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Politics And Armed Struggle In South East, Nigeria, 2014 - 2024

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the nexus between politics and armed struggle in Southeast Nigeria from 2014 to 2024, highlighting how political exclusion, economic deprivation, and structural injustice have fueled regional agitation and militancy. The paper situates the crisis within the broader framework of conflict theory, which explains how unequal power relations and resource distribution engender social unrest. Using a qualitative approach, the paper analyzes secondary data from academic publications, policy reports, and media sources to uncover the socio-political dynamics driving armed resistance movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), and Eastern Security Network (ECN). Findings reveal that decades of perceived marginalization, coupled with the state's coercive response and weak governance structures, have entrenched cycles of mistrust and violence. The paper argues that the Southeast conflict is symptomatic of a deeper national crisis of identity, equity, and legitimacy in Nigeria's federal system. It concludes that sustainable peace in the region requires a shift from militarized containment to inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and institutional reforms that promote justice and political participation. The paper recommends, among others that there should be inclusive governance and federal restructuring, as well as economic empowerment and infrastructure development.

Keywords: Armed struggle, conflict theory, governance, marginalization, politics, marginalization

INTRODUCTION

The issue of armed struggle in Nigeria is deeply rooted in its historical context and now manifests in a highly complex and multi-faceted dimension, one intertwined with the politics of marginalization, injustice, deprivation and structural imbalance in Nigerian federalism (Egobueze, Ojirika, & Owaji-Ibani, 2021). Forty years after the formal termination of colonial rule, the legacies of Nigeria's colonialism continue to dominate everyday life and public affairs in ways that are often insidious and blurred (Ekeh, 2001). Nigeria's political trajectory has been characterized by the use of state power to appropriate resources and offices in a manner that places certain ethnic nationalities at a disadvantage, thereby making marginalisation a central political question in the Nigerian political system. The evidence, therefore, suggests that the politics of marginalisation is entrenched in Nigerian political life and that this tendency has the capacity to destabilise the state and undermine its development.

One of these legacies that threatens Nigeria's corporate existence is the issue of ethnic agitations, which are grounded in marginalisation, deprivation, structural imbalances, outright human-rights violations and perceived inequality directed against a group or region. Egobueze, Ojirika and Owaji-Ibani (2021) emphasized that the principle of independence and co-ordinate jurisdiction of the different tiers of government which is a prerequisite of true federalism has substantially been eroded in Nigeria. They contend that this erosion is caused by the frequent interventions of the military in politics and the emergence of a dominant, sectional military-bureaucratic clique within the power elite whose survival depended on repression and unmediated management of state power and resources. The over-centralisation of power has weakened sub-national levels of government and undermined their capacity to fulfil the *raison d'être* of their existence (Egobueze et al., 2021). In this regard, the persistent mismanagement of national resources, massive political corruption, reckless neglect of oil-producing/-bearing communities, and the absence of a socially equal and equitable system of power sharing and resource distribution have combined to create fertile ground for what may be described as internal colonialism and sub-national revolt (Egobueze et al., 2021).

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced significant political turbulence (Achebe, 2083). Obasi (2023) notes that Nigerian politics has often been shaped by colonial histories, ethnic diversity, and struggles for autonomy. The intersection of politics with ethnicity, resource allocation and regionalism has repeatedly resulted in conflict. The country has recently witnessed an upsurge in the level of insecurity in the South-East geopolitical zone, with crimes such as terrorism, banditry, hostage-taking, kidnapping, armed robbery, and violent attacks by unknown gunmen on government infrastructure and installations exacerbating security tensions in the region.

In many instances, armed struggle becomes the chosen medium to convey a "warning message" to the government, signalling a breakdown in conventional political negotiation. Achebe (2012) observes that armed struggle frequently emerges as a response to perceived injustices, systemic marginalisation, or the denial of fundamental rights. The root causes of armed struggles such as those of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Eastern Security Network (ESN) include historical grievances, socio-economic disparities, and political exclusion. For example, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) left enduring scars and further entrenched the marginalisation of the South-East, and the post-war policies of the "3 Rs" (Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation) failed to effectively address the underlying issues faced by the region (Adewale & Mustapha, 2017; see also Onuoha, 2014). These historical contexts provide the foundation for understanding the resurgence of separatist movements in contemporary Nigeria.

One of the most significant political challenges facing Nigeria is the demand for self-determination, often shaped by years of neglect, marginalization, deprivation and human-rights violations of various groups, notably the Igbo ethnic nationality. The Igbo, one of Nigeria's three major ethnic groups, have long felt marginalised within the country's political and economic spheres (Obasi, 2024). In December 2020, IPOB established its military wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), as a paramilitary force to address perceived security threats in the South-East (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2021). This development escalated confrontations between the group and the federal government and significantly heightened security challenges in the region. The escalation in insecurity in the South-East prompted the late Prof. George Obiozor, former President of Ohanaeze Ndigbo, to remark during the visit of then-President Muhammadu Buhari to Imo State on 9 September 2021 that: "regrettably our South-East zone has recently become a theatre of conflict, negating the peace-loving nature of our people".

According to Achebe (2012), the struggles of MASSOB, IPOB and ESN are deeply rooted in the historical, socio-economic and political experiences of the Igbo people in Nigeria. The civil war, the loss of lives and socioeconomic destruction during that period feature prominently in the collective memory of the region. Post-war, many Igbo families suffered losses and damage without adequate compensation; these losses deepen feelings of exclusion and alienation despite the region's substantial contribution to national revenue and economic strength (Okonkwo, 2023). Politically, imbalances are also glaring:

Nigeria is divided into thirty-six states across its six geopolitical zones, yet the South-East has only five states (versus six in other zones) and a lesser number of local government councils, a disparity interpreted by the Igbo as tantamount to neglect and marginalisation (Nwozor, 2019). Ibeanu, Orji and Iwuamadi (2016) emphasise how the civil war created a legacy of mistrust and marginalization that persists in the South-East. Obasi (2024) highlights the decriminalization of IPOB by the Nigerian government, which designated the group a terrorist organisation in 2017 as a factor that further entrenches the group's belief in armed resistance. Human-rights organisations have criticised the government's approach, citing reports of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions and suppression of dissent (Amnesty International, 2018).

The conflict between separatist groups and the Nigerian state underscores the broader challenge of nation-building in a heterogeneous society where equitable governance and mutual trust remain elusive. The resurgence of armed struggle by IPOB and ESN raises critical questions about whether forceful approaches are effective in addressing political grievances. While IPOB originally pursued non-violent advocacy, alleged involvement in violent attacks and armed confrontation with government forces demonstrates the complexity of separatist movements driven by systemic politics (Campbell, 2020). The grievances of these groups include inequitable distribution of national resources, exclusion of the South-East from key political positions, and systemic under-development (Campbell, 2020). These frustrations have led to protests and armed confrontations with the Nigerian state. Studies also show a strong correlation between lack of political representation and inequitable resources with the intensity of secessionist agitation in the region (Nwozor, 2019).

Particularly, research shows that Nigeria's political framework disproportionately favours certain regions while marginalising others, especially the South-East (Nnoruga, 2025). This imbalance has created fertile ground for armed mobilisation via framing the struggle as one against systemic oppression and structural injustice (Nnoruga, 2025). Meanwhile, Egobueze et al. (2021) argue that structural imbalance in Nigeria's federal system occasioned partly by the colonial experience drives sub-national revolts and internal colonialism.

A critical examination of Nigeria's political landscape shows that marginalisation is not limited to minority ethnicities, but is felt by the Igbo nationality which, despite being counted among the major ethnic groups, perceive themselves as marginalised. The issue of marginalisation is therefore multi-headed and requires nuanced attention. Unresolved issues of marginalisation, resource-control debates, calls for restructuring, and agitation by MASSOB, IPOB and ESN for the restoration of the sovereign state of Biafra continue to feature prominently in the Nigerian Fourth Republic.

In sum, armed struggle in contemporary Nigeria can only be meaningfully understood within its broader historical, political, and socio-economic contexts. The enduring legacies of colonialism, distortions in the federal system, inequitable resource allocation, ethnic grievances, and systemic exclusion collectively create fertile ground for armed agitation. Unless these underlying structural issues are comprehensively addressed through inclusive governance, equitable distribution of resources, genuine federal restructuring, and deliberate trust-building measures, armed struggle and the instability it generates will likely persist. Against this background, the central objective of this paper is to examine the underlying causes of armed struggle in Nigeria's South-East region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conflict theory was developed by Karl Marx in the mid-19th century, with important contributions from other social theorists such as Friedrich Engels. The theory emerged as part of Marx's critique of capitalism, articulated in works such as *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *Das Kapital* (1867). It asserts that society is fundamentally structured by conflicts arising from inequalities in the distribution of resources, power, and opportunities (Obi, 2024). Marx argued that conflict is a serious disagreement and argument about something important: a struggle between people with opposing interests, ideas, beliefs, values or goals. Over time, this exploitation leads to tensions and, eventually, open conflict as the oppressed class becomes aware of their conditions and demands change. This perspective views societal

progress as resulting from struggles between opposing groups rather than through consensus or harmony (Ugwueze & Eme, 2019).

The theory has broad applicability to social and political phenomena, particularly in contexts marked by inequalities and competition over limited resources. Marx's original formulation (c. 1864) proposed that society is in a constant state of conflict due to the battle for scarce resources as later restated by theorists such as Ralf Dahrendorf in 1959. Conflict theory holds that social order is upheld by the exercise of domination and power, rather than by consensus and conformity Güçlü, İ. (2014). In this view, conflict is defined as a visible confrontation between two or more interconnected parties who have differing objectives, limited resources, and face obstacles from each other in accomplishing their goals. Interdependence is a characteristic that reflects the idea that individuals involved in the conflict rely on each other. For instance, land resources such as land, crops, pasture, or freshwater are scarce resources in Nigeria used by both agricultural and pastoral communities, and thus become sites of competition.

When conceptually unpacking conflict theory, it is useful to revisit Marx as a key figure, namely his reflections on class struggle and exploitation. He posited that conflict is inevitable in human interactions especially among groups or classes due to unequal access to resources and power. Dahrendorf extended Marx's ideas, contending that conflict is not predetermined in outcome: ownership of the means of production is not the sole axis of conflict, and conflict may manifest in many institutional forms (Dahrendorf, 1958). Consequently, those who possess wealth and resources will persist in safeguarding and optimising their holdings, whilst those lacking such assets will seek to acquire them by any means necessary. This dynamic implies that society will experience a pervasive conflict between those who possess wealth and those who do not. As noted by Bakiner (2016), many actors are engaged in competition to obtain a valued resource, where one actor's gain results in another's loss. Mack & Snyder (1971) argues that conflict arises from scarcity: when individuals' desires cannot be fully satisfied, conflictual activity ensues in the pursuit of resources. To achieve their objectives, parties may resort to physical force, which can cause injury, destruction, or even the elimination of the opponent in the struggle for resources. Conflict and consensus are inherently interconnected; conflict may act as a catalyst for constructive outcomes. While conflict may initially appear destructive, it has the potential to lead to accords and contribute to stability, whereas inadequately managed conflict can escalate into violence (Dahrendorf, 1958).

While conflict theory (developed primarily by Marx) posits that society is in a perpetual state of conflict due to competition for limited resources, it has also encountered several criticisms. One major critique is its overly deterministic nature: the theory tends to reduce all social relationships to class struggle or power imbalances, often ignoring the role of cooperation, consensus, and shared values in maintaining social order (Obasi, 2023). Additionally, it tends to generalize conflict as always negative, overlooking that conflict can sometimes lead to positive change and reform. The theory has also been critiqued for its limited attention to individual agency, focusing instead on large structural forces (Obi, 2020). Despite such critiques, the implications of conflict theory are significant, especially for understanding the roots and persistence of political instability and armed struggle. The theory encourages researchers and policymakers to look beyond surface events and examine structural inequalities such as political marginalisation, economic deprivation and social exclusion that often underlie violence and unrest. It also advocates for systemic change rather than temporary or surface-level interventions.

In the context of the South-East region of Nigeria, conflict theory is highly relevant to this study in terms of power imbalance, resource distribution, group interests and social change. First, the theory highlights how power imbalances rooted in social inequalities contribute to various forms of conflict in South-East Nigeria. These imbalances often based on factors like ethnicity, religion, class disarticulation lead to competition for resources and power, fuelling social tensions and conflict. Nigeria's history, including colonial legacies and post-independence struggles, has exacerbated these imbalances, making conflict a recurring feature of its socio-political landscape in that region.

Secondly, the theory's core proposition that society is shaped by competition for limited resources is highly pertinent in understanding challenges of resource distribution in Nigeria. Unequal distribution of wealth, power and resources—especially pertaining to natural resource endowments such as oil—has fueled numerous conflicts across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. This unequal distribution, combined with weak governance and corruption, intensifies existing social and economic inequalities, leading to recurrent conflict.

Thirdly, the theory suggests that societal conflicts, including those based on ethnicity and religion, often stem from competition for limited resources and power, not simply from inherent group differences. This perspective underscores how dominant groups may exploit or marginalise others to maintain their position, thereby fuelling tensions and conflict. Finally, conflict theory provides a useful lens for understanding social change in Nigeria: the competition for resources, power and status can drive shifts in societal structures. This is evident in Nigeria in the interplay of ethnic and religious diversity, economic inequality and political competition, all of which may lead to conflict and, potentially, social change. Indeed, the South-East geopolitical zone has experienced historic ethnic marginalisation, uneven development and alleged political exclusion; these dynamics have contributed to rising agitation and militancy in the region. In this sense, the struggle between dominant political structures and marginalised groups seeking greater autonomy or recognition can be examined through the lens of conflict theory, which helps explain not just armed conflict, but the deeper political and socio-economic conditions fuelling unrest in South-East Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-method research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of the relationship between political activities and armed struggles in South-East Nigeria. The qualitative component captured participants' experiences and perceptions through structured interviews, while the quantitative aspect utilized questionnaires and Chi-square analysis to establish relationships among variables. The study also incorporated secondary data from textbooks, journal articles, and official publications to strengthen the analysis and triangulate findings. This design was considered most appropriate for identifying patterns, trends, and causal factors linking political dynamics with armed conflict in the region.

The research was conducted in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States. Geographically located in the eastern part of southern Nigeria, the region covers about 29,388 km² (3.2% of Nigeria's land area) and is bounded by Benue and Kogi (north), Rivers and Delta (west), and Cross River (east) (Ogbonnaya, 2022). Despite being the smallest zone, it is densely populated, with an estimated 22 million people (NBS, 2024), predominantly of the Igbo ethnic group. Major cities include Enugu, Onitsha, Aba, Owerri, and Abakaliki, known for commerce, manufacturing, and agriculture. The area's humid tropical climate, fertile soil, and high population density support economic activities but also provide terrain conducive to militia hideouts. Persistent challenges like political marginalization, separatist agitations (e.g., IPOB), insecurity, and unemployment make the region highly relevant for studying the link between politics and armed struggle.

The study population covered all five South-Eastern states, totaling 22,012,828 people (NBS, 2024). Using Taro Yamane's formula at a 5% significance level, a sample size of 400 respondents was derived. A multi-stage sampling technique ensured proportional representation across states and stakeholder groups; namely - youths, community leaders, NGO representatives, and security agents—with 80 questionnaires distributed per state.

Both primary and secondary data were utilized. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires (4-point Likert scale) and interviews with 400 respondents. Secondary data were sourced from relevant academic and institutional materials, including government reports, NBS data, journals, and books, to provide background and contextual support.

The key instrument, the Politics and Armed Struggle Questionnaire (PAS-Q), contained six sections (A–F), addressing demographic data, causes, impacts, and government responses to armed struggle.

Validation was achieved through face and content evaluation by experts, and peers to ensure clarity and relevance. A pilot study further confirmed the instrument's suitability. Reliability was assessed through repeated expert evaluations, yielding an estimated consistency level above 90%, affirming its dependability for measuring the study variables.

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (mean and simple percentage) summarized responses, while Chi-square (χ^2) tested hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level. Statements with mean values of 2.5 and above were accepted as significant. Data presentation employed tables and frequency distributions for clarity and interpretation.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The first section of this work dealt with demographic analysis of administered and returned questionnaires while the second section analysed the responses on fundamental issues raised by the study using mean value followed by test of hypotheses and discussion of findings.

4.1 Presentation of Data

Table 1: Socio-demographic Analysis of Response Rate

Administration of Questionnaires	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Number of questionnaires administered	400	100
Number of questionnaires not returned	11	3
Number of questionnaires retrieved	389	97
Number of questionnaires valid for the study	389	97

Source: Field Work, 2025

The table above revealed that out of the 400 questionnaires that were administered to respondents, 11 respondents making 3% of the questionnaires were not returned, 389 respondents representing 97% were successfully completed, retrieved and valid for proper analysis. The response rate is 97% and this is a mark of excellence for the study.

Table 2: Socio-demographic Analysis of Returned/Valid Questionnaires

Administration of Questionnaires	Questionnaire Distributed	Returned Questionnaire
Youth Groups	100	98
Community Leader	100	98
NGOs	100	97
Security Agent	100	96
Total	400	389

Source: Field Work, 2025

Data in table 2 above revealed that out of the 389 questionnaires, 98 questionnaires were returned out of 100 that were administered to youths. Also, 98 questionnaires were returned out of 100 that were administered to CDC. Meanwhile, 97 returned out of 100 questionnaires that were administered to NGOs while 96 returned out of 100 questionnaires that were administered to security agents. The response rate of total questionnaires returned is 97% which is a mark of excellence for the study.

Table 3: Demographic Analysis of Gender

Gender of Respondents	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Male	220	57
Female	169	43
Total	389	100

Source: Field Work, 2025

Table 3 above showed that 220 respondents representing 57% are male while 169 respondents representing 43% are female. This indicates that the majority of the respondents are male. Irrespective of their genders, their responses do not in any way interfere with the outcomes of the study as they were not biased in their views.

Table 4.4: Socio-demographic Analysis of Academic Background

Educational Qualifications	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
PSLC/SSCE	100	26
HND/BSc/PGD	200	51
MSc/MPA/MBA/PhD	89	23
Total	350	100

Source: Field Work, 2025

The table above depicted the educational qualifications of respondents and thus revealed that 100 respondents making 26% possess the FSLC/SSCE, 200 respondents representing 51% acquired Higher National Diploma (HND)/Bachelor of Science (BSc) and Postgraduate Diploma (PGD) while 89 respondents representing 23% are holders of Master of Business Administration (MBA)/Master of Public Administration (MPA)/Master of Science (M.Sc) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D). This suggests that the respondents have good knowledge of politics and armed struggle in south east, Nigeria.

DATA ANALYSIS

Research Question: *What are the causes of armed struggle in south east, Nigeria?*

Computation of response rate of the causes of armed struggle in south east, Nigeria.

Table 5: Shows Item 1 of Research Question: Unresolved historical grievances are major triggers of armed struggles in South East, Nigeria

Options	Youth	CDC	NGO	Security Agent	Total Response	Mean Value	Remark
Strongly Agreed (4)	50	60	65	60	235	3.40	Accepted
Agreed (3)	30	20	15	28	93		
Disagreed (2)	10	15	10	6	41		
Strongly Disagreed (1)	8	3	7	2	20		
Total	98	98	97	96	389		

Source: Survey Data, 2025

Item 1 of table 5 showed the views of respondents on how unresolved historical grievances are major triggers of armed struggles in South East, Nigeria. In their views on whether unresolved historical grievances are major triggers of armed struggles in South East, Nigeria, the table shows that 235 respondents of the 389 respondents strongly agreed that unresolved historical grievances are major triggers of armed struggles in South East, Nigeria with 93 respondents agreed that unresolved historical grievances are major triggers of armed struggles in South East, Nigeria. However, 41 unresolved

historical grievances are major triggers of armed struggles in South East, Nigeria with 20 respondents strongly disagreed that unresolved historical grievances are major triggers of armed struggles in South East, Nigeria. With a mean score of 3.40, the respondents agreed that unresolved historical grievances are major triggers of armed struggles in South East, Nigeria.

Table 6: Shows Item 2 of Research Question: The exclusion from equal political representation contributes to armed struggle in South East, Nigeria.

Options	Youth	CDC	NGO	Security Agent	Total Response	Mean Value	Remark
Strongly Agreed (4)	70	65	70	40	245	3.54	Accepted
Agreed (3)	20	25	25	48	118		
Disagreed (2)	5	6	2	5	18		
Strongly Disagreed (1)	3	2	0	3	8		
Total	98	98	97	96	389		

Source: Survey Data, 2025

The table also revealed that 245 respondents of the 389 strongly agreed that the exclusion from adequate political representation contributes to armed struggles in South East, Nigeria with 118 respondents agreed that the exclusion from adequate political representation contributes to armed struggles in South East, Nigeria. However, 18 respondents disagreed that the exclusion from adequate political representation contributes to armed struggles in South East, Nigeria with 8 respondents strongly disagreed with the exclusion from adequate political representation contributes to armed struggles in South East, Nigeria. Based on the mean value of 3.54, the study agreed that the exclusion from adequate political representation contributes to armed struggles in South East, Nigeria.

Table 7: Shows Item 3 of Research Question: Unfair resource allocation policies have fuelled armed struggle in South East region of Nigeria.

Options	Youth	CDC	NGO	Security Agent	Total Response	Mean Value	Remark
Strongly Agreed (4)	40	55	70	39	204	3.40	Accepted
Agreed (3)	50	35	25	38	148		
Disagreed (2)	6	7	2	10	25		
Strongly Disagreed (1)	2	1	0	9	12		
Total	98	98	97	96	389		

Source: Survey Data, 2025

On whether unfair resource allocation policies have fuelled armed struggle in South East region of Nigeria. 204 respondents strongly agreed that unfair resource allocation policies have fuelled armed struggle in South East region of Nigeria, with 148 respondents agreed that unfair resource allocation policies have fuelled armed struggle in South East region of Nigeria. However, 25 respondents disagreed that unfair resource allocation policies have fuelled armed struggle in South East region of Nigeria with 12 respondents strongly disagreed that unfair resource allocation policies have fuelled armed struggle in South East region of Nigeria. With a mean score of 3.40, the study agreed that unfair resource allocation policies have fuelled armed struggle in South East region of Nigeria.

Table 8: Shows Item 4 of Research Question: Lack of accountability, transparency and legitimacy in governance has been identified as a cause of armed struggle in the south east.

Options	Youth	CDC	NGO	Security Agent	Total Response	Mean Value	Remark
Strongly Agreed (4)	80	90	85	80	335	3.83	Accepted
Agreed (3)	15	8	10	12	45		
Disagreed (2)	2	0	1	2	5		
Strongly Disagreed (1)	1	0	1	2	4		
Total	98	98	97	96	389		

Source: Survey Data, 2025

On whether lack of accountability, transparency and legitimacy in governance has been identified as a cause of armed struggle in the south east, the table above shows that 335 respondents strongly agreed that lack of accountability, transparency and legitimacy in governance has been identified as a cause of armed struggle in the south east with 45 agreed that lack of accountability, transparency and legitimacy in governance has been identified as a cause of armed struggle in the south east. Meanwhile, 5 respondents disagreed that lack of accountability, transparency and legitimacy in governance has been identified as a cause of armed struggle in the south east with 4 respondents strongly disagreed that lack of accountability, transparency and legitimacy in governance has been identified as a cause of armed struggle in the south east. By a mean score of 3.83, the study agreed that lack of accountability, transparency and legitimacy in governance has been identified as a cause of armed struggle in the south east.

Table 9: Shows Item 5 of Research Question: Violation of fundamental human rights by security forces has led to armed struggle in the south east.

Options	Youth	CDC	NGO	Security Agent	Total Response	Mean Value	Remark
Strongly Agreed (4)	75	73	69	30	247	3.47	Accepted
Agreed (3)	18	19	26	28	91		
Disagreed (2)	5	3	0	30	38		
Strongly Disagreed (1)	0	3	2	8	13		
Total	98	98	97	96	389		

Source: Survey Data, 2025

The question of whether the violation of fundamental human rights by security forces has led to armed struggle in the south east, the table above also displays 247 respondents strongly agreed that violation of fundamental human rights by security forces has led to armed struggle in the south east with 91 respondents agreed that violation of fundamental human rights by security forces has led to armed struggle in the south east. However, 38 respondents strongly disagreed that violation of fundamental human rights by security forces has led to armed struggle in the south east with 13 respondents disagreed that violation of fundamental human rights by security forces has led to armed struggle in the south east. With a mean value of 3.47 indicates that majority of the respondents agreed that violation of fundamental human rights by security forces has led to armed struggle in the south east.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Examining the Causes of Armed Struggle in South-East Nigeria

The data analysis undertaken in this study reveals a strong relationship between political and socio-historical factors and the emergence of armed struggle in the South-East region of Nigeria. In particular, one of the striking findings is the prevalence of unresolved historical grievances as a trigger for armed agitation. Of the 389 respondents in the quantitative survey, 328 (with a mean score of 3.40) indicated that unresolved historical grievances constitute a major driver of armed struggles in the South-East. When tested statistically, the computed chi-square value of 17.33 exceeds the table value of 16.919, thus warranting rejection of the null hypothesis. In other words, there is a statistically significant relationship between politics, historical grievances, pervasive injustice, widespread corruption and armed struggle in South-East Nigeria over the period 2014–2024.

This finding is well supported by qualitative data. One interviewee, speaking of their lived experience, remarked:

“I am a victim of the ill-famed Biafra civil war. After the civil war in 1970, the government promised to rebuild our region and rehabilitate us to have a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, this is 55 years after the end of the civil war yet no tangible development has addressed the issues of marginalization, and unfair treatment meted out on the region. ... This unfair treatment has paved the ways for the South East region to

adopt this social movement dimension (armed struggle) as medium to air our grievances” (P. Okeke, personal communication, January 3, 2025).

These sentiments reinforce the observations of Odiegwu-Enwerem (2023), who argued that the major driver of insurgency and armed struggle in the South-East is the failure to implement the “Three Rs” programme of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation, which was envisaged as part of the post-war healing process. The federal government’s declaration of “No Victor, No Vanquished” in the aftermath of the civil war did little to fundamentally rebuild the region’s infrastructure or re-integrate the populace; rather, it remained largely rhetorical and far from lived reality. The insincerity of post-war policy implementation, especially the neglect of the humanitarian and developmental obligations owed to the South-East, is a contributory factor behind the region’s resort to armed conflict. Similarly, Achebe (2012) contends that many Easterners perceive the “Three Rs” as broken promises rather than genuine commitments. Collectively, these sources illustrate how the enduring scars of the civil war persist in the frustration, anger and resentment of the region’s inhabitants.

In addition to historical grievances, the data show that political marginalization is a key explanation for armed struggle in the South-East. In the quantitative survey, 363 respondents (out of the 389) agreed, with a mean value of 3.54, that exclusion from adequate political representation contributes to armed struggle in South-East Nigeria. Secondary sources support this pattern, noting that Nigeria’s political trajectory is characterized by appropriation of resources and offices to the advantage of some ethnic nationalities at the expense of others. Political power concentrated in certain regional and ethnic blocs often translates into economic power, which is used to drive development in majority regions whilst minority or marginalised regions are deprived. Marginalization is central to the agitation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) for self-determination and the South-East’s status as the only geopolitical zone with five states rather than six. This has been viewed as symptomatic of structural disadvantage. On this point, Ogbonnia (2021) reports that the South-East receives one of the lowest allocations in the federal budget and minimal constituency-project distribution. One interviewee captured this sentiment:

Armed struggle is a product of political marginalization that occurs in the South East region. Imagine, Nigeria having six geopolitical zones, each made up of about six to seven states with the exemption of the South East with just five states... By implication, the region has the least number of Senate and House of Representative seats at the National Assembly... This without subjecting us to deep degree of argument would escalate the unending character of smuggling arms for the purpose of causing chaos (E. Nnabuike, personal communication, January 7, 2025).

The notion of political neglect aligns with the argument of Nwangwu and Ezeibe (2019) who maintain that the causes of armed conflict in the South-East lie in the broader historical context, multi-dimensional political analysis, and theoretical contributions that emphasise the failure to convert symbolic policy commitments into concrete developmental outcomes. The low electoral support (5 %) for President Buhari in the South-East in 2015 and 2019 exemplifies the region’s political alienation and feeds into the sense of deprivation that spawns radical responses.

Another dimension emerging from the data is the perception of unfair resource-allocation policies as a driver of armed struggle. A majority of respondents (352 of 389) responded affirmatively (mean = 3.40) to the view that unfair resource allocation has fuelled armed conflict in the South-East. Qualitative responses illustrate this:

Government policies are selective. There is a deliberate attempt to allocate resource unequally to the different parts and zones of Nigeria, particularly the South East region... A society that is built on political fraud and economic marginalization would perpetually experience the catastrophic result of arms rush, arms armament, arms proliferation with state destructive tendency (H. Udoka, personal communication, January 10, 2025).

This accords with Onwubuike and Ugorji’s (2022) assertion that inequitable resource distribution exacerbates socioeconomic deprivation, which in turn triggers ethnic agitations. Ugochukwu and Mezie-

Okoye (2025) highlight that the exclusion of the South-East from key federal leadership roles since the end of the civil war reinforces perceptions of systemic discrimination, which in turn bolsters demands for self-determination (Okafor, 2021). These resource-based grievances have tangible effects: one survey of the region found the South-East to be structurally disadvantaged in industrial investment, federal project allocation, and infrastructural development (Ogbonnia, 2021).

But perhaps the most forceful finding concerns governance deficits; the lack of accountability, transparency and legitimacy of government in the South-East. In the study, 380 respondents (mean = 3.83) identified this as a cause of armed struggle. Governance in this context implies equitable distribution of wealth, uniform policy application, equal representation, and open administration. The interview data were compelling:

Transparency in Nigeria is a curse rather than blessing. The south eastern part of Nigeria has suffered the excruciating effects of bad governance with associated anti-peoples' policies... absence of transparency in number of states and local government councils, government appointments, budgetary provision that would distribute capital projects to the south east... What is good for the 'goose' would have been good for the 'gander'... The visible display of this 'madness' in unaccountable governance without recourse to addressing them would only propel armed conflict in the region (V. Oriaku, personal communication, January 14, 2025).

Transparency is the public disclosure of government decisions, policies, and the timely flow of reliable information to the public. Transparency and accountability are widely regarded as essential to building trust and legitimacy in governance (Transparency International, 2015). The consistent perception of unfairness in appointments, resources and decision-making in the South-East is thus an important trigger for armed agitation. For instance, the rail-infrastructure controversy: during President Buhari's administration, members of the National Assembly Committee on Land & Marine Transport accused the minister of discriminating against the South-East zone, pointing to the narrow-gauge design of the rail corridor while other regions received standard gauge train lines. These tangible infrastructure biases reinforce the sense that the southern-eastern region is systematically sidelined.

An additional causal factor revealed by the study is the violation of fundamental human rights by security forces and resultant impunity. The survey found that 338 respondents (mean = 3.47) agreed that human-rights violations by security forces have provoked armed struggle in the South-East. One of the major problems has been the conflict between IPOB/ESN and Nigerian security forces, fueled by historical distrust and alleged state excesses. An interview participant explained:

The rights of many people living in the region have been violated by the same security forces who are legally entrusted with the responsibility to protect lives and property. ... The illegal extra-diction of Nnamdi Kanu is unconstitutional... Second, our innocent people are being held in confined detention without being charged to court for transparent prosecution... third, most of our young ones killed are innocent (O. Uche, personal communication, January 17, 2025).

Amnesty International (2025) documents that between January 2021 and June 2023, at least 1,844 people were killed in the South-East, in contexts of protests, violent clashes, abductions, and electoral violence; many were attributed to both state- and non-state actors. This record of killings, enforced disappearances and torture is compounded by the fact that perpetrators often operate with impunity (Amnesty International, 2025). These conditions heighten perceptions of injustice and validate the turn to armed struggle as a means of redress.

Taken together, these findings lead to several important conclusions. First, the cumulative effect of unresolved historical grievances, political exclusion, resource-allocation inequality, poor governance and human-rights violations generates a potent mix of frustration, anger and resentment in the South-East. These feelings are not merely emotional but are rooted in structural realities, hence the mobilisation of groups such as IPOB/ESN is not surprising. Second, while each of the factors can independently drive

conflict, their convergence substantially increases the likelihood of armed struggle. Third, the fact that the statistical evidence supports relationships between these drivers and armed conflict underscores the utility of using both qualitative and quantitative data in conflict-analysis research.

From a policy and academic perspective, these results indicate that armed struggle in the South-East cannot simply be treated as criminal or terrorist activity divorced from socio-political context. Rather, it must be seen as a symptom of deeper structural issues that require political, socio-economic and governance reforms. Without addressing the root causes identified such as historical grievances, exclusion, inequitable development, and impunity, efforts at addressing armed conflict will likely fall short of sustainable success.

In summary, this paper finds that the South-East region's turn to armed struggle is underpinned by a series of interconnected causes: (a) the failure of post-war reconciliation and reconstruction efforts, (b) systemic political marginalisation, (c) unfair resource allocation and development disparity, (d) governance deficits in transparency and legitimacy, and (e) recurrent violations of human rights by security forces. Policymakers must therefore adopt a holistic and structural approach, one that combines inclusive governance, equitable resource sharing, accountability mechanisms and guaranteed political representation to restore trust, reduce grievances and enhance stability in the region.

CONCLUSION

The persistence of armed struggle in Southeast Nigeria underscores the deep-rooted structural and historical contradictions within the Nigerian state. The region's agitations are not merely spontaneous acts of rebellion but rather the manifestation of longstanding grievances stemming from political exclusion, economic marginalization, and social alienation. Colonial legacies, uneven development, perceived injustice in federal resource allocation, and governance failures have created conditions conducive to sustained unrest. As several studies reveal, these conditions have evolved into collective expressions of frustration, amplified by poor institutional responses and weak conflict management mechanisms.

The findings from this study affirm that addressing armed struggle in the Southeast requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach that goes beyond military containment. The Nigerian state must adopt an inclusive and reform-oriented governance strategy capable of restoring trust, equity, and justice among all citizens. This entails recognizing the legitimacy of grievances while discouraging violent expression through dialogue, engagement, and development-oriented interventions. Only through such an approach can the region's violent agitations be transformed into productive political participation and sustainable peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Inclusive Governance and Federal Restructuring:**

The Nigerian government should promote genuine federal restructuring that allows for regional autonomy, equitable representation, and participatory decision-making. This will help address the sense of exclusion and imbalance in national governance.

2. **Economic Empowerment and Infrastructure Development:**

Focused investments in industrialization, education, and employment in the Southeast can reduce youth restiveness and weaken the economic drivers of armed struggle.

3. **Dialogue and Conflict Transformation Mechanisms:**

Establish permanent regional peace and reconciliation commissions to facilitate dialogue among aggrieved groups, traditional institutions, and the state.

4. **Justice, Human Rights, and Institutional Reform:**

Strengthen institutions of justice and accountability to address extrajudicial killings, unlawful detentions, and other human rights abuses that perpetuate mistrust and conflict in the region.

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