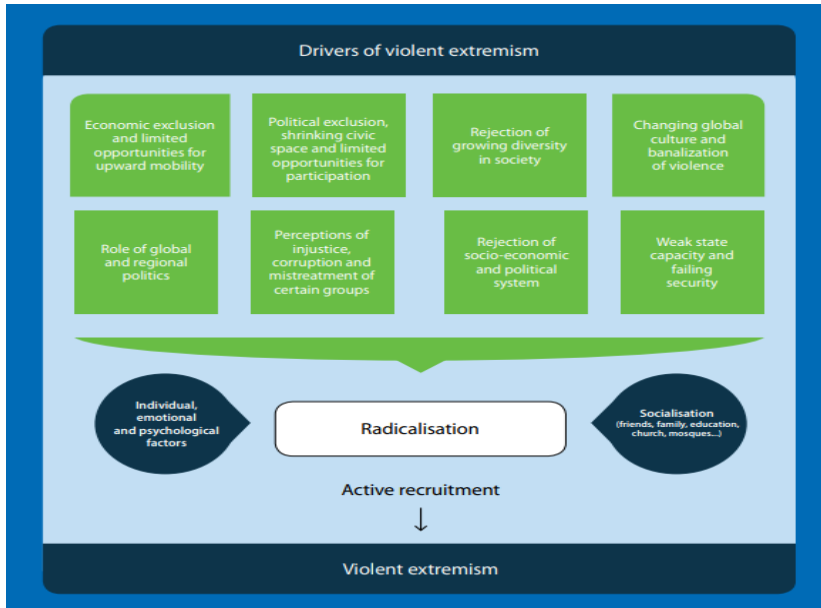
The rise of religious extremism and intolerance in Nigeria is one of the implications of poor socialization over the years. One way or another, most socialization agents have failed to promote respect for diversity and other national values. Some of them, including the primary agent (the family) even promote the contrary. For example, denigrating a religious figure as Deborah was alleged to have done is more a manifestation of improper socialization than freedom of expression. The resulting mob violence was a glaring failure of religious organizations to deliver on their mandate to educate their adherents properly. The killers of Deborah, supposedly learned youth, would certainly have explored more civilized ways to handle their grievance had they been adequately educated on what many Muslim scholars, including the President of the NSCIA, reiterated after the incident—that the act is “a contravention of the extant laws of the land and the very Islam they purportedly acted to defend” (Adunola 2022, para. 5). Underscoring this in the light of Islamic scriptures, a prominent cleric went beyond condemning the act to charge Muslim clerics on the need to “wake up and teach Muslims their religion” (Shiklam n.d., para. 6).

Furthermore, the blockage of public roads during religious programs is not fostering peaceful coexistence among the people. Nor is the use of loudspeakers in mosques and churches in overnight programs, especially as the preachers sometimes disparage the opposing faith. In fact, in deliberate attempts to implant religious disharmony, both Muslim and Christian intellectuals have gone beyond preaching to publish books in which they not only

misinterpreted and demonized the opposing faith but also incited hatred towards their adherents (Omotosho 2003).

The media have also been guilty of promoting extremism through exaggeration and alarming reports of religious violence. Even people who hardly read beyond headlines are often incited by horrible images and alarming headlines like: 'Hundreds of Christians killed as Muslim fundamentalists attacked Gombe community'. Such headlines often stir up emotions and trigger reprisal attacks, and sometimes turn out to be untrue, exaggerated, or distorted. And it is worsened by the rise of social media wherein alarming news, fake news, and hate speeches have extensive coverage, especially as it is unregulated in Nigeria. In fact, a synthesis of evidence has shown that social media is "an environment that facilitates violent radicalisation" (Alava et al. 2017, p.6).

The institution of governance is by far the most responsible, given the power it yields over all the others. As successive regimes failed to adequately foster social cohesion and national integration by collaborating with other institutions to properly orient the people, the result has been an upsurge in violent extremism, among other social ills. Their persistent failure to bring the perpetrators of such dastardly acts to justice and their failure to stem other drivers of extremism largely contribute to its growth as depicted in Figure 3.



**Fig. 3:** Drivers of Violent Extremism. **Source:** UNDP (2016, p. 18).

## 6. The Effects of Religious Extremism and Mob Violence in Nigeria

Casualties, displacement, and loss of valuable properties are the immediate effects of religious extremism and violence in Nigeria. It is hard to quantify the magnitude of these over the years. Mob violence incidents, intra and inter-religious clashes, and attacks by violent religious groups have led to a considerable number of deaths and destructions. The Boko Haram phenomenon alone accounted for over 350,000 deaths and over 310,000 displacements (Institute for Economics and Peace 2020). Beyond these immediate effects, the casualties of violent extremism in the long term are the country's prospect for national integration and sustainable development. It increases division among the citizens by reinforcing hatred for the religions, their adherents, and anything that represents them. It also increases mutual suspicion of marginalization attempts and controversies over some national issues, ranging from very

significant to extremely trivial ones. One such national controversy, generated by Nigeria's full membership of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) since 1986, is "yet to completely abate" (Faseke 2019, p. 1).

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Muslim Rights Concerns (MURIC) are two of the religious pressure groups that sometimes inflame religious controversies. For all intents and purposes, they play active roles in derailing the country from national integration. For example, when (in 2011) the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) granted a license to Ja'iz Bank to operate non-interest or Islamic bank—which is practiced in not just Muslim but also non-Muslim countries like the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), Germany, Japan, and Singapore (Olatunbosun & Aladekomo 2020)—the CAN perceived it as "a plot to Islamise Nigeria" (Omafuaire 2011). Consequently, the CAN and many Christians, in sharp contrast to the generality of Muslims, staunchly opposed it in spite of its "globally acknowledged benefits" (Sampson 2013, p. 405). They were also against the use of head coverings (hijab) by Muslim girls in public schools and Muslim women in places of work, a situation that needlessly generated national controversy. It even became a legal battle that lingered until a Supreme Court ruling settled it (Balogun 2022).

In the same vein, the MURIC has, based on superficial issues, "nurse[d] serious grudges bordering (sic) on marginalisation" (Premium Times 2017, para. 6). One of these is annual religious public holidays which it says favours Christians with 'five' against Muslim's 'three'. In reality though, the 'three and five' permutation is wrong. The five is arrived at by separating Boxing Day from Christmas and Easter from Good Friday. The actual number of holidays are, therefore, three for Christians consisting of five days in total (Christmas two, New Year one, and Easter two) and three for Muslims, also consisting of five days in total (Eid-fitr two, Eid-kabir two, and Maolud one). And all of these are observed by all Nigerians irrespective of their religious affiliation.

The implication of such religiously induced national division is that the country has continued to sleepwalk in the developmental

realm. It fuelled violent extremism which in turn creates an unfavorable climate for sustainable development. As “socio-economic infrastructure that create[s] [an] enabling environment for investments and developments are destroyed during the violent conflicts”, growth and development are retarded because they can “only take place under a peaceful atmosphere” (Ugwu 2023, p. 24). Nigeria’s vision of achieving the 17 SDGs has been elusive, hence the narrowing down of the country’s focus to just seven of them (SDGs 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 16, and 17), as revealed in the 2020 Nigerian Voluntary National Review on the SDGs (VNR). The then president of the country has emphasized that “progress on the SDGs is mixed” with modest progress and numerous challenges (VNR 2020, p. v). These challenges, which include violent extremism, are making the target of even the seven SDGs increasingly unrealistic.

## 7. Solution to Religious Extremism and Mob Violence in Nigeria

Usually, some arrests are made after mob violence incidents in Nigeria, as it happened after the killing of Deborah. Beyond that, however, hardly anything is heard about the incident. But in situations of large-scale religious violence, the government deploys brute force to repress it and goes beyond arrests to set up a commission of inquiry (Adesoji 2019, p. 11). Such actions continued to prove ineffective as the commissions’ recommendations were hardly acted upon, resulting in future reoccurrences. The escalation of the Boko Haram crisis in 2009 laid bare how the disproportionate use of force by security agents could be counterproductive. As Mohammed (2014) observed, the demolition of the sect’s physical structures, indiscriminate extra-judicial killings, and the killing of their unarmed leader in police custody escalated the crises, having “pushed the movement to the end of the spectrum” (p. 24).

In light of this and the continued occurrences of violence in the name of religion, scholars have been calling on the government to instead focus on tackling the root causes of extremism (Harnischfeger 2014, p. 59). The recent wave of mob violence has been a costly reminder of these calls. In its “Strategic Framework for Countering

Terrorism and Targeted Violence”, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS 2019) outlined five major areas such effort should focus on as subsequently analysed.

### *Prevention*

Extremism in Nigeria can be prevented only if the historical, political, economic, and social circumstances that make them thrive are addressed. In order words, it has to be dislodged from the root. To this end, state and non-state actors have significant roles. The government needs to first and foremost prioritize the elimination of poverty and unemployment, among other drivers of extremism. The Nigerian government’s priority areas revealed in the VNR (2020) are well versed on this, but not much meaningful progress has been achieved. In addition to achieving this, the government must collaborate with various non-state actors to prevent extremism from growing. Among the important non-state actors, the UN (2017) observed that “religious leaders, in particular, have a strong potential to influence the lives and behaviours of those who follow their faith and share their beliefs” with their messages having “a strong and wide-ranging impact” (p. 4).

It is upon this realization that the UN developed “The Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that could Lead to Atrocity Crimes”, which captures nine thematic recommendations. It was developed from consultations with religious leaders, government officials, and civil society organizations, among other actors in Morocco between 2015 and 2016. Table 2 shows the nine recommendations in three main clusters. They provide ways religious leaders and other actors can contribute to preventing incitement to violence, which is direly needed in Nigeria.



**Table 2:** UN's Recommendations on Preventing Violent Extremism

<b>Prevent</b>	<b>Strengthen</b>	<b>Build</b>
Counter incitement to violence	Education and capacity building	Peaceful, inclusive, and just societies through respecting, protecting, and promoting human rights
Incitement to violent extremism	Interfaith and intra-faith dialogue	Networks of religious leaders
Incitement to gender-based violence	Collaboration with traditional and new media	
	Engagement with regional and international partners	

**Source:** The author, based on data from UN (2017, p. 6).

Furthermore, to inform global, regional, and national strategies for Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2016) has developed a conceptual framework which “proposes eleven interlinked building blocks for a theory of change explaining how development can help prevent violent extremism” (p. 5). They invariably address most of the foregoing drivers of extremism in Nigeria and, as such, their relevance cannot be overemphasized. They are:

11. Promoting a rule of law and human rights-based approach to PVE.
12. Enhancing the fight against corruption.
13. Enhancing participatory decision-making and increasing civic space at national and local levels.
14. Providing effective socio-economic alternatives to violence for groups at risk.
15. Strengthening the capacity of local governments for service delivery and security.
16. Supporting credible internal intermediaries to promote dialogue with alienated groups and reintegration of former extremists.
17. Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

18. Engaging youth in building social cohesion.
19. Working with faith-based organizations and religious leaders to counter the abuse of religion by violent extremists.
20. Working with the media to promote human rights and tolerance.
21. Promoting respect for human rights, diversity, and a culture of global citizenship in schools and universities

The second item has particularly touched on what, in the words of the immediate past Nigerian president, is “the greatest single bane of our society” (Akinwale 2017, para. 12). As he further reiterated, “no society can achieve anything near its full potential if it allows corruption to become the full-blown cancer it has become in Nigeria”. Indeed, Egwu and Mshelia (2023) have rightly observed that the failure of successive administrations to tackle developmental challenges like religiously induced violence is reinforced by endemic public sector corruption.

### *Protection*

The impact of PVE programs will take time to be felt given the magnitude of the developmental challenges in Nigeria and the complexities of the country. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance security to protect people’s lives and properties against violent attacks by religious extremists. The key to this is information gathering through intelligence and effective communication. Therefore, state actors need to work with communities to enhance preparedness. As Sodipo (2013) emphasized:

*active engagement of youth and communities in peacebuilding programs that facilitate interactions among individuals of disparate backgrounds, teach values of tolerance, and promote nonviolent conflict resolution have been effective in diminishing prejudice and mitigating the appeal of radical ideologies. (p. 1)*

Digital technology is now indispensable to this course given that it permeates every aspect of social life. The Nigerian public administration is not yet fully digitized, as Kari and Mshelia (2023) observed. This partly accounts for the lackluster performance of law

enforcement agents in the fight against violent extremism, hence the need to step up efforts toward digitization and digital inclusion. In this vein, Warren (2015) has found a positive association between widespread access to mass media and the reduction of militant violence in Africa. Similarly, Maronne et al. (2020) have found that entertainment-focused radio programs are effective avenues for communicating counter-violence extremism (CVE) or peace-focused content among community members in Nigeria.

### *Response*

In situations where extremists defy the protective measures put in place to perpetrate violence, the security forces should collaborate with the affected community to respond promptly to ensure the arrest of the perpetrators. Except in combat, extra-judicial killing of the suspects must be avoided. This is because it not only violates constitutional rights to a fair hearing but also has the potential of escalating the situation as the July 2009 ineffective treatment of Boko Haram members proved.

Subsequent responses of the Nigerian security forces to the excesses of organized religious groups have shown that not many lessons have been learnt from the Boko Haram phenomenon. The December 2015 massacre of IMN members in Zaria was particularly a reminiscence of the 2009 Boko Haram saga. In sharp contrast to this approach, the security architecture often lets violent mobs get away with their heinous acts. Most of the arrests made in the wake of such incidents have turned out to be plots to placate the irate public since prosecution and conviction are hardly secured. The need for strict application of the rule of law and human rights-based approach in response to religiously motivated violence in Nigeria can therefore not be overemphasized.

### *Mitigation*

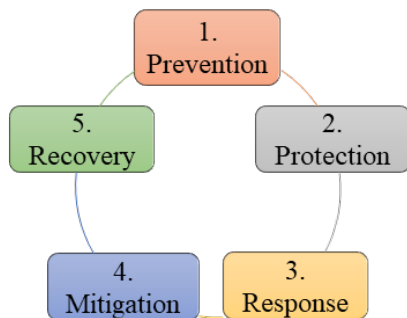
Being as versatile and long-lasting as analysed above, the effects of violent extremism in Nigeria require an intense concerted effort to mitigate. Depending on the nature and magnitude of different

incidents, a wide range of actions concerning perpetrators and victims need to be carried out. The perpetrators, on the one hand, need to be brought to justice. Their arrest will hardly mitigate the effects of their actions if they are not swiftly prosecuted, tried, and convicted. On the other hand, the victims should be compensated to facilitate their physical, psycho-social, and economic recovery. In cases of death, families of the deceased should be granted robust relief support.

Though the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) conceived a deradicalization and reintegration program as one soft approach to CVE, its implementation is grossly ineffective. First, victims of the ‘repentant terrorist’ atrocities, most of whom get little if any support from the government, are kicking against the reintegration of the terrorists into their communities, thus negating the potential success of the program (Owolabi 2020). While this is largely due to the psychological trauma the presence of the ‘repentant terrorists’ would cause them, Ike et al. (2021) have found that people even hardly believe the terrorists could genuinely repent. Second, the program, in the words of the Borno state governor, “is not working as expected”. According to him, many of the repentant terrorists “usually go back and rejoin the terror group after carefully studying the various security arrangements in their host communities” (Owolabi 2021, para. 5). This shows that the program is even counterproductive and as such, worthless.

### *Recovery*

Society needs to ultimately put past extremists’ violence behind it and move forward. Continuously living in the shadow of such a past will be counterproductive and destructive. Achieving this, however, relies as much on mitigating measures as preventive ones. This makes the solution framework revolve back to its base, as depicted in Figure 4.



**Fig. 4:** Solution to Violent Extremism. **Source:** The author, based on data from DHS (2019, p. 3).

However, the inefficacy of the Nigerian government in the other four areas will continuously negate the prospect of achieving recovery from the impact of religious violence. Most of the communities ravaged by religious violence due to the failure of preventive and protective measures are yet to recover, owing to inadequate response and mitigation. Plateau and Kaduna states, for example, have remained as polarized and volatile as they became after their respective religious crises in the early 2000s. And with insurgents still terrorizing different states in the north-east, their excesses continuously weaken the bond that holds the country. It is thus safe to say that neither the north as a region nor Nigeria as a country is anywhere near recovery.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding their positive impacts, Islam and Christianity have over the years served as umbrellas for violent incidents in Nigeria. And unfortunately, religiously induced mob violence in the country now becomes rampant. This is rooted in historical, political, social, and economic factors and fuelled by poverty and illiteracy, among other human security threats. Though no region in the country is immune from the threats of religious extremists, the north is relatively more volatile due to its configuration and the prevalence of human security threats.

The continuous occurrence of the phenomenon, as recently experienced in Sokoto and Abuja, served as proof that the efforts of successive regimes to stem the tide are not yet successful. And the impunity with which the recent incidents were perpetrated showed how far off we are. Beyond the loss of lives and properties, these incidents negatively impact on the country's quest for national integration and sustainable development. Going forward, it is necessary to strengthen the country's criminal justice system to ensure perpetrators of such acts are brought to book on the grounds of prevention, deterrence, or retribution. It is equally necessary to alleviate poverty among other threats to human security, while systematic policies are formulated to address the need for robust religious education, religious regulation, and interreligious dialogue, among other things.

The solution framework suggested in this paper is holistic, having ranged from preventive to recovery spectra. And until political will supersedes mere rhetoric to achieve them, the country's quest for "peace, justice and strong institutions" among other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will remain a mirage. However, multifarious and context-specific strategies geared towards erecting each pillar of the solution framework must be designed. And this calls for concerted efforts by academics and policymakers alike.

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