Insecurity and Conflict Management Strategy in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract
Insecurity has been a reoccurring decimal in Rivers state and the state has adopted strategies to combat the menace of security challenges. The state was the epicenter of militants' activities that culminated to the Presidential Amnesty Programme granted by President Umaru Musa Yaradua in 2009. The proliferation of cult groups in the state has escalated to full blown armed conflict that is ravaging communities across the entire Local Government Areas in the state. The State government since 2016 has made attempts to curtail the cult related conflict. This study examined the conflict management strategy and insecurity in Rivers state. Specifically, the study investigated why the amnesty programme between the Rivers state government and cultists failed to de-escalate insecurity; and how the non-inclusion of payments for surrendered arms by cultists as part of the peace deal contributed to the escalation of insecurity in Rivers state. The study therefore adopted the documentary method of data collection to generate relevant data and data gathered were analyzed using content analysis. The framework of analysis was anchored on the Governance Failure-Security nexus. Our findings showed that the non-inclusion of payments for surrendered arms in the peace deal heightened, contrary to the expected result of de-escalating armed conflict in Rivers state. The implication of this is the rise in incidents of violent attacks by cultists against the civilian population, inter-cult battle for supremacy and the rise in confrontation between cult groups and Nigeria's security agencies on one hand, and government backed local Vigilante groups on the other .We recommend that the Rivers State government should take more robust action to stop these attacks by investigating every clash and bringing perpetrators to justice in tandem with the State Law that prescribes the death penalty for any cultist who kills during a cult activity and life imprisonment for any cultist apprehended.

I.   Introduction
Rivers State has dealt with a variety of social conflicts and challenging security issues. Around the middle of the 2000s, militancy marked by disputes over resource control and self-determination had a significant impact on the security situation in the state as well as the rest of the Niger Delta. The state turned into a focal point for armed militia agitations as a result of groups like the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), and the Movement for Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) launching guerilla-style attacks on crucial oil infrastructure. The Niger Delta experienced a radical shift away from oil militancy toward other types of state insecurity as a result of the Umaru Musa Yar'adua-led Federal Government's implementation of the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) there in 2009. These other types of state insecurity included locally-based armed cult groups, intensified violent kidnapping, electoral violence, oil theft, and artisanal refining. (Ebienfa, 2011).

In comparison to other states in Nigeria and the Niger Delta region in particular, Rivers State stands out as a significant conflict analysis testing ground. This is largely due to the complex interplay of unusual political, economic, ethnic, and social factors that produce significant conditions for violent conflicts. The military's transition to democracy increased citizens' optimism, particularly regarding good governance. Sadly, the Republic has brought about a number of violent crimes, particularly in the wider Niger Delta. Since the general election in 2003, there has been a dramatic rise in crime in Rivers State. A scenario in which the political class employed unemployed youths in

thuggery in order to further their political objectives. According to Odoemene, 2011,

Many militant groups were never disarmed after the elections were held, becoming in effect standing armies for their political patrons. But while the armed groups remained, their political allegiances constantly shifted. Sekibo found himself unable to reign in Ateke"s excesses, and the pair had a falling out during the 2007 election campaign when the latter blew up several police stations in Port Harcourt, freeing his supporters but injuring many bystanders.

Following that, violent crimes persisted unabatedly because the majority of unemployed youths saw violence as a means of surviving. As a result, kidnappings for ransom have increased, and militant groups in Rivers State are fighting one another. In order to manage the conflict, the former governor Dr. Peter Odili's administration decided to establish two committees in 2004: one for social welfare and the other for arms recovery. "The cost of the various kinds of weapons was negotiated by the military and security personnel. Through this process, they were able to recover and pay for about 3400 guns of various types, which they then publicly destroyed in Port Harcourt's Nigerian Army Bori Camp in front of the local and international press as well as the defense ministry. The majority of the unemployed youth remain jobless even after the Amnesty Programme, so the Amnesty Programme and the weapon retrieval did not stop the crime wave in the state. An unheard-of crime wave that included not only kidnappings for ransom but also an increase in politically motivated kidnappings hit the Delta in 2006, according to a local NGO.(SDN, 2006). Insecurity in Rivers state was also exacerbated by unemployed youths' agitation for resource control, ethnic rivalries, chieftaincy disputes, illegal oil bunkering, and competition over ungoverned territory. The security of Rivers State has been negatively impacted by the large number of unemployed youths who are currently engaged in electoral violence and thuggery, gangsterism and cult activities, armed robbery, etc. You hardly ever travel or can fall asleep with your eyes closed without worrying about being killed or abducted somewhere in the State. This is true despite the numerous conflict resolution techniques used to eliminate the unrest.

The state has continued to experience what might be called a resurgence of cult violence, kidnapping, and armed robbery activities that nearly brought the state's economy to its knees many years after the implementation of the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP). The majority of the communities in Ikwerre, Ogoni, Andoni, Etche, and Emohua were severely affected by kidnappings and cult violence. Despite the presence and close proximity of heavily armed military and police personnel at various checkpoints on that road, armed robbers and kidnappers practically made the East-West Road impassable, especially the Emohua area up to the Rumuekpe Junction. This also applied to the Elele Alimini axis of the Owerri-Port Harcourt road, where commuters were frequently kidnapped for ransom while aboard passenger buses. Some passengers who were kidnapped would undergo sexual assault (Otubor, 2019). Before the Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area (ONELGA) Security and Peace Advisory Committee (OSPAC), a government-backed local vigilante group, emerged to restore order and security in the area, which later spread to other parts of the State, this was the pitiful situation for both passengers and commercial drivers on these two major roads.

Another major significant attempt by the Rivers State government to address the insecurity in the state was in 2016 when the Rivers State government decided to grant amnesty to cultists and kidnappers in the state, provided they were ready to surrender their weapons. On Friday, September 16, 2016, the Rivers State Amnesty Programme Committee was established. Representatives of the Nigerian Armed Forces, Nigerian Police, and Department of State Security (DSS) served on the committee. The committee's chairman was Sir Ken Chinda, the Special Adviser to the Governor on Amnesty. The committee was to interface with different cult groups for the purpose of retrieving arms and ammunition from them. The committee was also tasked with developing the procedures to guarantee the proper integration of militants and cultists who voluntarily joined the amnesty program. The committee was cautioned against assuring militants and cultists who had turned to God that the state government would pay for any weapons they turned in as part of the program. Anyone who turned in their weapons and followed the amnesty process was promised a pardon by the government, which was alluring. A person like that wouldn't face charges

"The amnesty programme was not politically- motivated, according to the River

State government, pointing out that it was designed to promote the security of all communities in the state.

Ojewale (2021) noted that in spite of government efforts, the insecurity in Nigeria is deteriorating. The debate on how best to tackle the menace of insecurity in Nigeria has continued; In the light of the above, therefore, the study interrogates the conflict management strategy and its implication on security in Rivers State between 2016 and 2023.

Conceptual Framework

The nexus between governance failure and security was adopted as our framework of analysis for the purpose of this study. Newman (2017) conceptualized governance failure as any failure caused by the ineffectiveness of governance processes. Governance failure is often used interchangeably with policy failure in some work. Some of the work that have highlighted the nexus between governance failure and security include Rhodes (1997) and Klin and Koppenjan (2000). Governing is what government do and according to Lasswell (1958), it involves controlling of resources among social actors; providing a set of rules and operating a set of institutions that determine who gets what, when and how in the society. Lasswell (1958) also noted that governance include management of the symbolic resources that are basis of legitimacy in the society. The implication of this according to Howlett and Ramesh (2014) is that governance involves the establishment, promotion and support of a specific type of relationship between both governmental and non-governmental actors in te governing process.

For the writers who established the link between governance failure and security, worsening internal security challenge in any state is direct consequence of governance failure and not necessarily state failure. In fact, 'governance failure' as a concept is often preferably adopted by writers who consider the concepts of 'fragile state', 'failed state' and 'collapsed state' analytically problematic to define or disaggregate. For this Scholars, while there are no universally acceptable baseline for categorizing state as fragile, failed or collapsed, the concept of governance failure do not suffer from such ambiguity (Peters & Pierre, 2016). They also noted that governance failure does not always imply that a policy of the government is bad, since governance failure can also occur from the implementation of a good policy. A recent example of this in Nigeria is the governance failure associated with the implementation of the federal government social welfare policy.

According to the World Bank (2019) this ineffectiveness of of governance process is mostly caused by many interrelated factors. The World Bank listed the following as the key indicators of governance failure:

- Lack of Voice and Weal Accountability
- Political Instability
- Corruption
- Poor Economic Growth
- Transparency

For the Scholars who share this governance failure – security nexus viewpoint, the reinforcing relationship between governance failure and corruption is instrumental in understanding why security policies of many states fail. They argue that governance failure in security management often emanate from either bad policy or strategies adopted by government because of the opportunity for personal material aggrandizement such polices provide or from the distorted implementation of security policies that look good on paper. In the latter case, some government officials and non-state actors often connive with violent actors to sabotage the effective implementation of policies that aim at managing violent conflict and resort peace and order in the society.

Application of the Framework

The adoption of the amnesty programme by the Rivers State government as a conflict management strategy reinforces governance failure in security management not only in the state but in Nigeria as a country. Irrespective of the argument for and against the adoption amnesty that remains ongoing in literature, available evidence already suggests that the amnesty programme and its implementation has afforded both state actors and non-state actors opportunities for personal material aggrandizement than it has actually curtailed insecurity in the state. This reinforces governance failure and further escalates insecurity. For state actors like elected and appointed officials, opportunity for embezzlement of state funds is created by the adoption of the amnesty deal as a conflict management strategy, as billions of naira are voted for security contracts and empowerment programme for repentant cultists in manner that lacks accountability and transparency.

Other state actors like security personnel of the Nigerian Polices and Military deployed to the state, as well as key Traditional and Religious Rulers or figures who often act as the interface

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between the people and the government also connives with violent non-state actors to fuel insecurity for material gains too. These actors are most times attracted by available government largesse and believe that by overtly fueling the crises, they will become more indispensable to the government and make a 'strong' case for additional funding. Rather than effectively manage the conflict, the provision of financial and other material benefits to cultists based on peace deal signed between them and the state government, becomes a trigger factor for many unemployed youths to join criminal gangs that often work in alliance with some state security officials to perpetuate more violent crimes. The logic behind this is that since the state government is willing to engage in negotiations that attract significant benefits to these criminal groups, a life of crime becomes profitable for this handful youths and the attendant consequence is a proliferation of violence in the state, rather than a decline. In the final analysis, the governance failure – security nexus suggest that insecurity in Rivers State is a product of governance failure and this governance failure and corruption are mutually reinforcing in such a way that every security policy or strategy adopted to manage the conflict, irrespective of whether is a good or bad policy, wil not achieve the desired result as long as the ineffectiveness of governance process occasioned by many interrelated factors already identified by World Bank (2019) predominate the political space.

II.   Methodology

This study adopted the mixed method of data collection. They include the documentary method of data collection and survey method. The adoption of this method is imperative since the study largely made use of data generated from secondary sources and it is also helpful in charting the course of analysis. For the avoidance of doubt, data from secondary sources are data gathered or authored by another person. This method of data collection complements our research's design because the information or data is usually collected periodically thereby making the establishment of trends over time possible. Another advantage of this method of data collection is that the gathering of information from secondary sources does not require the co-operation of the individual about whom information is being sought.Some of the documents from which data

were sourced for this study include the International Crisis Group (lCG) report, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) report, among others. Others include conference and workshop papers, journal articles and other published books which provide a veritable tool for understanding the security challenges caused by the activities of cultists in not just Rivers State, but the entire South South region.

The survey method adopted was the interview method. It involves two or more people exchanging information through a series of questions and answers. The questions are designed by a researcher(s) to elicit information from interview participants on a specific topic or set of topics which are usually informed by the author's research questions. We adopted this method to elicit eye witness information from victims of cultism in Rivers State as well as representatives of civil society groups actively involved in helping victims of the insecurity.

The implementation of the amnesty programme of the Rivers State government failed to de-escalate insecurity in Rivers State.The emergence of militancy in Nigeria's Niger Delta after the 1999 general elections brought social maladies like robbery, kidnapping, assassinations and increase in cult activities, among others.The political rivalry and hate campaigns by the major political parties helped in no small measure in promoting violence in the state. And on the days of the elections, cultists deployed the arms and ammunition bought purposely to perpetuate violence in virtually all parts of the state. But worried by the proliferation of arms in the state and the deadly activities of cult groups, the state governor, Chief Nyesom Wike felt that one of the ways to tackle the menace could be through the adoption of the carrot- and -stick method. The governor decided to grant amnesty to cultists and kidnappers in the state, provided they were ready to surrender their weapons. He then inaugurated the Rivers State Amnesty Programme Committee.This committee had 60 days to complete its assignment. After the 60 days, any cultist or militant who fails to subscribe to the amnesty programme will face the full weight of the law. The governor reiterated that the amnesty programme   was   not   politically-motivated, pointing out that it was designed to promote the security of all communities in the state.

Table I: Statistical table of the rise in Cultism in Rivers State before the inauguration of the State Amnesty Programme on the 16th day of September, 2016.
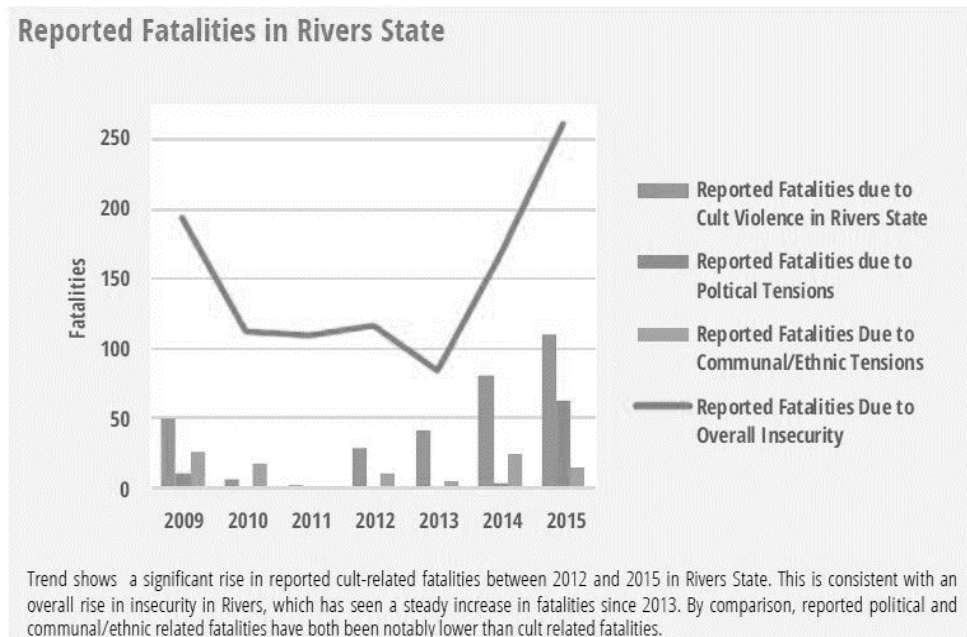
Source: Nigeria Watch www.nigeriawatch.org

The above table was considered significant enough to warrant a change of tactics by the Rivers State government in its management of the violent conflict that has ravaged the state since 2009. Thus, the Rivers State government negotiated a peace deal with cultists in 2016 that culminated in the award of amnesty to 'repentant' cultists.

Upon commencement of the peace deal, the Rivers State government claimed that hundreds of weapons were laid down by 'repentant' cultists and their gang leaders, 22,430 cultists accepted the amnesty after the first phase, 911 assorted arms, 7661 assorted ammunitions and 147 explosives were surrendered. The state government considered the peace deal a success and on 16th November, 2016, it announced that it will not continue with the peace deal as the repentant cultists would be rehabilitated and reintegrated. The peace deal was not monetized. Table II shows the major financial and material benefits directly accrued to bandits in the peace deal.

Table II: Rehabilitation and Re-integration Benefits to the Repentant Cultists in Rivers State Amnesty Deal

Offers	Targeted Recipients
Rehabilitation and Re-integration scheme	All cultists that surrendered arms within the period of the amnesty.
Skill acquisition training	All cultist that returned arms within the period agreed upon and were ready to be trained.
State pardon	All leaders and members of the cult groups.
Offer of jobs	Leaders of cultists

Source: Author's Compilation from multiple media reports

It was stated by the state government that all 'repentant' cultists were going to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into the society to enable them become beneficiaries of the state government economic empowerment programme aimed at empowering Rivers youth for self-reliance. The whole process of reaching the peace deal lacked transparency as the State government was accused of shielding hooligans that were used for election rigging during the 2015 general elections and the immediate consequence of that is the lack of public support for the amnesty programme. The crises were at a point deescalated. However, the state started witnessing

resurgence of the insecurity occasioned by cult related activities, the amnesty programme further fueled the conflict as insecurity became a means economic survival for many of the repentant cultists who were

not meaningfully engaged. Thus, rather than ameliorate the problem, the amnesty programme has motivated more youth to join because of the government neglect of the repentant cultist.

Table III: Some Incidents of Insecurity in Rivers State between 2016 (Year the Peace Deal took Effect) and 2023

Dates	Locations	Victims	Remarks	References
1st September, 2023	Obio/AkporLGA	1	A woman identified as Joy Njoku was abducted on her way back from job interview	https://punchng.com/family-seeks-abducted-rivers-womans-release/
May 2020	Gegema LGA	2	Robbers clashed with four policemen who were escorting a commercial boat, abducted two civilians, and made away with a riffle belonging to one of the policemen.	https://ndlink.org/piracy-sea-robbery-rivers-state-june-14-20-2020/
21st November, 2016.	Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni LGA	4	4 personnel of NSCDC were killed and their weapons carted away.	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/12/rivers-rerun-election-police-dsp-killedorderly-beheaded-5-officers-missing/
8th August, 2023.	Ahoada West LGA	10	10 Engenni-Ijaw people mostly women and children who were kidnapped from their farms	https://pmnewsnigeria.com/2023/08/12/abductors-of-10-women-children-in-rivers-demand-n10m-ransom/
16th May, 2023	Emohua LGA	12	12 NYSC members were abducted by armed men along the Rumuji axis of the East-West Road.	https://punchng.com/seven-corps-members-kidnapped-in-rivers-freed/

Source: Author's tabulation from the cited references (All cited references were accessed online on 24th October, 2023).

Table III shows some of the some incidents of insecurity in *Rivers* state between 2016 after the amnesty programme between the state government and those described as 'repentant' cultists came into effect. No significant de-escalation of violent conflicts occurred within the period as more attacks were reported in the media between 2016 and 2023. Between January 2021 and March 2023, there were over 90 kidnapping incidents reported in Rivers State, along with over 50 related fatalities. There is an increase in kidnappings in the State, according to recent data. For example, there have been reports of gunmen kidnapping a woman and her daughter in March 2023 along Garrison Road in Port Harcourt LGA. In Ubeta community, Ahoada West LGA, in April, there were reports of three residents being killed and two more being

kidnapped by a cultist gang that also acts as kidnappers. Two of the former NBA president's assistants were slain by gunmen who allegedly kidnapped him along the East-West Road in Obio/Akpor LGA. Additionally, it is reported that three people, among them a female Federal Commissioner, were kidnapped in April at Ogbakiri Junction on the East-West Road in Emohua LGA. About 12 National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) members are said to have been kidnapped recently, on May 16, 2023, along the East-West Road in Rumuji town, Emohua LGA. The year 2020 was no better as 120 kidnap cases were recorded (SNM Intelligence, ACLED, CFR, 2020).
All available and accessible data indicated no sign that peace deal was in any way effective in addressing the security challenges in the state.

Table IV: Rivers State's Security Situation Report: 2020 in Focus

Classification of Incidents	Number of Incidents	Fatalities
Armed groups VS Nigerian Security Forces	10	20
Non state actors attacks against civilians	22	25
Riot	5	2
Total	37	47

Source: Culled from https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-nigeria-2021/rivers

European Union Agency for Asylum reported that Kidnappings, piracy, robberies, and altercations between gang members and security personnel were among the crime-related incidents in 2020. There have also been documented deaths from conflicts between communities and between pirates and the armed forces. Violence within the state caused by cults and gangs resulted in deaths and displacement. Furthermore, militiamen and locals have lost their lives as a result of military operations in Nigeria, some of which occurred during confrontations with IPOB/ESN. Protests to "End SARS" have reportedly also taken place nearby. In Rivers state, ACLED recorded 37 security incidents in 2020 (10 fights, 22 instances of violence against civilians, and 5 riots) (average of 0.7 security incident per week). Twelve of the twenty-three LGAs had security incidents, with Port-Harcourt City local government area recording the highest total of six.

III.   Summary and conclusion

This paper examined the state government's conflict management strategy and insecurity in *Rivers state* between 2016 and 2022. Specifically, the study investigated why the amnesty deal between the Riversstate government and cultists failed to de-escalate insecurity. We adopted the documentary and survey methods of data collection to generate relevant data for this study and data gathered was *analyzed* using content analysis. The framework of analysis was based on the Governance Failure-Security nexus because it aptly explains how governance failure in security management exacerbates security challenges in states. Our findings showed that the amnesty deal heightened, contrary to the expected result of de-escalating armed conflict in Rivers state. The implication of this is the rise in incidents of violent attacks by cultists against the civilian population and the rise in supremacy tussle between cult groups in one hand, and local vigilante groups on the other. Ransom motivated abductions by cultists also increased since the Riversstate government and families of victims demonstrated on many occasions their willingness to engage in financial negotiations with cultists for the release of abducted people in the

state. Data showing the escalating incidents of violent confrontations and fatalities, as well as data showing complicity of some notable actors in Rivers state were presented as evidence in this study. These data were instrumental in the validation of our hypothesis.

IV.   Recommendations

The findings of this study provided the basis for the understated recommendation:
- To defuse armed conflict, the state government of Rivers should implement a conflict management plan that places a high premium on strengthening the state's institutions, human capital, and the economic empowerment of young people.
- The Rivers State government should take more robust action to stop these attacks by investigating every clash and bringing perpetrators to justice in tandem with the State Law that prescribes the death penalty for any cultist who kills during a cult activity and life imprisonment for any cultist apprehended.

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